

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1970)
Heft: 1597

Artikel: The reminiscences of a broadcaster
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689280>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 13.12.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

THE REMINISCENCES OF A BROADCASTER

We were fortunate to have as our after-dinner speaker at the last Anglo-Swiss Society Dinner an historian and political writer whose name is remembered by many for his wartime broadcasts: Professor J. R. de Salis. Swiss newscasts and commentaries during the war found an audience which out-reached Switzerland by far. The broadcasts of Professor de Salis in German, those of the late René Payot in French, had a universal impact. They were listened to by friend and foe with equal respect for their objectivity and their trustworthiness.

Having introduced his speech by recalling the numerous family and professional ties which made England endeared to him and having explained why, working in our three national languages, he had never had the opportunity of becoming familiar with the English language, Professor de Salis spoke to us of the tacit but highly useful co-operation which he enjoyed from the British News Services.

For all that, both as an historian and as a broadcaster during the second world war, I have made use of English sources, documents and statements, to great advantage. English news and documents were particularly important and useful in my wartime work. I received them in various ways. Needless to say, we listened day and night to the BBC programmes in English, German, French or Dutch. Reception was clearer at night, as during the day the German jamming transmitters often made listening impossible. At this point the late Lindley Frazer, who so successfully ran the German Department of the BBC, comes to mind. We did not meet until after the war, but when we did, we discovered that we had been listening to each other. My commentaries on the war situation were recorded at Bush House every Friday evening. When I first visited London after the war it was an enormous pleasure to me to find friends at the BBC whose *personal* acquaintance I was making for the first time. Until the summer of 1942 we also got "The Times" in Zurich: after the Germans moved into the Unoccupied Zone of France, we were effectively surrounded by two powers in alliance, which was bad from the informational point of view, as well as creating other difficulties. These difficulties disappeared again after the "longest day" in June 1944.

Piecing the information jigsaw puzzle

But information from England reached me by other channels. Without flattery I can say that they were outstanding by reason of their trustworthiness. I must, however, make one reservation: when secrecy was essen-

tial for a matter of operation on political or military grounds, we either learned nothing about it or it was disclosed later, after an interval of some time.

Even during the war the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation was not under government control, but enjoyed autonomous status. But for reasons of security and neutrality, there were limits to what we could say. It was forbidden to criticise foreign heads of State or Governments overtly or to side openly with either warring party. Our broadcast had the character of objective information—or such was the intention. In a way this was also an advantage. During the war we got the news from all countries and were thus in possession of quite a rich range of material. With a little bit of critical interpretation, especially applying the comparative method, it was quite possible to deduce a good deal that was not known in Germany and the German-occupied countries of Europe. This was why listening to foreign broadcasts was banned on pain of punishment in those countries—practically the entire continent. In spite of that, these stations were listened to, of course, and in French and German language programmes we were able to help many people in Europe to form an idea of the situation that differed somewhat from the picture put out by Dr. Goebbels through his Propaganda Ministry.

No censorship, but caution all the same

It was in 1940 that I was asked by the Swiss Federal President, Mr. Pilet-Golaz, to broadcast a fifteen-minute weekly commentary on the political and military situation on Radio Beromünster. I told him I had absolutely no radio experience or professional knowledge of radio techniques. To this he replied that he did not want a professional journalist, or a politician either, for this job. He said that as a professor of history I was independent, I was simply to speak on the radio as I had expressed myself so far in my newspaper and magazine articles. He did not wish to give me any political advice and I can say that I never received instruction or "mots d'ordre" from either the Government or the authorities. In Berne they did not want there to be any possibility of these broadcasts being interpreted as semi-official or inspired commentaries, and I was not unhappy at carrying personal responsibility for what I said—and how I said it.

No entry for the Military

There was one snag about that: I was given no information by our political and military authorities. But just as many roads lead to Rome, so do some paths lead to Berne and to per-

sonalities — Swiss, British, French, American and so on—with whom I could discuss things. I did, however, make one condition: that no military censor was to read my manuscript before I went to the microphone with it. The Director-General of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation set my mind at rest, assuring me that my manuscript would be read in his own office and not submitted to any other censorship authority. In matters like this, personal trust also plays a part and this trust existed between the heads of Swiss Radio and myself. However, every Friday I had to send the manuscript I wrote in the morning by express post to the Radio's general directorate in Berne. When I arrived at the Zurich studio in the evening—I always spoke from seven-ten to seven-twenty five p.m.—I would find my manuscript with the comment "Alright by Berne". This "alright" however, often meant that a sentence was crossed out or that a wording apparently not thought to be sufficiently neutral, underwent stylistic changes. But generally speaking I had a great deal of independence and notwithstanding these limitations I could say a great deal. In this respect there was a technique; for instance, instead of giving one's own views, quoting extracts from a speech by Prime Minister Churchill. I did a lot of quoting, in fact, and this was always permitted. I even quoted the sentence from that terrible speech by Hitler in which he foreshadowed the extermination of the Jews.

