

# Ambassadors of the people

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## AMBASSADORS OF THE PEOPLE.

*A talk given by Mr. Gottfried Keller, President of the Foreign Press Association and London Correspondent of the "Basler Nachrichten", at the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, on March 20th, 1951.*

Foreign Newsagency or newspaper correspondents, stationed in an important capital like London, are sometimes called "The Ambassadors of the People." H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh, once used this expression when he attended a banquet of the Foreign Press Association in London. What he wanted to convey, was, of course, that Ambassadors proper represented Heads of State or governments, whereas foreign correspondents represented whole sections of peoples and of public opinion. Diplomats describe governments to governments, whereas foreign correspondents describe peoples to peoples.

For many of those with whom one gets into touch in the course of one's work, the term foreign correspondent has a certain amount of glamour attached to it. "Your life", one is often told, "must be incredibly interesting. You are invited everywhere, you meet the most thrilling personalities, you see and hear a great deal, you know much of what really happens behind the scenes in the political world. You never have a dull moment".

Many people think of the job of a foreign correspondent as something thrilling, nearly mysterious. Some years ago a film called "Foreign Correspondent" ran for a while in London and ever since some English people have been thinking that the daily life of a foreign correspondent runs on the lines as depicted by the film directors of Hollywood: wild chases after spies and criminals, an endless chain of social events in the company of breathtakingly beautiful women, and above all a bottomless expense account, which the Head office settles without raising an eyebrow. Some people look on foreign correspondents as a sort of Super Detectives who take part in bringing murderers to justice, others look on them as a sort of omniscient semi-diplomats, who know all the secrets of all the Chancelleries and pat Foreign Ministers benevolently on the shoulder, individuals, in other words, one likes to cultivate and hand round at cocktail and dinner parties, because they know so many interesting inside stories. Yet others, and that is the other extreme, look on foreign correspondents as on beings one better avoids: inquisitive, indiscreet, loud, irresponsible, incapable of keeping a confidence, with bad table manners and dandruff on the shoulders, constantly after good food and plenty of drink, very superficial in their knowledge: foreigners and representatives of the Press, that is too much.

What, then, is the truth about this mysterious profession? As usual, the truth lies somewhere in the middle. As far as the "interesting life" is concerned, it is, of course, true, that there are extremely interesting sides to our calling. But on the other hand there is a large amount of dreary routine work, which it is sometimes quite difficult to stomach: the routine of reading a round dozen daily papers and some 7 or 8 Sunday editions, quite apart from five important weeklies, which come out every week-end, and three evening papers, which, uninteresting as they mostly

are, yet have to be looked at particularly for inaccurate stories they might contain about our own country. Moreover, there is the BBC news with its many bulletins one ought to keep up with, there are the questions in parliament, there are letters to the Editor; there is, in other words, the constant compulsion of keeping "au fait," of being on the Qui-Vive, which follows one into the week-end and keeps one on the alert. Over and above this, there is the constant pressure of time, as it is one's duty not only to gather information and sift it, but also to comment on it in time to telephone it across to one's agency or paper as quickly as possible. These are but a few of the disadvantages of this "glamorous occupation".

Now what of the possibilities of meeting interesting personalities? Of course, it is true that a foreign correspondent, once he is established, is bound to meet interesting and leading people of the political, parliamentary, economic and other spheres of the country in which he is accredited. It is extremely important, however, that a foreign correspondent stays in this country long enough to become known and, above all, that he makes a name for himself as reliable, trustworthy and capable of keeping faith. Somebody who rushes into print as soon as he has got hold of some information, somebody who quotes informants names when they have spoken "off the record", somebody who causes unreliable news to be splashed under huge headlines, will soon find that all doors are closed to him and that London is not a healthy spot.

