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Autor: [s.n.]
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ZURICH'S "CAFE ODEON"—A BIT OF WORLD AND SOCIAL HISTORY

Bellevue-Platz — more country than city

Bellevue-Platz is for Zurich what Place Pigalle is for Paris, Times Square for New York, and Piccadilly Circus for London. A focal point of traffic surrounded by theatres, restaurants and places of entertainment, it awakens to gay life at nightfall when it is flooded by neon lighting. Surrounded, did we say? This is not quite correct, because strictly speaking, Bellevue-Platz, which is bounded on only two sides by buildings, actually has the close-to-nature look, common to Swiss cities, lent by its groups of trees leading to the promenade along the shore of the widely-eulogized Lake of Zurich. There is only one corner of the square which, to a certain extent, has the air of a big city. Here stands a building which more than fifty years ago, rising before the wondering eyes of the citizens, was a forerunner of a new era, boldly triumphing over the architectural transgressions of the foregoing period and the "art nouveau" style. Some years ago, when the suggestion was made to pull it down and erect a modern department store in its stead, a storm of indignation rose throughout the city. This storm did not blow down the fifty-year-old building, but it certainly did reduce to nothing the plans for its destruction. What was the particularity of this building with its rather insignificant exterior, that a whole city should fight for its preservation as though it were a treasure of the Middle Ages? The answer is simple: it was not the fate of the building, but that of the Café Odeon which was at stake.

The Odeon is a typical "Viennese coffee house" because its prototype can be found anywhere along the shores of the Danube. Here one can sit for hours over a "café crème" — served with a glass of water, according to tradition — engrossed in one or more of the 300 Swiss and foreign newspapers and magazines to which the management subscribes for the pleasure of its guests. Or lost in thoughts, someone may take up his pen to put a sudden brain-wave on paper, be it only the solution of a cross-word puzzle. For this, also at the cost of the house, there is an encyclopædia, in several volumes, at the disposal of the guests. Not one of the waiters who, according to their age, bring to mind budding or retired diplomats, would dare suggest that the right to remain at a table be secured by a repeat-order. In the Odeon, for the price of a glass of beer or a cup of coffee, one can sit undisturbed, oblivious of time, and dream, brood, meditate, compose verse, chat with one's table-companions, or be just an ordinary mortal and individualist.

A hang-out for odd characters and social reformers

The upholstered window-seats and massive settees have recently been re-covered in real calf-leather, the somewhat ungainly-looking chairs re-furbished, the marble and brass ornamentation given a high polish, and the crystal-beaded "art-nouveau" chandeliers carefully dusted and rejuvenated by the installation of an original lighting arrangement, so that they are now resplendent as the sun at noonday. When the renovation was completed, all Zurich heaved a sigh of relief: everything seemed as on the opening day — 1st July 1911. One liked it that way. Here, voluntary preservation of art and culture had been at work. An oasis for real individuality, a reservation for odd characters and solitary eccentrics had been maintained against the onslaught of the prosaicism and uniformity of the new era. Only on the first floor is there now a suggestion of a modern, big-city atmosphere. The

cabaret of the old days has been transformed into a fashionable night-club. And yet, as in former times, visitors still have to run the gauntlet past the marble-topped tables in the café, and would be exposed to the view of card and billiard players in the rooms on the first floor, if these had eyes for them in the heat of contest. Many, but not all, guests of the Odeon come to see, and be seen.

It is not the edifice, but the spirit pervading therein which is worth while preserving as a living reminder of times gone by. In the Odeon everyone is a personality, never a number. And no one would think of interfering in your private life. Politicians, scientists, poets, painters, actors and social reformers, theatregoers and debaters at the round table count among the regular guests equally as much as people who just to pass the time, or for professional reasons, oppose the ethics of the middle-classes and manifest this opposition by their outward behaviour. Beatniks, Bohemians, even "ladies of a certain profession" have tables reserved for them, where they are at fixed hours. "Who is that dignified old gentleman who looks like a Nobel prize winner?" an inquisitive foreign journalist once enquired of a waiter, who looked like a dignified Nobel prize winner himself. "He has been coming here regularly for the past twenty-five years, sir", was the stern reply, "He comes at the same time every day and sits at the same table. But hasn't he the right to keep his incognito? Of course, if you insist, I can go to him at once and ask him who he is". Not even the curious newspaperman had the heart to desecrate the sanctity of the spot by such a breach of etiquette.

