

Ambassadors of the people [Continuation]

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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.

(Continuation.)

It may amuse you to know, and I don't see any harm in relating it, that H.M. Lord Privy Seal and until recently Foreign Secretary has, somewhere in his wardrobe, a dozen white stiff collars which I bought for him in Aarau. It was at one of our luncheons, which took place 3 days before I left for Switzerland on my holiday, that Mr. Bevin, while speaking, kept putting his finger between his collar and one of his chins. "Oh!, there he goes again", said Mrs. B., "with his paper collars bought in the diplomatic stores in Moscow, which shrink every time he begins to sweat". Well, a few days later I went into a shop in Aarau and asked, with a set, stern face, for a dozen stiff white collars, size 19½, or continental 43. The shopkeeper looked at me and said: "Mr. K., it is true you have put on a little weight, but believe me, you will never take a 43". When I told him who the collars were for, he walked to a corner of his shop, opened a drawer and produced them. I still have a letter of thanks from Mr. Bevin in my collection of souvenirs, and the shopkeeper in Aarau still dines out on the fact that he supplied collars to the Foreign Minister of Gt. Britain.

On another occasion Mr. Bevin's speech, all about the Marshall plan, went out alive from our table to the U.S.A. and to Canada. Everything was timed down to quarter minutes. Mr. Bevin was briefed to speak for exactly 29 minutes, but when he rose to start, produced from his pocket a wad of sheets which looked more like a telephone directory than a script of a speech. When he had about six more minutes to go on the air, the telephone directory had been reduced only to about half its size. I had no other choice but, while the Foreign Secretary rambled on, to take off my wristwatch and hold it under his nose. He understood. While holding fast to the remainder of his fat script with the right hand, he tore some twenty or so pages out with his left, threw them on the table, bridged the gap by saying a few times "Hem, hem" very eloquently and finished dead on time.

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On yet another occasion we entertained Mr. R. A. Butler, the former Minister of Education, and present member of Mr. Churchill's shadow cabinet. When he came in, he asked me whether we wanted him to speak on home policy or foreign policy. I was surprised at this, as we had had Mr. Eden a little while before for a foreign policy speech and we had booked Mr. Butler to address us on conservative home policy. I told him so. "What a pity", he said "I have such a good foreign policy speech in my pocket. I prepared it, at the behest of Mr. Churchill, for the foreign policy debate in the House last week, but could never deliver it, as Mr. Churchill suddenly got up himself and stated the case on behalf of our party. And now *you* don't want it either." I gather that his Constituents had to endure it in the end.

One day we had Lord Woolton as our guest. He came in, rubbed his hands sleekly and smoothly and said to me: "Who are we?" I told him we were the F.P.A. "Oh yes, I see", he said, "eh, do I speak?" I told him that indeed he would speak, and speak on the record, which means for publication. "That's all right", he said and ate his lunch with appetite. When I gave the toast to the King, he took his name card and jotted down one word with a golden pencil. That was his script. He made the most perfect speech ever heard. Some weeks later I was invited to another function where Lord Woolton was the guest. "Who are we", I heard him say to the host, when he entered, and then "Do I speak?" I knew then what a superb showman he is.

About two years ago we entertained that most



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interesting right-hand man of Marshal Tito's, Alès Bebler, then Vice-Foreign Minister, now permanent Yugoslav Representative in the Security Council. He surprised me not only by his perfect drawing room manners, his heavy golden cigarette case and his well groomed appearance, but above all by his remark that he originated from Switzerland, where his grandfather was still the Gemeinderatspräsident of Schleins. In my introductory speech I could not help, knowing this, calling him a remarkable Swiss contribution to world history.

During the war we were the first organisation to offer a platform to General de Gaulle. When he came in he was extremely tense. At table, when I offered him wine, he snapped: "Non, de l'eau". When I tried cider, whisky or beer, he snapped again: "Non de l'Eau". "Comment, de l'Eau Vichy?" — I said, whereupon he snapped back: "Non, de l'eau pure". He made a perfect speech after an awkward luncheon, lasting some 45 minutes, and not once looking at his script. It was the speech, in which he said that victory would be in view once the Allies had 100,000 tanks, 100,000 planes and 5 million tons of shipping space. One gasped at these figures at that time. A few days later I received an invitation to a dinner party given by the General at his then Headquarters, the Connaught Hotel. When I came into the room, de Gaulle received me with a cocktail glass in his hand. I laughingly referred to it and said that I had thought he drank water only. "Ah!", he said "to-night I do not have to make a speech. You see, I am not a politician. When I have to make a speech like the one

to your association, I have to learn it by heart, word for word, in front of a mirror, I cannot afford to have the effect spoilt by alcohol". I thought that frankness deeply moving.