Perhaps in no country personal contacts matter so much, as in England, contacts with personalities of the government of the day, with parliamentary leaders of all parties, with the permanent officials in the ministries. On top of this, it is naturally, a very great advantage if one has really good and intimate connections with one's own Embassy or Legation, but also with Fleet Street, which is, of course, the heart of the British press. If, additionally, one has good friends in as many London embassies as possible, all the better. Now to build up such really good and worthwhile connections in England takes, to put it mildly, years and years, if not decades. Foreign correspondents who only stay here for three or four years

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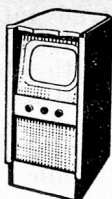
and are shifted around from capital to capital will never succeed in penetrating to the innermost ring. They may, it is true, have a number of acquaintances, they may even have shaken hands once with an Under-secretary of State at the Foreign Office and have agreed with him that the weather is bad, but they rely, ultimately, merely on the British press for their information, on secondhand news in other words, even if they dress it up in their own messages as emanating from "well informed circles", "diplomatic sources" or what have you. They are — unless they have become rooted here and sufficiently well-known to be able to check information at its source — in constant danger of falling victims to any sensational headline contained in one of the London boulevard papers. In so doing they often allow themselves to be carried away to such an extent that they cause a sensational message to appear in their own papers abroad — only to regret it a day or two later when the real truth has become publicly known. The capacity of some foreign correspondents of producing and getting away with misleading information — and yet keeping their positions — is sometimes quite a puzzle to me. They have not yet learnt the ABC of journalism, one of the fundamental maxims of which is: "First get your facts straight — the distorting takes care of itself afterwards." These correspondents do not know, as yet — how could they, after a short stay? — that there are in London newspapers with circulations reaching many millions of readers, which one reads but for the purpose of finding out what is merely propaganda of one party or another, or wishful thinking, or even

pure sensationalism — divorced entirely from truth and facts. They are not yet capable of judging, when seeing such sensationalisms, whether there is any possibility of any truth in such stories, because they do not know the country sufficiently, nor do they know the tendencies and policies of certain papers of this country. As they do not yet know the background of Fleet Street, they also may ignore the fact that there are certain Press Lords who are completely capable of sacrificing the truth to an increase in their circulation.

A foreign newspaper which attaches importance to good, factual information from England will, consequently, be well advised *not* to change its London editors frequently. It is with foreign correspondents as with certain choice wines: the longer they are bottled up and allowed to mature, the better value they become. Foreign newspapers which want good information from England will also be well advised to allow their London representatives as generous an expense account as possible. (Pity none of my editors is here just now!) Perhaps in no other capital so much information begins to flow at the luncheon table, when the stage of brandy and cigars has been reached — or in the Club.

While it is thus entirely true that one does meet a good many interesting people in our profession, it is, on the other hand, truly astounding how many uninteresting people try to get into touch with one. Inventors and would-be inventors, industrialists and business people who would like to sell something abroad, even clothing firms who want to launch a new two-piece bathing suit, politicians who have made a trip behind the Iron Curtain, resigned monarchs who come to London to view a stamp-exhibition, former diplomats who think they know the formula for staving off a third world war; cranks of one kind or another, they all, and many others more, call *Press Conferences* and *Press Receptions* where they try to sell their ware. It does, of course, occasionally happen that they really have something interesting to say. Altogether too often, however, it is nothing more but personal vanity which causes them to attempt, mostly by the détour of a press reception with cocktails, to get their names into print. It is no rare occurrence that two, three, or even more such receptions or conferences take place in London in one day. The foreign correspondent will, in the course of time, develop a certain feeling which will guide him to receptions which are worth while and make him avoid others which are a sheer waste of time. It is truly astounding how many people either have nothing to say or might have something up their sleeves but can, for understandable reasons of statecraft, diplomacy or etiquette, say nothing, but will *nevertheless* call a press conference. On the other hand it is equally astonishing to see how little sense of dignity some representatives of the press have. Not only are they not ashamed to run after people, but some of them actually hound prominent people down and then publish ridiculous details about their dress, the way they part their hair, the way they hold the hand when smoking a cigarette and other such unworthy rubbish. Surely the journalist who makes himself *cheap* — and there are many of this category for which personally I have nothing but contempt — does not render a service to himself, to his paper or indeed to his calling as such. For what reason, one may well ask, did for example Ex-King Carol of Rumania call a press con-

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ference at the Claridges when he was in London some time ago, as he made it perfectly clear that he did not want to talk politics at all?

