

Things are not what they used to be

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THINGS ARE NOT WHAT THEY USED TO BE

Looking at Switzerland from the London end could perhaps be compared with looking at something through the wrong end of a telescope. Everything looks extremely neat and tidy, if small. Everything is neatly in its place. As a Swiss living abroad for a long time, one tends to idealise things in one's homecountry. One remembers vividly all the good things. One would never believe that trains can run unpunctually in Switzerland or that a Swiss workman could promise to call on one at a certain given time without really turning up or even telephoning.

I for one have to admit that for years and years whenever I got irritated about British workmen who have not kept their appointments, or British firms which have not delivered when promised, I used to say to myself — and to my British friends — that such a thing could never happen in Switzerland. For all the 29 years I have now lived in this country, Switzerland has been for me the country of exemplary courtesy, honesty punctuality, trustworthiness and solidity.

Now, after a stay in Switzerland, I have reluctantly to admit that this is no longer the case. Fings ain't, as the slogan has it, wat they used t' be. During a three weeks' stay I have seen a number of sad examples to prove this. Here are some:

A relative of mine has been waiting for more than 8 weeks — in Zollikon, which is a suburb of Zürich — to get an electrician to get a so-called floodheater properly fixed up in a bathroom. For 8 weeks she was promised that he would call any day. After 8 weeks the lady in question became insistent and was then told that the electrician would definitely call "next week". When she retorted that she could not possibly stay in the whole of that week and could she not be given a definite time when he would call, she was told that that was not possible. Whether her floodheater is now installed or not, I do not know.

A friend of mine, who lives in Küsnacht, also very near Zürich, has ordered bookshelves to be built into a corner of his lounge. He ordered them a little more than a year ago and is still waiting for them. His wife has placed an order for curtains with one of the smartest and most expensive curtain-shops in Zürich and is today, after more than 10 weeks, still waiting for them.

I myself have had two small incidents in Switzerland concerning my car. Both of them seem to me to be symptomatic: in the one case regarding a deterioration in the standard of honesty, in the other the standard of care. On the (extremely narrow) Bernina-Pass road a Volkswagen from Austria and my car touched one another while passing. On both cars some damage to paintwork was caused. As regards mine I decided to have it made good immediately. Through a garage in St. Moritz — which proudly exhibits the three-pointed star symbol of the make of my vehicle — I got on to an excellent painter or carrossier. The work he had to do necessitated some rubbing down and some spraying and polishing. He did it very well indeed within 24 hours and got, as he told me, 60.— Swiss francs for the job. Yet the garage which had put me on to him had the nerve to charge 140.— Frs. i.e. 60.— for the work and 80.— just for passing me on to him. It goes without saying that I did not pay this. I put a onehundred franc note on their table and threatened to fetch the police immediately if they did not accept this and give me a receipt. They did, of course, while mumbling some face-saving kind of formula about possibly having made a mistake in their calculations.

The second case happened in the Canton of Zürich. We lived in Küsnacht for a few days and were invited to lunch at Dübendorf. That meant going across the Zollikerberg and down to Fällanden and from there to our destination. The road from Fällanden to Dübendorf was newly tarred. It was, however, not barred. Motorists were merely warned that there was "Neu-Teerung mit Rollsplit" and enjoined to stick to 40 kilometers per hour. On this road I collected well over 8 Kilos of tar, which unbalanced the wheels, made the steering heavy and made circulation extremely difficult, if not dangerous. The car had, afterwards, to be "de-tarred" and washed 3 times in succession. Moreover as tar and flints had been thrown up into the disc brakes, damaging them, I had to have new discs and brake pads. When I called at a garage on the Zollikerberg on returning from Dübendorf, the foreman there told me: "You must have been on the road Fällanden-Dübendorf, for you are the 7th car I see today in this pitiful state."

The road in question should, of course, either have been closed to traffic or only opened after proper steam-rolling and hardening of the tar. I have, since my return to this country, taken up this case strongly with the appropriate authorities of the Canton of Zürich. Whether I get any satisfaction from them or not remains to be seen.

These are but a few examples. To mention them publicly, bearing in mind that the "Swiss Observer" has a good many British friends as readers, is, of course, not a pleasant thing to do. This article may even expose me to criticism — but I feel these things have to be said all the same. Things in our beautiful homecountry just simply are no longer what they used to be. It is no good trying to hide facts. So many people in Switzerland have had it so good for so long — the boom in the building industry still goes on — that it is not good for them any longer. Many things have got quite out of proportion. A friend of mine has recently moved into a new flat on the "Forch", behind the Zollikerberg, where, as the Swiss saying goes, fox and hare say goodnight to one another. It is, theoretically, a 7 room flat, but in actual fact there are 5 rooms, two of them with recesses. The rental he has to pay amounts to 15 000.— Swiss Francs per annum. It sounds unbelievable, but it is true.

It goes without saying that I have always taken the line that the Swiss press was on a much higher level than the press of any other country. But, while this is still true of the majority of responsible Swiss papers, it is nevertheless a fact that there is now in Switzerland a daily paper in existence, which, like a wellknown British counterpart, caters for the sensationhungry. So much so, that it recently announced the late Pope's death and described the scenes of mourning on St. Peter's Square in Rome before the Pope had actually passed away. Naturally this paper outdid all others regarding the most lurid details of the Profumo-Ward-Keeler-case. It makes one sad to add that its circulation is now amongst the highest in Switzerland. The authorities have been asked more than once whether there are no constitutional or legal means to close it down. But as Switzerland is a democracy with a free press, there aren't. And the said rag flourishes.

The sad case of Zermatt is, of course, still fresh in everybody's memory. All the beautiful propaganda put out by those whose job it is to publicise our country as the ideal holiday playground cannot alter the sad fact that Zermatt was a case of gross neglect and, worse still, deliberate misleading on the part of some responsible per-

sons in Zermatt. Yet, on making careful enquiries about the situation, one has not heard that any of them have lost their positions.

If anybody, on reading this, should accuse me of not being a good Swiss, because I publish my impressions, instead of shamefully hiding them, my retort to him would be this: just because I consider myself as good a Swiss as any and love my homeland as much as anybody, I deem it my duty and my right to speak out. In conclusion I would like to express the hope that the present trend will soon be reversed again. Very soon.

Gottfried Keller.

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