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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

It is generally conceded that the Swiss possess a unique gift for understanding the intricacies of technical things. That is why so many countries are envious of Switzerland—primarily because of the Swiss ability to put together a watch that works for a reasonable length of time. The watchmaker's skill seems to be symbolic of everything that borders on technical prowess, for Switzerland looks like a watch, ticks like a watch and thinks like a watch. The trouble is that some things do not resemble watches at all. Take the story of my telephone.

When I moved to Switzerland a number of years ago, I happened to live on the border between two communities, Herrliberg and Feldmeilen. Actually, for postal and taxation reasons, Feldmeilen decided to adopt me, with the result that Herrliberg was left out in the cold. However, Herrliberg—obviously jealous of Feldmeilen's acquisition of my family and apparently lacking a full quota of genuine artists on its home territory—decided to grant me a Herrliberg telephone number. This seemed fine for the moment, but it was also the beginning of the story of my telephone.

A friend once tried to obtain my telephone number through information and was told that I was nonexistent. "Nonexistent he isn't," said our acquaintance, "because he very much exists in Feldmeilen!"

"Impossible!" reiterated the telephone company. Our friend never did reach us that year and, as a result, I missed receiving a contract to write a Hollywood scenario based on Dante's *Inferno*. This film was eventually produced under the title, "The Fires Are Burning for Me and My Gal."

Perhaps I had lost a hundred thousand dollars because I lived in Feldmeilen instead of Herrliberg, but, after all—and thanks to the telephone company—no one bothered me, for no one knew I existed.

One day, worried over the fact that our telephone had not rung once in two years, I called information to ask if they knew me. "Sorry, sir," Miss Information said, "Eugene V. Epstein could not possibly live in Feldmeilen, for we have a Herrliberg number listed for him."

"My dear," I said, "please be kind enough to correct your records. I am Mr. Epstein himself and I live in Feldmeilen. But through the kindness and generosity of the telephone officials I was granted a Herrliberg number so that no one would telephone and distract me from my work, which, as you must certainly know, belongs to the ages—the ages of three to four."

"Sorry, Herr Eppschtein," said my new friend. "You couldn't possibly live in Feldmeilen. Why don't you take up the question with the Cantonal Address Office—they will advise you where you live even if you don't know it yourself."

"Miss," I implored, "just because I have a number beginning with the digits '90' doesn't mean I can't live in Feldmeilen!"

"Terribly sorry, sir, Feldmeilen begins with '73'. Adieu!"

Here I was, a man without a country, a man without a community. There was my telephone—that ominous instrument—looking as if it would ring any moment but obviously thinking better of it. If only someone would call me, I thought. If only someone would interrupt this incessant and boring writing. Ring, damn it!

"R-r-r-ring, rr-r-r-ing," went the telephone. I jumped across the room, tripping over the cat and my son's model watch factory, which ticks like a real one. "Hello!" I gasped into the receiver.

"This is the telephone office, sir. We wish to inform you that your telephone number is going to be changed to one beginning with '73'. We are sorry to do this, but, for organizational reasons, all people, including women, who are now living in Feldmeilen will

be given Feldmeilen numbers. Your new area telephone office will now be Rapperswil instead of Zurich."

The next day, while shopping for a new cat in Zurich, I called my wife. The number rang and rang—but there was no answer. Wait, I thought to myself, I must dial the new number. When I did, my wife answered immediately. The next minute I was on the wire with the telephone company.

"Madam," I uttered, "why does the old number seem to ring when it really doesn't? My wife answered only when I dialled the new number."

"Obviously!" said the telephone company. "What do you expect when you dial the wrong number?"

"That's fine," I interjected. "But what happens if a complete stranger should try to reach us under the old number and thinks it's ringing when it really isn't?"

"If it isn't, then you have nothing to worry about—he won't reach you anyway."

"Precisely," I said, rapidly losing my famous composure. "But supposing he *wants* to reach me?"

"Then he should call the new number."

"Exactly! Supposing he doesn't know the new number?" I had her there.

"You must give the new number to all your friends," she said.

"But is it not possible for the telephone company to provide the new number when the old one is dialled?" She told me it was, but, after all, I was the one who had moved.

"Moved? Where did I move to?"

"You moved from Herrliberg to Feldmeilen—you should know that!"