How, one may ask, does a message of a Foreign Correspondent come into being? Which are the sources of information at his disposal? Well, the sources for his raw-material, as it were, are manifold; the newsagencies, the news of which one can buy on the tape, the press of the country, in which one resides, the official spokesmen of Ministries, of which category practically every Government Department boasts several, the House of Commons — the question hour there is often a true fountain of information — Press Conferences, personal contacts. This list is by no means exhaustive, as one may add such things as visits to factories, conducted tours to industries, visits to political meetings, and so on.

The big news agencies have, of course, a news service and a network of informers both at home and abroad, which no foreign correspondent can ever hope to build up for himself. Nevertheless, a foreign correspondent will try to build up, in various fields, a staff of correspondents of his own who, for one reason or another, like to keep *him* informed and ring him up on their own accord if something worth mentioning happens in their sector. Mostly these correspondents of correspondents render their services free of any charge, be it because they have a personal or professional interest to see a certain item of news published and circulated, be it because they have cause to oblige the particular correspondent, or be it that they exchange news and views together. As regards the news services of the big agencies — the raw material, as I

have called them — they can either be delivered home against certain charges, or they can be picked up on the ticker in any large West End Hotel or Club, that is if one has not enough of the choice offered on the radio against a pound per annum. This raw material, which thus keeps flowing into one's house or office either in a fat bunch of newspapers, a wad of ticker tape, or over the telephone, is hardly ever passed on in its original shape. If one did this, one would merely become a relay-station. A foreign correspondent worth his salt will, on the contrary, try to verify, to gather additional information, to amplify, to pre-digest and then to mould the information into a shape to which the readers at home are accustomed. It goes without saying that the telephone plays an extremely large part in this process. If and where this instrument does not lead anywhere, a personal visit may become necessary, or a letter, even a telegram may be indicated. It is in this process of gathering additional information and of shaping views that the personal contacts in ministries, in parliament, in embassies and legations, in the City, in Fleet Street and in other circles play such a large part. It is extremely important to know the right man on the right spot. It is equally important not only to know the right man in the right spot, but also to have such relations with him that he will part with information, knowing that you will never give him away if he wants to remain anonymous. To build up such a circle takes, as I have said before, years; to keep it revolving means keeping up contacts constantly and may necessitate some "lubrication" here and there. Often it will happen that people who know things worth knowing, will pass

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them on on condition that the correspondent keeps them off the record and will not publish them. It goes without saying that such an undertaking will always, under any circumstances, have to be kept. In such a case one makes a note and keeps the information back until it is officially released. One is, however, perfectly free, to pass it on confidentially, à titre d'information only, to one's editor or to one's Legation, if one feels so inclined. Any foreign correspondent who comes across such confidential news will always be tempted to publish it — he would be a bad newspaperman if he were not so tempted and would be lacking some printing ink in his veins — but one such mistake, one such slip, and one's whole career may be jeopardised. As time goes on, one collects whole notebooks full of such "off the record" information, which one cannot use directly, but which nonetheless enriches one's knowledge and enables one to judge a given situation much more authoritatively than if one is without any background knowledge. The larger thus the collection of unpublished information in the possession of a foreign correspondent, the more knowledgeable and authoritative his published dispatches will be, as he has written them with real background knowledge. No foreign correspondent will shun a meeting, a conversation, or an exchange of news and views, merely because he knows in advance that whatever he may carry home cannot be passed on directly and published. He knows far too well that the richer his collection of confidential news items, the more his reporting — be it on home policy or foreign policy — will be fertilised.