The Poles in Exile in London wanted, of course, always to speak. Once in 1942, in July, we had the then Foreign Minister, Anthony Eden, as principal guest and some 520 people present. The Top Table, which was a terrible headache to make, had some 16 ambassadors, 6 ministers, some British Cabinet Ministers and Undersecretaries, the then Soviet Ambassadors Maisky and, if you please, the three Baltic Ministers Torma — Estonia, Zarine — Latvia, and Balutis — Lithuania. That Top Table, comprising 41 people, was done, approved by the Protocol Department of the Foreign Office and printed, when at midnight the day before the function a Polish colleague rang me and said: "You will be delighted to hear that my Prime Minister, Gen. Sikorsky, will be coming along to-morrow." Was I delighted! The whole table arrangements had to be re-done and re-printed. After Mr. Eden, Dorothy Thompson said a few words. While she talked, Gen. Sikorsky, who was sitting two down from me, kept writing furiously. Mr. Eden, who sensed what was coming, kept saying to me: "I don't want him to speak. You got to stop him. You've got to stop him." But before Dorothy Thompson was properly down in her chair again, Gen. Sikorsky, was on his way, grabbed a microphone and rattled away in Polish, while a translator, actually his then Private Secretary Retinger, translated sentence for sentence. That speech caused a world sensation, for Gen. Sikorsky gave away the fact that he, Maisky and Eden would go, from our luncheon, to the Foreign Office to sign the Soviet-Polish treaty of re-conciliation and friendship. Next time we gave a luncheon, in fact to Mr. Brendan Bracken, then British Minister of Information, the then Polish Ambassador, Count Raczkowski, who sat next to my wife, said to her all of a sudden: "You won't mind, I hope, if I re-read the speech." Had he got hold of Mr. Bracken's speech beforehand? No fear, it was a speech he was going to make, without so much as asking our consent. When, therefore, Mr. Bracken had finished, I shot up, thanked him for his contribution, declared the function as closed and remained standing, thus giving the signal for the break-up of the party. After that I was not troubled by Polish speeches any more.

I could go on telling you these little inside stories. I could tell you about H.M. King George II of Greece who asked me whether I knew a baker called Wehrly in Zürich who made excellent "Weggli". I could tell you about an introduction I had to manage between Mr. Attlee and the present German Consul General, about the fussiness of the advisors and secretaries of The Duke of Edinburgh and his own charm and utter simplicity, about Fieldmarshal Montgomery and his views about the Swiss Army and the Swiss Réduit National, about M. Spaak of Belgium, who, when we had him and M. Bech from Luxembourg got up and started his speech with the remark: "Whenever I am in the company of my friend Joseph Bech, I feel like the representative of a grand pouvoir" — about Count Sforza and his remarks about the red-coated toastmaster Dean we employ, but I feel I have kept you long enough.

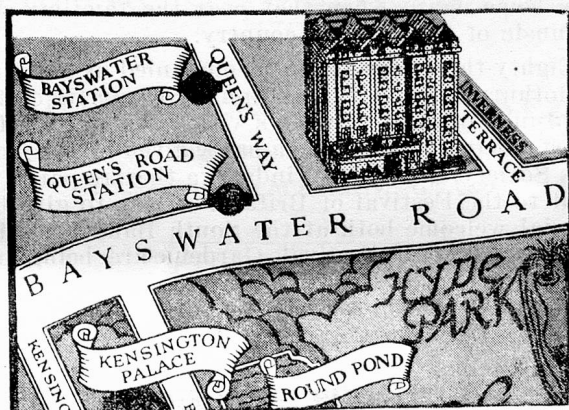
Of course, we have, among our corps of foreign correspondents, some 125 by number, one or two

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highly interesting and one or two amusing ones. About them, too, a book could be written, but, again, that will have to wait. There is just one amusing fellow who comes to my mind. I had him in my car the other day, when he suddenly said: "Would you mind stopping and waiting at the Chemists for a moment, I must get my pills." "Pills", I said, in order to say something, though I was not particularly interested in the working of his inside, "what pills do you take?" "Oh!", said he, "you see I am a proper terror when I wake up in the morning. I am most terribly rude. So at the instigation of my wife I went to the Chemist and asked him whether he could not give me something against rudeness in the morning. And, believe it or not, he has given me some pills, which make me perfectly sweet. As my first supply has now run out, my wife has insisted that I should get a new lot. So if you will kindly stop at Bakers, I shall get a new 3/6 worth of morning sweetness". What nationality do you think he is?

Another fellow succeeded during the war, after his country had been overrun, to persuade the British Ministry of Information to provide him, free of charge, with an office, stacks of beautiful paper, three girl typists, a roneo-multiplication machine, a good short-wave receiver, to all of which he contributed the wits.

With all this outfit he produced, on the strength of radio reports, a "Free Ruritanian Bulletin", which he succeeded in selling to another Department of the

same Ministry of Information for 80 pounds a month. That I call tüchtig.

He was, I might add, a Rumanian, and as you know, to be Rumanian, is not a nationality, it is an occupation.

There is, however, one remark, with which I would like to close this unambitious little causerie: if there is one person in particular, to whom the F.P.A. in London, and its President, owe a debt of gratitude for the most loyal services possible, it is our permanent secretary — the very soul of the whole machine — Miss T. von Holzer., who, I am glad to say, is here with us all to-night.

I am fully aware of the fact that this talk has been merely a stop-gap, as we on the Council have not been able to produce a better and more worthy speaker for this meeting. If I have succeeded, however, in convincing you that often there is an enormous amount of work behind the newspaper edition which you may use to wrap some old rubbish up in, then it has been worth my while rummaging through my scrap books — as I hope it has been worth your while coming here to-night.

Thank you for listening to me.

THE "STADTMUSIK SOLOTHURN'S" LONDON VISIT.

Swiss Music at a London Concert Hall.

London will have the opportunity to hear a concert in real traditional Swiss style when the "Stadtmusik Solothurn" play at the Central Hall, Westminster on Tuesday, June 12th. The concert, which includes among its patrons Lord Ismay and the Swiss Minister in London, is in aid of the National Institute for the Blind, the Musicians Social and Benevolent Council and the London Swiss Benevolent Society, and the programme includes yodellers, solos on the Swiss Alpine horn and the traditional airs of the Swiss mountains. Swiss residents in England may well imagine themselves home again when they hear the familiar songs and music of their native country.

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