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NEWSPAPERS FROM EVERYWHERE

Over sixty years ago a young Swiss was given an unusual foreign newspaper. From that gift has developed the world's largest private collection of newspapers and periodicals.

The collection, owned by Mr. Johann Oetiker, of Zurich, contains well over 100,000 different specimens, ranging from the world's greatest opinion-formers to tiny journals catering for the interests of such specialists as fire-eaters.

Mr. Oetiker, now aged 85 and in retirement, possesses a collection excelled only by those in the British Museum, the Vatican and the Brussels Newspaper Library.

"Through learning Esperanto", he recalls, "I made a large number of friends — and through them got in touch with their friends. In this way my hobby and my collection became widely known.

"Nowadays I hardly need to lift a finger. Unsolicited parcels of newspapers and magazines arrive every day from all parts of the world. People know me — and they like to do me a good turn."

Proudly Mr. Oetiker adds: "There is no country and hardly a town not represented in my collection by at least one newspaper."

A visit to the home of this slightly-built friendly expert is an experience not quickly forgotten. As he talks about how his collection developed, the years roll back and he dips into his fund of fascinating reminiscences of travels in a dozen Eastern European countries which he visited when a young man.

The visitor could spend several days leafing through only a fraction of the huge collection. Old news stories and advertisements bring back a world long since dead. In fact the collection, which includes examples dating back to the 17th century, gives a unique view of a section of the world's history and culture.

Not that his collection — which contains material in 300 different languages and scripts — has not brought its worries too. For instance, it was very nearly lost altogether when a house he was living in caught fire, and was saved only with great difficulty. It was nearly lost a second time when a swindler, purporting to know someone interested in buying it, persuaded Mr. Oetiker to send the collection to France. He retrieved it after ten months and considerable expense.

Mr. Oetiker has his collection neatly filed under headings such as "countries", "continents", "religion", "science", "sport", and "politics". He has journals catering for such varied groups as atheists and the Salvation Army. One publication is devoted to the interests of Spanish bullfighters, and another, "The Vagabond", describes itself as "the journal for unemployed wanderers and bulletin of the Association of German Tramps". From Germany, too, came the most "expensive" newspaper in the collection. It cost ten thousand million Marks — during the tragic inflation period in Germany

after the first world war when this astronomical sum was worth only a few coppers.

Apart from his newspapers and magazines, Mr. Oetiker also has a large amount of other material relating to printing and the Press. And among his proudest possessions are letters from celebrities such as Amundsen, the Norwegian polar explorer, Sven Hedin, the Swedish traveller, Walter Mittelholzer, a Swiss pioneer of aviation, and Zita, last Empress of Austro-Hungary. What is to happen to this valuable collection? In the knowledge that "you can't take it with you", Mr. Oetiker is willing to sell it. The City of Zurich would like to buy it but is unable to find anyone willing to act as curator because of the time and trouble involved.

Mr. Oetiker naturally feels disappointed that his own work and care may not be carried on. The collection is irreplaceable and would be of tremendous value to students of the world's Press. It would be a pity if those sixty years of enthusiasm were wasted.

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