How, one may ask, does a correspondent choose his daily despatch-material from the wealth of information available? Any correspondent will always, when looking at a days harvest and wondering what to transmit and what to keep back for a rainy day, ask himself the question: does this interest my readers at home? He may also ask himself: Should I *make* my readers take an interest in a particular item? A Swiss correspondent working abroad for Swiss newspapers can, to begin with, always assume, that any development in the general international situation will be of interest. Any news item or development which registers an up- or downward change in the international tension, an increase or a decrease in the actual danger of conflict, or any change in the relations between West and East, however slight, may invariably be presumed to be of interest at home. Equally, it can always be taken for granted that news and reliable reports about the play of the political forces inside the country in which we reside, any reliable information about tendencies and developments in internal policy, as well as on the economic and financial sector of the country where one is a guest will be of great interest at home. For example, it can be presumed to interest the average Swiss reader whether in Gt. Britain the Labour party is advancing or receding, whether the Conservatives are gaining popularity or not, whether new elections with the possibility of a change of regime are in the offing or not, whether communism has a strong influence or not, whether the devaluation of the currency has brought in its train an increase in prices and so on. All these things, and many others, will, in view of the close relations between the two countries, not least in trade matters, be of the greatest interest to Swiss readers. Over and above this, it will be of interest to the home readers to know whether plan-

ning succeeds and is something to be striven for, whether there are any chances of a more liberal economic policy, whether there is any change impending in currency policy, etc. Moreover, there are many more problems and items which may interest large sections at home, which cannot be exhaustively enumerated here, among them for example views heard or published in this country about Switzerland, its institutions, its hotels, its customs control. Of particular interest are, of course, views published or expressed here about the course of Swiss foreign policy, trade policy, economics. The framework is, as can easily be seen, an extremely wide one, into which can be fitted a rich collection of sketches. Often it is, of course, very difficult for a foreign correspondent to know whether many or only very few of his readers are interested in a particular subject. He can never really know, he can only follow his intuition and feelings. Often he may ask himself: If I were in Switzerland on holiday just now, would it interest me to know about this or that? Though the correspondent is the donor, he will thus, at least for a moment every day, identify himself with the receivers and decide for them, as it were, whether they want to know something or not. In case of doubt, he will always be well advised to send rather more than less, as the editors at home can always weed out what is not wanted. Thus, what the reader at home receives, has already passed two sieves: the one of the correspondent and afterwards the one of the editors. And finally, no reader is compelled to read anything which may have appeared in print but does not interest him: he can always act as the third sieve.

It happens, from time to time, that readers react directly. Thus I have in my possession quite a handsome number of letters from readers who are totally unknown to me, letters which are very useful as an echo, whether they be written in praise, or in objective criticism. It has also happened to me that readers, who may have read my despatches for years, have found on occasion of a visit to London that they wanted to meet their London informant in his flesh and blood. Yet other echoes appear from time to time

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in London papers, this mainly in war-time, when neutral opinions, particularly if favourable, matter a great deal. Sometimes one gets a reaction in conversations with British or Swiss officials, sometimes also in a chat with colleagues. One is well advised to look through one's collection of echoes from time to time, as one will find that it contains many a useful hint.

Sometimes reader's reactions will take quite a substantial shape — some time ago I wrote a series of articles about the dreary life and material difficulties of our Charlady, giving, with her consent, her real name. A few days later a soft-hearted lady-reader from Basle sent a food parcel for our Char, care of Mr. Keller. The recipient was, of course, quite overjoyed.

Only about three weeks ago I received suddenly a box of genuine Basler Leckerli, again from a female reader, on account of an article in which I had stressed the fundamental decency and soundness of the British way of life.

About twice a year, ever since the end of the war, I receive a pressing invitation from a certain Government — somewhere in the Mediterranean — for a three weeks visit with free air passage and free stay. I have, tempting as it would be to see that part of the world, so far never accepted it, as I feel I would not be free enough to describe my real impressions if I were to accept such lavish hospitality. Not all my colleagues suffer, however, from such inhibitions.

Sometimes it happens to me that I suddenly have the awkward sensation as though I were "writing out of the window", as it were. On the one side one tries to compile a daily chronicle for several thousand people, on the other hand one does not know them or their attitude. One does not know, for example, how many people read one regularly, how many occasionally and how many not at all. One does not know whether one writes for the benefit of professional politicians, or for rather more simple people in whom one cannot presume any knowledge of political events — or for both. Often, therefore, one tends to build a sort of bridge with one or two initial sentences to restore the connection between what one is going to say and what one is referring to in past history.

