

Letter from Switzerland

Autor(en): **Epstein, Eugene V.**

Objekttyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Die Schweiz = Suisse = Svizzera = Switzerland : offizielle Reisezeitschrift der Schweiz. Verkehrszentrale, der Schweizerischen Bundesbahnen, Privatbahnen ... [et al.]**

Band (Jahr): **45 (1972)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **05.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-777227>

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

When I was a boy on Long Island there was no such thing as a supermarket. As a result, everything we bought usually came from a small specialty store. How well I remember how my mother chose the live chicken which would soon—alas for it!—end up on our Sunday dinner table. And some of my earliest memories of the world of commerce concern a small delicatessen store in a remote Long Island village. I no longer remember precisely where the store was located, because everything in that area has now become one long monotonous row of undulating traffic and sprawling suburbia.

That particular delicatessen—wherever it was—holds memories for me which I would have some trouble explaining to my psychiatrist, even if I had one. That store—that simple, straightforward store—seems today to symbolize the uncomplicated life I think we must have led at that time. Perhaps I was pampered and perhaps I was sheltered by my parents from the evils of the grown-up world, but, for some reason, I think that life—especially on Long Island—was uncomplicated and full of delicatessens and bakeries and butcher-shops and places that sold live chickens for the Sunday dinner table.

This particular delicatessen, as I started to say, remains in my memory because it was there that we used to buy butter and flour and pickles out of open containers. The butter—rich and yellow and awfully buttery-looking—was kept in a smooth wooden tub and was sold in chunks and by weight. I recall how the delicatessen man, as we called him, used to cut out chunks of butter with a menacingly large knife—and then he would weigh them and wrap them in wax paper. And the same thing happened with his pickles and with his flour and, if I'm not mistaken, with his coffee, because the roasted beans were also kept in large barrels and sold by weight in lined paper bags.

As everyone knows by this time, the small specialty shops in America began disappearing as the new, more efficient self-service markets gradually gained acceptance. This was many years before the same thing began happening in Europe, but now, of course, it's happening here too.

What fascinates me about the whole business is that I've been through it twice, which leaves me with an odd and almost mysterious feeling of *déjà vu*. For when I first came to Switzerland more than two decades ago, I was fascinated by the fact that the same type of store I recalled from my childhood was apparently quite common in Switzerland. I saw no tubs of butter, but I don't remember looking for them either. But there were tiny grocery stores run by tiny old ladies who sold everything imaginable in an area no larger than a hall closet. And then there were those

marvelous Swiss bakeries with little windows which opened onto the street, where strangers like myself could buy *pâtisserie* and drip jelly and powdered sugar all over their clothes on the way home.

I learned a great deal about Switzerland from those little stores. The tiny old ladies were invariably polite and helpful. They never failed to say "grüezi", nor did they hesitate to help me with my impossibly confused German. They even worried about me if I didn't appear for my daily liter of milk. "Were you ill yesterday, Herr Epstein?" they used to ask—not just to make conversation, but because they were genuinely interested in my welfare. Such treatment was quite normal in Switzerland, just as it must have been on Long Island some years earlier.

My purpose here is not to lament the passing of the small specialty shop, because I would feel rather idiotic to stand in the way of progress—even if it would help. I happen to enjoy supermarkets. I think they are most efficient, and I'm sure that—dollar for dollar or franc for franc—we're all possibly better off in the end. But I'm not quite so sure what technology and efficiency and data processing will leave us once the human element has been even more efficiently eliminated.

And we are all doing our best to eliminate that human element. As ironical as it may sound, I still prefer an ill-tempered sales clerk to a thoroughly automated food-dispensing machine, because even ill-tempered people are sometimes inclined to blurt out a diffident "grüezi" or two. And who would lament my passing if, for example, I should fail to appear one day for a liter of milk? Would a friendly computer ever send personal condolences to my wife, assuming, of course, that computers could even manage to spell our names correctly—which never seems to happen anyway. I wonder sometimes whether recapturing thoughts of butter sold in open tubs is such a noble thing. It happens to cross my mind from time to time, and there's not much I can do about it. And it's not only the butter—it's the period.

The tobacco stores somewhere in the old city of Zurich still exist, as do the bakeries. The red-faced old butcher still hacks away at pigs' feet with his cleaver, and there are still a few grocers who haven't yet given up, haven't yet disappeared forever. And, with some luck, there will always be a few fine old people who will continue to operate their stores as they have in the past. And perhaps they will operate them long enough so that the next generation can nostalgically look back—as I am doing right now—and reminisce about the little delicatessen somewhere, sometime, run by somebody, where butter used to be sold out of open wooden tubs.

SWISS CULTURAL EVENTS DURING APRIL

MAX BILL IN GENEVA

The big exhibition of Max Bill's paintings and sculptures (April 8 to 30) is something entirely new not only for Geneva but also for the whole of Western Switzerland. The works on view in the spacious rooms of the Musée Rath on the Place Neuve in Geneva illustrate a facet of his many-sided art. Max Bill was born in Winterthur in 1909 and built a house for himself on the outskirts of Zurich in 1933. All his life long he has been in the public eye as architect, sculptor, painter, graphic and commercial artist, teacher and theoretician, organizer and politician. He is at home in the major

centres of artistic activity in Europe and has won a worldwide reputation through his long years of building and teaching at the "Hochschule für Gestaltung" at Ulm. He is known to many as founder of the campaign for "Die gute Form" (The Right Form) which was organized for many years in connection with the Swiss Industries Fair at Basle and made a great impact on consumer taste.

Of Bill's vast and complex activity spread over many decades the Geneva show is concerned only with the part covered by the term "artistic" in its narrowest sense. As a painter he is a convert to "Concrete Art", which is