My previous preparation for this sort of work was several years in Paris as a correspondent for Swiss newspapers, becoming familiar there with international questions. I gained a certain amount of know-how in diplomatic and political techniques and heard or met many leaders of French and European life. By chance I was also in Paris during the Battle of France in the days that followed the tenth of May, 1940. Much later, in April 1945, I also witnessed the collapse of the Third Reich in South Germany, as a guest of General de Lattre de Tassigny.

Historical parallels

Although it is often a matter for dispute, I believe that we can learn from history. When in 1940 Hitler made preparations to invade Britain and gathered vessels together on the coast, but was unable to carry out his plans, I remembered Napoleon's "Camp de Boulogne". The parallel was downright amazing when, because Britain did not succumb, he attacked Russia—and from that moment on it was also clear how the drama was going to end. In a broadcast on the twelfth of September, 1941, twelve

weeks after Hitler launched his attack against Russia, I mentioned the fact that in 1812 Napoleon reached and occupied Moscow within twelve weeks, while now a Russian marshall was counter-attacking the Germans between Smolensk and Yelnia. That evening I found a large exclamation mark on the margin of my text, sent back from Berne. But I was, of course, able to read my commentary, which was historically and militarily correct, at the microphone.

In an analysis, much can be said without resorting to polemical terms. A well-known Austrian author who had fled to Switzerland in 1938 and with whom I once talked about the way to comment on political events, said: "Analysis is the best polemics". Perhaps consciously or unconsciously, I followed this maxim in my broadcasts. I must also not fail to mention that a great help for me were the Swiss Press, in the form of its best representatives, and Swiss diplomats with whom I was friendly, not forgetting military correspondents in Switzerland and other countries who commented on the situation. It was inevitable that the official representatives of the German Reich in Switzerland should be dissatisfied with the way in which we presented matters. They repeatedly suggested that I should be replaced by someone else on the air. A member of our Government at that time later described one such *démarche* to me. The German diplomat complained to him about my broadcasts. The Minister—or "Federal Councillor" as we say—asked: "Is what Mr. von Salis broadcasts not true? Can you give me concrete examples of errors or untruths?" Apparently no such examples were forthcoming; at any rate the Government left me in peace. After the war the British occupation authorities in Germany found many documents; including blacklists, which contained some Swiss names. Mine had not been forgotten.

The radio war

There was an incident at a lunch which my wife and I had in Zurich with the charming and helpful Press Attaché of the British Legation and I am sure that now, after so many years, I can talk about it without being guilty of indiscretion. You know there was a radio war going on and that the part played by radio stations in every country was important in informing and influencing public opinion. Of course there was no television in those days. There were also secret transmitters, some run by the resistance movements in the occupied territories and others probably organised from Britain. Even before the invasion of Normandy a real sensation was caused by the radio station which broadcast in German under the name "Soldatensender Calais". The broadcasts were in fact beamed from the Channel coast

area. This station informed listeners that it was a secret transmitter operated in occupied France by opposition members of the German armed forces. It did indeed describe, with many details, conditions in the German Army from which it could be inferred that a good deal was wrong and that the troops' morale was no longer high. This tallied with what we already knew from German sources. All the same, it did seem surprising that in the midst of the German army of occupation, such a transmitter could operate without being tracked down by German military security. Was it, we asked ourselves, a German or British station?

The music played during these broadcasts was American jazz records which were unobtainable on the Hitler-dominated Continent. On a skiing holiday in Davos my wife had heard these records while listening to American radio broadcasts at night time with other hotel guests. So she asked our British friend: "How is it that the German Soldatensender Calais has American records we do not have on the Continent?" The Press Attaché assumed a very British expression—in other words a poker-face—and then he said: "Well, perhaps you know that British submarines are supplying the French resistance groups with arms and all kinds of things. I should think that these American records are also being brought by submarine to the German resistance in Northern France". We took due cognizance of this explanation, although we thought it highly peculiar. A few days went by. Then this allegedly German station played only German military marches. Now we knew that the transmitter could not be on the Continent. I later met the man who ran this admirable radio station at the BBC in London. His staff consisted of German emigrés and prisoners-of-war.