It was relatively simple for me, when, some years before the late war, I was asked by a colleague to take over his work, lock, stock and barrel, during his 5 weeks holiday. The paper in question was the "Jaunakas Zinias" of Riga in Latvia, the largest

daily in the country. There was a daily telephone call, coming through at a fixed time, lasting for twenty minutes and those 20 minutes had to be filled. I tried, most conscientiously, to report on political trends in as sober and factual a way as possible.

It only took three days until, one morning, the managing director came to the telephone in lieu of the stenographer, and shouted all over that distance; in his strange Baltic German: "We don't want academic politics, what we want is more bloody sensation." When I asked, flabbergasted as I was, what he meant, he shouted back: "If no bloody sensations happen, then, please, invent them yourself." A Latvian colleague, whom I asked for advice, smiled and told me, from his own reminiscences, that he had, for example invented a barber who had cut the throat of no fewer than five people, moreover an execution which failed, and also a train smash, which, thank God, had not taken place. "A little bit of phantasy is what you need, my dear colleague, only a little bit of phantasy and imagination!" It is hardly necessary for me to say that I threw up this job after three days. The conception, I felt, was too different, though Jaunakas Zinias was a rich paper. "Bloody sensations" are, I am glad to say, not my line at all.

Fortunately there is, as between those of my colleagues who work for Swiss newspapers from here — no keen competition, as it exists, for example, between Swedes. Among several national groups there is not only no co-operation, but, in all personal friendship, a constant professional fight. Not only do these colleagues omit to give each other any tips, but they constantly try to get exclusive information and to overshadow others. This, happily, is not the case among those colleagues working for Swiss papers who, on the contrary, meet from time to time at lunch and discuss business. Often one arranges a mutually agreed release time for a certain news item, so that no one colleague outshines the other vis-à-vis his editors or readers. Not once have I known such an agreement to be broken.

A word may, perhaps, be said about the transmission of news. Correspondents among themselves will often curse the telephone and consider themselves as the slaves of that instrument, because most of them are bound to transmit at certain given times. On the other hand correspondents who only inform their respective papers by way of letters, are often considered as the "poor relations" of not quite the same

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standing, not quite grown up, as it were. Naturally, this is sheer nonsense, as the value of an article can hardly depend on whether it has been transmitted by telephone or by mail. I would even say that mail articles are usually much more valuable, as they are not, like the telephone dispatch, jotted down in half an hour, but often are the result of long research and study. Nevertheless, foreign correspondents will, as a rule, look on colleagues who do not transmit by telephone, as slightly inferior. Yet messages which are transmitted by telephone are usually not formulated with the same care as are "mailers", as often they are jotted down at the last moment, often even do they get altered during the actual telephonic transmission. Most foreign correspondents have a script from which they will read their telephonic despatches, some, however, have only half sentences or single words ready, round which they build their sentences as they go along. To do this, one either needs a nearly incredible mastery in the art of formulating, or an enormous nerve, particularly if one wants to avoid repetitions, or an editor who is goodhearted enough to do half the work of the correspondent and to file his messages until they are ripe for print. The conscientious correspondent, however, will see to it that some little while before the moment for his call arrives, he has a good script in front of him, as it is highly advisable to file such messages and keep them for about a year or so.

All in all, you will have gathered that the life of a foreign correspondent in London who works, for example, for Swiss newspapers, is not such as some

writers in Hollywood have described it. The ideal foreign correspondent — and this, I would like to make quite clear, I am *not* — should be in a position to dispose of the following things:

- (a) a robust constitution which enables him to stand a lot of drink;
- (b) a tolerant and goodhearted wife who does not mind when her program gets suddenly and without any notice thrown topsy-turvy;
- (c) as large as possible a circle of friends and acquaintances in the country where he works;
- (d) excellent eyesight which does not mind the truly enormous amount of reading it has to contend with, often at night, often in very small print;
- (e) as thorough as possible a working knowledge of the history, laws, customs and habits of the country in which he resides, quite apart, of course, from as complete as possible a mastery of the language of the country;
- (f) a good memory from which he can draw and which allows him to remember the names of all cabinet ministers and their offices during the last few years, as well as the telephone numbers of the most important ministries, embassies, High Commissioners Offices and London newspapers;
- (g) a well stocked wardrobe which enables him to be properly dressed for evening functions and dock strikes, weddings and funerals, factory visits and memorial services;
- (h) quickness of conception which enables him in an instant to judge a piece of information as to its being of value or valueless;
- (i) independent means of transport, by which I mean a motor car which works;
- (k) financial backing from his employers which allows him as much freedom of movement as possible, also in the better restaurants of London;
- (l) devotion to his duties and a certain belief in his mission which automatically prevent him from sending "bloody sensations";
- (m) a well-stocked library which contains the most important books about the country in which one resides;
- (n) a good secretary or typist who is capable of conducting some of the paper war on her own;
- (o) several hundred printed cards, some of which read "has pleasure in accepting", and some "regrets that owing to a previous engagement".

These requisites are but a few of a long list. I would never advise anyone lightly to enter this profession, even if it has many advantages, not least the one that one is one's own master and nobody can check whether one enters one's office early or late. One always remains responsible to one's own conscience, to one's editors, one's calling as such, and, ultimately to one's readers, whom one likes to entertain from time to time, but whom one would never, under any circumstances, want to misinform.

Let me turn now, Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, to some of the more amusing side-lights of the work of a President of the F.P.A. in London.

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women who act as correspondents of newsagencies and newspapers in foreign countries, foreign in the technical sense of not belonging to the British Commonwealth of Nations in any way. Nearly all these professionals belong to the Foreign Press Association, which was founded in 1888 and registered as a friendly society. It has as its purpose the furtherance of journalism, literature, science and the fine arts, and promotion of friendship and fellowship of the Press. It is the one and only professional organisation of accredited journalists of all foreign nations. Access to it is not easy to gain, especially so in war-time, for candidates for membership have to prove their status as working journalists and accredited correspondents, whose main income derives from journalism. One of the most important purposes of the F.P.A. as a professional body is to look after the interests of its members. Thus the Committee watches carefully the working conditions in Parliament and in this country generally, it helps members who through no fault of their own are in financially difficult positions, it tries to help those members find work who have become unemployed through some misfortune or other and looks after their welfare generally. It has both an Hon. Legal and Medical Advisor. Through its big official luncheons, which have served as a platform for many British statesmen and allied personalities, it has become *an integral part of the political life of London*.

It is about these luncheons and dinners, which are sometimes attended by upwards of 400 people, that some amusing background stories could be told. I myself have, in my capacity of President of the Organisation, received and welcomed, in the course of the six years I have now had this office — 2 years during the war and 4 years running now — no fewer than 112 guests of honour. If I name some of them, I beg you to believe that I do not do this for any reasons of self glorification, but merely to show that our association as such has a good name and high standing, so high in fact that only a few days ago, immediately after a luncheon we had offered to the Minister of Defence, another member of the present Ministry had me telephoned by his Public Relations Officer and asked why we had not invited him yet. We, of course, like it that way, if Cabinet Ministers queue up, as it were, to be our guests. Well, among the personalities I have received at such functions have been: H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh, Mr. Attlee (twice), Mr. Bevin (twice), Mr. Eden, Mr. Shinwell, Sir Hartly Shawcross, Count Sforza, M. Spaak, the late King George of Greece, the late Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Temple, General de Gaulle, the late Gen. Sikorsky, the late President Benes, Mr. Herb. Morrison, Mr. Kenneth Younger, Mr. Ernest Davies, various allied Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers, Field Marshall Montgomery — to name but a few.

As you can imagine the tabling at these functions, the protocol, etiquette and such things are of very great importance. I could easily write a book about the vanity, touchiness and over-inflation of some of the guests we have had — none of those I have mentioned — but as many of the prominent persons involved are still alive — and I am still in office — this book, which might be called "What the butler saw in diplomacy and politics" will either have to wait or remain unwritten, and the juiciest stories will have to remain untold for the time being.

(To be concluded in next issue.)

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