A certain Mr. Uljanov

In that portentous winter and early spring of 1917, a group of men sitting at a table, their heads close together in secret discussion, did not attract particular attention. Guests at the Odeon were accustomed to seeing all kinds of shady characters and people of obscure types. Here they had seen the birth of Dadaism, and other more or less harmless movements which were a trend of the times. No one had an inkling that a plot, destined to have enormously far-reaching consequences, was being concocted, namely that of the Russian revolution. The Red participants of the round-table meetings were Leon Trotsky, Karl Radek, Sinowjew, Bronsky, Tysanow, and a certain Mr. Uljanov, who was the heart and soul of the conspiracy. On 8th April he assembled his followers here for the last time, and the next morning left by train with carriages locked and sealed, via Germany for Russia. Mr. Uljanov was none other than Comrade Lenin.

Similar stories are told about another contemporary who was sowing seeds of unrest, Benito Mussolini. It is said that while playing billiards at the Odeon he planned the "March on Rome" which delivered his country into the hands of the Fascists.

It is not only troublemongers who make history, however. At the Odeon these were far outnumbered by dispassionate celebrities, who throughout the years were wont to gather there. Almost endless is the number of world-famous people in the fields of science, literature, art, and philosophy, that one saw here regularly — Ferdinand Sauerbruch and Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann and James Joyce, Gerhard Hauptmann and Somerset Maugham, to mention but a few. Others included novelists, playwrights and poets like René Schikele, Frank Wedekind, Alfred

Kerr, Eric Kaestner, Else Lasker-Schueler, Franz Werfel and Stephan Zweig, as well as two exponents of contemporary Swiss drama, Friedrich Duerrenmatt and Max Frisch.

Where Toscanini did not swing his baton

There were also celebrities in the world of music. During the past fifty years the Café Odeon came to be their favourite meeting place in the heart of Europe. The list of names is long: Franz Lehar, Richard Strauss, Emmerich Kalman, Ferruccio Busoni, Eugène d'Albert, Oscar Strauss, Leo Fall, and the great conductors like Wilhelm Furtwängler and Arturo Toscanini — likewise a small contingent of painters and sculptors such as M. von Werefkin, Lembruck, Paul Kassierer.

Night after night, after performances at the neighbouring theatres, the Odeon is taken by storm, not only by those impatient to share their impressions of the play they have seen, but also those who want to gaze at some stage star in everyday surroundings, without make-up and the glamour of the footlights. Sarah Bernhardt, Elisabeth Bergner, Max Reinhardt, Tilla Durieux, and Alexander Moissi are but a few of the illustrious names which belong to the Odeon's past. Like the great of the stage and the screen, their fans also came, and still come, alone or in groups, to take some refreshment after a day's or an evening's work, and enter into conversation with their table companions — journalists, artists, craftsmen, students and their girl friends. All of them experience the magic of this place where everyone can be his natural self, and find a refuge, a balm for the spirit, a debating ground for individualists and social reformers who have seen their dreams and aspirations being crushed by the onslaught of uniformity and indifference.

Methuselah and the Premier

Here in the Odeon, plots to overthrow governments have been hatched, novels have been written, verses composed, and philosophical ideas expounded.

This old-fashioned coffee house at the Bellevue has even been used as the subject for a film, and changed into a spotlight-flooded studio with authentic backdrops and extras: street walkers, gangsters, men from the provinces seeking adventure. In summer, tourists occupy its sidewalk tables, and throughout the year they visit the nightclub on the first floor with its international, and somewhat daring, floor show. And yet, despite this touch of frivolity, the place has an air of consistent and permanent middle-class respectability. The two pillars which uphold this virtue, which is stronger than the flippant but actually less effective atmosphere of vice, are the regular customers and the dignified waiters with their courteous and obliging demeanour. As already mentioned, there are guests who for thirty or forty years have been coming daily, at a regular hour, to take their coffee, or play cards or billiards. Some of the waiters, in their turn, belie the inconsistency and hectic rush of our times. Karl, the Methuselah of this "Viennese Café", is eighty-two, and has long been eligible for a pension. He prefers, however, at least now and then, to contest his rights with his younger colleagues, among whom there is Sepp, who still carries on with a stately bearing, despite more than twenty-five years of service.

In the billiard room, Ernst has been ruling over his domain for three decades, with the tact and statesmanship of a premier. Then there is Gottfried, another old-timer, who for the last twenty years, heedless of the charms of the floor show chorines, has been serving whisky as though

it were a highly commended Puritan drink — fresh milk.

The Café Odeon, this oasis where human weaknesses and virtues are candidly exposed, this meeting place with its unique environment and atmosphere, has all but eluded annihilation.

"What would you do", a distinguished habitué was asked, "if, despite everything, it should disappear to make place for a department store?"

"Disappear also", he replied, adding, "but where would I go? I could never find another Odeon."

(Swiss National Tourist Office, Zurich.)

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