One of my British relatives, Count Peter de Salis, who served as an intelligence officer with the Eighth Army, told me recently that the bulletins put out by the British Information Service in Cairo used to quote my commentaries from time to time. The Swiss Red Cross Representative in Egypt at that time, Mr. Hans Bon, whose connections with the Dorchester you know, had already informed me of this. More curious, perhaps, is the fact that the German armed forces staffs in France and Italy also used to listen in to the broadcasts from Switzerland. Earlier than was generally known, the German military authorities began to doubt the Nazi Regime's information policy and tried to enlarge their knowledge of the war situation from foreign sources. The Russian radio, operating in Kuybyshev also quoted us frequently. Of course the resistance organisations, especially in Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, France, Holland and so on, also made use of our news as well as information from British, American

and other radio stations. Most of this we did not learn until after the war; it was interesting to discover in these countries what a great effect the mass media have in wartime.

I think the history of the "radio war" during the second world war should be written by an historian some time. We all know that speeches by Churchill, de Gaulle, and Roosevelt had an enormous response on the Continent; but the overall radio policy of the various countries should be described, for it was the modern form of the bellicose dialogues before the walls of Troy.

A crystal ball prediction

On the basis of available information, including an American description of the Allied air offensive, I forecast, on the fourteenth day of April, 1944, that the invasion of France would begin "around the tenth of May". Of course I had no knowledge of the decisions made at Quebec and Teheran which had, in fact, fixed this very date. On the following day, the Exchange Telegraph news agency put out my remarks to the British and American press. The "Evening Standard's" writer on air warfare, James Stewart, devoted a long commentary to my broadcast. He posed the question whether the allied air fleets could destroy the German front-line fighter strength and reserves totalling about 2,500 aircraft and their factories within 26 days. James Stewart's conclusion was that if the Anglo-American communiqués could be accepted and if one continued to calculate soberly and logically, then cool consideration of this date was not sensational speculation. I should add that the British Cabinet banned further comment on this forecast and it is perhaps time to apologise for the fact that at that particular time my statements were inopportune from the allied standpoint. But I was only doing my job.

More surprising was the reaction among the Swiss public. Although the public were overwhelmingly pro-allied,

SWISS SPECIALITIES

SAUSAGES
CHEESE
CHOCOLATES
HERO CONSERVES
BISCUITS
ROCO CONSERVES

go to

BARTHOLDI'S

4 Charlotte Street, London W1

Telephone: MUS (636) 3762/3

ALSO FIRST CLASS MEAT

many military men and civilians did not believe an invasion would take place. They thought it was all "eye-wash" and part of the war of nerves, maybe because we had waited so long for the second front to be opened. After my broadcast, people were laying bets on whether there would be an invasion or not. A satirical weekly published in Berne printed a front-page caricature showing me as a fortune-teller with crystal ball and pointed hat, telling the future for Churchill, Hitler and Stalin, seated around a table. The caption read: "Professor von Salis, Fortune Teller, Scientifically-based war of nerves rumours. By appointment, purveyor to

Radio Beromünster." And the comment: "Professor von Salis successfully tuned Radio Beromünster into the war of nerves propaganda by forecasting the invasion for the tenth of May".

I think that reactions such as these threw a very revealing light on the conflicting and nervous atmosphere that prevailed on the Continent in the last year of the war. We hardly dared to go on hoping that the miracle of such a difficult operation as the invasion of France would still take place—or we feared it might not succeed. After the war, the reasons why the invasion had to be put off to the sixth of June were revealed".

MISCELLANY

by PMB

DID YOU KNOW? . . .

Who would accept to drink from an incompletely clean glass in a restaurant? No one, we can be sure. How is it then that most users of the restaurant's convenience will accept to use the common towel hanging from its walls? This is the question put forward by Dr. A. Gilgen, a member of the Institute of Hygiene at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich.

According to him and fellow specialists, washing one's hands in a public convenience is not sufficient to escape the risk of contamination. The drying-up procedure is more important, since it rubs away through friction those germs and bacteria which have resisted the washing operation. But the towel must evidently not itself be germ-infected.