"No, I didn't move, I swear it. The telephone company simply changed my number. It was as simple as that."

"Impossible, you must have moved. Why don't you check with the Cantonal Address Office and ask them your name and where you live?"

"Madam, I have been through this before. I happen to have lived in Feldmeilen for seven years, during which time I had the pleasure of a telephone number beginning with the indigenous digits '9' and '0'. It is only at this point that the telephone company apparently thought better of their past actions and decided—no doubt after a vote of all males present and forming a quorum—to change my number to one beginning with '73'."

"Oh then, sir, you must in any case speak with the Rapperswil area office. This is Zurich, and we have nothing to do with Feldmeilen numbers."

I dialled Rapperswil with a vengeance. "This is Eugene V. Epstein, and I'm calling about my former number which began with '90'."

"You must call Zurich, sir, we don't handle Herrliberg here."

"No, you don't understand! That was my *former* number. My present number begins with '73'."

"When did you move, sir?"

"Oh, darn it!" I said quietly, attempting to control my blood pressure. "I just wanted to ask you if you could conceivably tell anyone trying to call my old number that that number has been replaced by a newer number more indicative of the location in which I reside?"

"Why didn't you say so in the first place? These people who don't know how to express themselves! What you ask for, sir, is an exceedingly simple matter, only you will have to call Zurich, for they are in charge of your former number, which is, after all, the one your friends will dial."

I was exhausted, but managed, somehow, to thank the friendly lady from Rapperswil. I was now so intent at solving this problem that I sprained the tip of my index finger when I next dialled Zurich. "Zurich? This is Eugene V. Epstein, telephone number 73..." She wouldn't let me say the rest of it, but informed me that such numbers are handled by Rapperswil.

I explained the story again, and the Zurich operator apparently understood me. "We'll simply notify callers that your number has been changed," she said. "Then we'll tell them what the new number is."

"That would be dandy of you," I said graciously. We then made all final arrangements and I hung up, my faith in Swiss technological progress completely restored.

The next day, I thought I would double-check. I dialled the old number. It rang... and rang... and rang. Then a tape-recorded voice said, "The number you are calling is no longer valid. Please call number such-and-such for further information."

I whipped through the dial with my newly acquired dialling proficiency. "What number are you calling?" asked another voice. I told her. "One moment, please."

I waited. Then the voice said that the number I was calling had been disconnected.

"Ha!" I shouted. "Now I have you! I am the subscriber himself, and that number has *not* been disconnected. It has been changed!" In the end, as one might suspect, the matter was straightened out, as things often are in Switzerland. I now know, for example, that my name is Eugene V. Rapperswil, that I live in Herrlistein near Winterthur, and that I have moved once every three years during my two-year stay in the country.

This really isn't fair to the telephone company, if you think of everything they have to do and the shortage of trained personnel these days. I am extremely patient and I realize that we live in a complicated and difficult age. It's just that I feel like moving to Herrliberg to see what they would do next time.

SWISS CULTURAL LIFE IN JANUARY

WINTER CUSTOMS IN TOWN AND COUNTRY

We hope the clear winter sun of the Upper Engadine will be shining when the jolly sleigh parties are held there in the fine old "Schlitteda engiadinaisa" tradition. You can witness this festive highlight of the winter season at St. Moritz on January 15, at Samedan on January 22. Drawn by horses, the jingling sleighs glide in a long column across the glittering snow, and the flaming red of the traditional Engadine costumes adds a gay touch of colour to the scene. At Urnäsch, a large village in the Appenzell district, the ancient calendar is still preserved in the form of a noisy New Year's Eve masquerade called "Silvester-Klausen" on January 13. The weekend following (January 14 and 15), the village of Baar, near Zug, where many old customs are still upheld, will be the scene of an international masquerade in which groups from Switzerland, Germany and Austria will take part. Carnival time is now almost upon us, the first to start "operations" being Lucerne, on January 8, with its ceremony of "Fetching Father Fritschi". Then, on January 31, Baden follows suit, the main Carnival event being again a masked procession on February 5. In fact, Carnival fans will find fun almost everywhere in early February—in Lucerne, in Fribourg, in Lugano, Locarno and Ascona. A week later comes the second wave of rumbustious frivolity in other towns and areas—first and foremost in Basle with its satirical masquerades on February 13 and 15, but also Bienne on February 11 and 12, Murten on February 12, when everything is given over to King Carnival. In Zurich the best masked groups are to be seen on February 11 at the traditional Maskenball and prize-giving in the rooms of the Kongresshaus, artistically and imaginatively decorated for the occasion. There is another "bal masqué" in the same fantastically adorned rooms on February 13. But we must not fail to underline the highly original and picturesque custom of "Vogel Gryff", the prelude to the famous Basle Carnival. It takes place this time on January 20, a Friday, and the day is dedicated to "Little Basle", the quarter of the city on the right bank of the Rhine. In the course of the proceedings, the three emblem figures of "Little Basle"—the Lion, the Wild Man and the Griffin—perform grotesque dances, conjuring up a legendary world to the cheering crowds that throng the street and the middle bridge across the Rhine.

