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ROUNDABOUT

SWITZERLAND

by Derek Meakin

With its musical horn sending a joyful melody echoing from side to side of the valley of the Rabiosa, the distinctive yellow postbus pulled to a halt in the little mountain hamlet of Malix, where 15 British children were enjoying a six-months rest cure.

All of them, asthma sufferers from Manchester and Liverpool, were having a long holiday in the pure Alpine air, 4,000 feet above the sea, as guests of the Swiss people. And they had been told that when they returned home all trace of their illness would be gone for ever.

To reach the large wooden chalet where the children were living I had to climb a long steep icy path leading from the hamlet's one street.

Long before I got there I could hear gay peals of laughter, and high above me I could see a group of merry youngsters gambolling in the first snow of the winter.

The man who came to greet me was called Arnold Lehner, a former teacher who had left his big-town school to take over the 36-bed Kinderheim. Now he likes nothing better than playing nursery rhymes on his tiny flute and teaching pale city children how to be happy.

He showed me round the neat all-electric chalet with its rows of brightly-polished showers and huge washing machines with fatherly pride. He pointed out the stack of sawn-off skis and said: "After being here two or three weeks most of the poor mites can go out skiing on their own and think they are in paradise."

Well, what accommodation does this "paradise" have to offer? I looked into one dormitory with the word "Sonneck" (sunny corner) carved on the door and saw trim wooden beds covered with billowy red-and-white duvets. It had been taken over by five of the English boys.

The "Röseligarten" (rose garden) bedroom was for a handful of pathetic German boys who had been sent there from a Displaced Persons camp in Stuttgart. They were refugees from Eastern Germany and spoke Russian as easily as their native tongue.

English girls were in the "Juhee" (hooray) and "Berguckerli" (Belle Vue) rooms, while three English boys and one Swiss shared the bedroom called "Kleeblatt" (shamrock).

As the children ran to wash before lunch the enthusiastic Mr. Lehner took me round his well-equipped workshop used for on-the-spot repairs, and then through the brightly-decorated infants' room with its tiny tables and chairs, which had been hand-

made at the chalet, and dolls, fashioned out of old socks, lying in pretty wicker cradles.

But despite all the playthings the strict timetable of the Kinderheim insists that the children spend part of each day doing some serious studying. I poked my head through the schoolroom door just as the clock was striking noon to see a solitary pupil — a ten-year-old Swiss boy — pouring over his books. While the other children were revelling in snow fights he had been kept in because he had been slow in completing his lesson.

Teacher for the English children was 27-year-old Claire Müller. After breakfast every day she took them for two hours lessons and then packed them off outside to look after themselves. It was not until five o'clock that they were back in the classroom for another hour's studying, and then after supper they had games for an hour before going to bed.

I flicked through the pages of one of the schoolbooks and then asked John Glascott, a 13-year-old from Kirkdale, Liverpool, whether he had learned anything in his first few weeks in Switzerland.

"Not much", he admitted, and then added excitedly: "But I can recognise the tracks of rabbits and foxes and bambis in the snow. And the squirrels

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are so tame they let me feed them with nuts instead of running away."

He also told me he could speak a few sentences of Swiss-German, and knew a little French. But his newly-acquired knowledge was not a product of the classroom. He had picked it up from his new French and Swiss friends, and was teaching them English in return. In such spontaneous and friendly way the children were easily demolishing the language barriers.

The children I met were not the first to go to Malix. The scheme was started two years ago when an initial group of 12 London schoolchildren were invited there by the "Schweizerisches Arbeiter Hilfswerk". Arrangements from the British end were made by the Swiss Economic Council, whose gifts since the end of the war have done so much to strengthen Anglo-Swiss relations.

The stay in Malix has really worked wonders for these children. It has brought them health, and many of them found their attacks ceased as soon as they arrived in the pure, dust-free mountain air. It has also wrought a complete change in their mental outlook on life, for the six months they spend amid such glorious mountain scenery makes a great impression on their young minds.

And the children who go to Malix really appreciate all that is done for them. I never heard of one who was really homesick. Their long holiday has created such a profound impression that it will remain a priceless memory for the rest of their lives.

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