A recent piece of research in Germany has disclosed however that common towels in public conveniences contained 98,000 germs per square inch on average. One towel in two carried infectious germs and one in three intestinal germs! The collective hand towel can be a carrier of infections of all kinds, such as typhus, diphtheria, measles, infantile paralysis and this has actually been experienced in hospitals. The fact that the towel is perpetually wet makes it an ideal breeding ground for bacteria.

Some countries have already prohibited the use of the collective hand towel in catering establishments. This is the case in the United States, where the States of Louisiana, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Florida have generalised this prohibition.

There are three other usual and less dangerous collective hand-dryers. The first and best is the paper towel which is discarded after use. The second is the towel distributor in which the towel unwinds and is not used a second time. The third is the hot air dryer, viewed unfavourably by special-

ists. Although this third means does eliminate whatever water is left on the hands, it does not remove germs and bacteria. The air used is the ambient air, which, in a public convenience, is always bacteria-charged, and the fact that it is heated reactivates these bacteria, thus making them a potential danger.

An enquiry showed that 91 per cent of Germans disliked sharing collective towels, and that 7 per cent of them would like to see this practise prohibited. The collective hand towel can then be considered as public enemy No. One!

THE POST ACTS AS YOUR BANK

In England the postal giro system, or possibility of transfer from one postal account to another, was introduced almost two years ago. The system does, however, not appear to have "caught on" and its introduction has barely affected the traditional pattern of payments in Great Britain. The British still make extensive use of the crossed and signed bank cheque for their day-to-day payments. The Swiss, on the contrary, have been using postal orders and postal accounts for a long time. In fact, the Swiss post office and postal cheque office is increasingly assuming the role of a deposit bank. Stamps, telegrams and parcels are one thing. So are savings books. But a growing part of the time of the counter clerk is now taken up by cashing and redeeming postal orders and postal cheques.

Thousands of people and businesses keep postal accounts, for which there is a directory. The bulk of payments in Switzerland is carried out between these accounts and the service is free. There is a small fee when payment is made by one who does not hold a postal account.

The system has been extended to its logical conclusion by the recent in-

troduction of the postal cheque. Any person with a postal (or, more precisely, a giro account) can draw up to two thousand francs in any of the 4,000 post offices of the country. All he needs is an elementary identity document (such as a driving licence) and his postal cheque book. The system has a definite advantage. Indeed, which bank has 4,000 branches? It is possible to draw more than 2,000 francs at two predetermined post offices in the area of domicile or business of the drawer.

The Swiss postal giro does everything that the banks do, and cheaper. It will serve bankers orders and pay the regular bills for telephone, gas and electricity automatically. A giro statement is mailed twice every month to all account holders. The giro will also handle wages, pensions and rents, and all this free! The only cost is the basic rate of keeping an account.

With this system a considerable time is saved by businesses because there is no more need for taking cheques to the bank. They are mailed directly to the firm's giro account, or paid in by the firm itself by mail.

The day when the post office will start investing the money of its clients, then the banks will begin to get worried.

THE BEST FOOD IN THE WORLD

Ask a foreigner what he considers to be the best discovery which has sprouted from the Swiss genius, he will speak of the cuckoo clock, Swiss chocolate, watches, cheese and such like. Will he mention Birchemuesli? He probably will never have heard of it.

For my part, I find Birchemuesli a luscious nourishment and the outstanding discovery of our health-conscious dietetists. I was surprised to learn from our street corner "Express Dairy" that they had been selling the "Familia" (Sachseln) make of Birchemuesli, which I had noticed on the shop's shelves for the first time, for many years. I was told that the packets were selling very well. So much so that there were acute supply problems, and this despite the high cost (4/3d.) of the relatively small packet. When in a hungry and gluttonous disposition, I can finish off such a packet in one meal! Better stick to Corn Flakes.

Birchemuesli is the richest composite food you can imagine. Turn to the back of the packet (the front shows a dish of Birchemuesli, with gorgeous apples, rich cream and honeycombs) and you will read: "*Familia*" **SWISS BIRCHERMUESLI** is an excellent cereal of high nutritional value for the modern family. It consists of oat flakes, apple flakes, wheat and rye, millet flakes, unrefined sugar, dried raisins, honey and crushed almonds. Apples are totally used with peel and core. Wheat is freed only of the outer, indigestible husk; so the precious elements of apples and the wheat-germ are re-