FOREIGN MUSIC ENSEMBLES ON TOUR

An extensive Swiss tour is being undertaken towards the end of January by the "Viennese Soloists" whose conductor, Karl Engel, will also be the pianist in a Mozart concerto. Their Mozart programme will be preceded by a Haydn symphony. This classical programme will be repeated on five successive days, from January 23 to 27, in Berne, Basle, Zurich, Lausanne and Geneva, and again on January 29 in Kreuzlingen. The Collegium Musicum of the famous Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra will also be playing chamber music in Zurich on January 18, interpreting rarely heard works by Johann Sebastian Bach, Friedemann Bach, Mozart, Schubert and Rossini. More chamber music in Berne, where the Loewenguth Quartet is playing on January 27. Then, in the same city, the Bamberger Philharmoniker are programmed for a guest concert on January 30. Opera: A Prague ensemble will perform Mozart's "Don Juan" at Saint-Maurice.

A GALAXY OF ART EXHIBITIONS

In the Zurich Helmhaus Argovian artists will be exhibiting from January 16 to February 12, while the latest Helmhaus exhibition of Zurich artists will move to Aarau for the same period. Contemporary work will also be to the fore in Fribourg, where the exhibition "Tendances actuelles" will be on show at the Musée d'art et d'histoire from January 21 to February 26, paintings and sculptures by young West-Swiss artists will be on view. A commemorative exhibition in the Winterthur Art Museum and opening on January 22 is dedicated to the work of Thurgovian painter Adolf Dietrich, a genuine "peintre naïf". Broader historical aspects of art are opened up at the Zurich Art Gallery (Kunsthau) with the display, lasting until February 26, of art treasures from the USSR, and with the exhibition of "18th and 19th Century English Painting" commencing on January 7. At the Musée Rath in Geneva many unknown works will be on view under the heading "Art hellénique contemporain", opening on January 26.

GEMS OF GRAPHICAL ART

The Abbey Library in St. Gall, one of the loveliest Baroque interiors and well worth a visit for its beauty alone, is arranging a series of temporary exhibitions with a view to making the contents of its treasure chambers accessible to the general public. The current display bears the title "Travel in the Middle Ages" and comprises a wide selection of manuscripts and incunabula dealing with this intriguing theme. This novel show will last until the end of April. In the Cabinet des estampes, Promenade du Pin, Geneva, the exhibition "La scénographie italienne au 18^e siècle" includes a wealth of pictorial documents from the Museum of the Scala in Milan; it will be open till the end of March. The world-renowned Scala Opera House, which dates back to the year 1778, possesses authentic pictures of productions staged in the heyday of the Baroque period. Numerous modern theatrical scenic designers have drawn inspiration from the festive décors of that epoch. Contemporary works of graphic art in miniature can be admired in the new special exhibition at the GPO Museum in Berne. Its title is "Portraits of Famous Swiss on our Postage Stamps". The display of stamps issued at various times is complemented by the artists' original sketches and by printers' proofs. In addition, the subjects of the portraits are described in brief biographies, thus enhancing the informative character of the exhibition. It lasts until February 28.

"THEATRUM MUNDI" IN PICTURES

The "Theatre of the World" exhibition of the Graphical Collection of the Swiss Institute of Technology in Zurich is being prolonged to the middle of February. It illustrates life in Europe over five centuries. A fascinating array of woodcuts, copper engravings, etchings and illustrated books chosen from the Collection's vast stocks conjures up the mentality, the everyday life and the festivities of long-dead cultural epochs. The original graphical works recount it all far more vividly than mere reproductions in books.