

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

I don't enjoy skiing at all. This is because, for some inexplicable reason, I cannot take it seriously. A good skier should obviously *look* like a good skier—which disqualifies me from the start. I am incapable of curling up my lip or of creating that peculiar glint in my eyes that all good skiers seem to have. Of course I am a little envious of those who treat a gleaming slope as if it were Highway Number One from Boston to Bangor. This undoubtedly accounts for the difference in our personalities. To the ski enthusiast, that same slope represents a challenge to push on towards the unknown, a duel between man and nature, a clash of physical forces of unimaginable complexity.

When I stand at the top of such a slope—my feet imprisoned in safety bindings—and look down towards the distant valley, I usually begin laughing softly to myself. My laughter gradually increases in intensity until those around me notice it. Then, with a final “Ha-Ha” and “Ho-Ho”, I push off with a flourish of ski poles and snow, slowly gathering speed until we—my skis and I—are smashing ahead at four miles per hour. I never had the impression that I was racing against the forces of nature or that there was any sort of clash of physical forces involved. I was simply too busy trying to keep my balance. And, anyway, those wintry attacks of laughter were completely unpredictable and I never knew what the result might be.

Forty or forty-five yards down the slope I would invariably fall. It was always the same. My skis began moving at five miles per hour while I was still going four. The result was a clearly predictable separation of man and conveyance. I would fall—neatly and with artistic grace. The indentation left in the snow would have distinct and unmistakable lines, for I had made a study of how to fall and stay alive. According to my analyst, this is why I have to laugh as I stand so omnipotently on top of the slope.

Subconsciously I know that I shall fall—I have always known it—and I have made an art of it. Falling has become my means of showing my prowess on—or off—skis. A good skier may be a good skier, but he is almost always a bad faller. I am a bad skier but a good faller. I have never broken a bone since developing my personal falling technique, while good skiers continue to break their bones as if they grew on trees.

It started some years ago with my first ski lesson in Switzerland. I had entered the beginners' class of the ski school at an Engadine village where we were spending our winter holidays. I had no great desire to ski, even then. But my wife was reasonably good—and so were my children—and I literally felt left out in the cold while they seemed to be having so marvelous a time. At first I fought the inclination to try. I fought it when it became a mild wish and I fought it some more when it became an irresistible compulsion. How nice it would have been just to sit somewhere—perhaps with a warming drink in my hands—and meditate. But my days of meditation were over. I had no further choice. I was caught up in the wiles and whims of my own ungrateful Psyche.

And so I rented a pair of skis, as well as poles, boots and gloves, ski pants, jacket, goggles, straps, an altimeter and a compass. I bought the best and fastest silver wax available and, at eight o'clock one morning, set out for the beginners' class at the local ski school.

Swiss ski instructors are quite unusual. My teacher was named Reto (pronounced “ray-tow”), which I thought was a charming and colorful name until I learned that all ski teachers in Switzerland

are named Reto. The Swiss manage to distinguish one Reto from the other by appending descriptive adjectives to each. For example, my Reto was known in the village as Young Reto. There were, of course, an Old Reto and a Skinny Reto, a Farmer Reto (with fourteen cows) and a Farmer Reto (with only three). There were Carpenter Reto and Plumber Reto, Radio Reto and Railroad Reto.

Young Reto introduced himself to me and the other members of the class. I was the oldest (the others ranged in age from six to eight), and Reto therefore asked me to lead off the various exercises which were designed to make professional skiers of us before the winter was over. We started with an elementary method of movement called “sliding and walking on the level”. Basically, this means placing one ski before the other and simply moving. I led off and fell. The other nine members of my class followed—and each fell exactly where I did.

Young Reto rushed over and explained to my fellow pupils that they were to follow *him*, not me. They then proceeded to walk and slide on the level without incident. By that time I had untangled myself from my skis and had re-joined Reto and the class.

We then learned how to turn. First came an extremely easy form which I soon mastered. Then Reto showed us the Kick Turn and two or three other murderous operations which made me wonder if the whole thing was worth it.

“Listen,” I said to Reto, “skiing really must be a fairly straightforward business, and I see no earthly reason to overcomplicate it.” Reto told me to keep quiet and pay attention as he continued to run through his repertoire of ski technique. With each exercise, he seemed to become more and more elegant. He jumped and turned with enormous ease. He skipped and swished wherever and whenever he wanted. And he never fell—not even once.

At the end of our second week, Reto announced that, if we wished, we could all take the Bronze Test. Those who succeeded in this qualifying test would be awarded a Bronze Medal. We could continue to improve each year and eventually try the Silver and Gold Tests.

We all entered the Bronze Test that next Friday. The entire class passed without difficulty—all except me. Reto was most sympathetic. He said he was sorry I couldn't have passed, for it really wasn't that difficult. I interjected that I had certainly skied well, had I not? Yes, said Reto, but he pointed out that I had fallen in the middle or at the end of each exercise, and this had never happened before.

When they handed out the medals at the local inn, and each pupil was called to receive his, they waited until the end to mention my name. Reto stood up and announced a special award. The tension was great and there was a sudden, expectant silence in the audience. I rose and stood next to Reto, for I knew that my moment had come.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” said Reto, “this evening you have witnessed the awarding of Bronze, Silver and Gold Medals. Tonight, for the first time in the history of our ski school, we have the honor of presenting a new award. To this gentleman here, we now give our Tin Medal for outstanding performance in the difficult art of falling.”

He pinned the handsome medal on my proud breast and kissed me on both cheeks. The audience cheered—and I began to laugh softly to myself.