

English reminiscences on Zurich

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ENGLISH REMINISCENCES

ON ZURICH, by Stanley Mason

What have cities to do with one's personal fate? Why do people get born in Vladivostok, or settle down in Stoke-on-Trent? Is there some occult affinity that leads one's footsteps willy-nilly to Salt Lake City or to Isfahan? Some people are born in a city and never leave it again. Some people carry a city with them wherever they go, as James Joyce carried Dublin. Their fates are intertwined. Germans of the old school used to introduce themselves with a stiff bow as Schmidtke, Stuttgart, or Graf von Blotzheim, Berlin. Perhaps they were not so wrong after all to throw in this geographical tag that casts so much light on one's origins and destiny.

Personally I never had the slightest intention of going to Zurich, Switzerland. For that matter I might just as well have landed at Zurich, Montana (near Chinook), Zurich, Kansas (near Paradise), Zurich, Ontario (near London) or Zurich, Friesland (near nowhere).

My first destination in Switzerland was a remote green hill called the Zugerberg, and the first thing I saw when I got out of the train in the little town at its foot was a tram with a placard in the window reading "Zugerberg hell". I very nearly turned tail and fled. But only very nearly. For fate meant otherwise with me. Before long I was sitting in the train heading for Zurich.

When Picasso arrived in Zurich he is said to have picked out the chimney of the technological institute's district heating plant as the one satisfying architectural accent. I was far too much of a country boy to be so clever. My first impression of Zurich—apart from a passing fascination with a few examples of stepped gables—was of a city with rather big, gaunt, foreign-looking buildings but with plenty of trees and a great deal of light. This last is perhaps the key to Zurich's individuality. The lake and the River Limmat split it into two and let the sky in. The Zurich flag (in Switzerland every canton and commune has its flag) is blue and white, and blue and white are the colours of Zurich. Especially on a blue summer day with white clouds flying (because of the Föhn wind) and the blue-and-white trams zooming through the streets.

It was in such a tram that I soon made the acquaintance of the inhabitants of Zurich. I was about to jump off one while it was travelling at speed, as I had always done in darkest Birmingham, when a sober-faced Zurich burgher blocked my way with an arm of iron. As I had not as yet enough German to curse him, I fumed inward-

ly. But I had learnt a lesson: the people of Zurich are law-abiding, and they expect the same of you. In other cities you are free to commit suicide if you wish—not in Zurich. Any passing citizen believes that he knows more than you about the state of your psyche and won't hesitate to pull you back rudely from the fateful brink.

Since then many years have elapsed, the trams have been fitted with automatic doors, and Zurich has remained just as blue and white as ever it was. I have lived in Zurich, worked in Zurich, fallen in love in Zurich. Without my ever willing it, our fates have got intertwined. If I look back now on the intrusion of this city into my private stars, if I weigh up its qualities as a background for the activities of half a life-time, what are the aspects of it that strike me as worth recording?

To begin with, let me admit that Zurich still seems to me a pleasant city. Although in the first half of winter it tends to lie under a blanket of grey mist, it is an efficient city full of central heating and pipes that do not burst. Although it is not a place to expect miracles in, it is a place that keeps you comfortable. And although it has ceased to be what I have heard it called—"the biggest village in Switzerland"—it is still small enough to allow its citizens an individual existence, without the crushing sense of being only a meaningless cipher in the huge, impersonal wheels of a metropolis.

I like Zurich because—even if less than Venice or Stockholm—it is a city of waters. Not only does the lake reach in a wide, gleaming arc into the very heart of it, and the Limmat neatly divide its streets. The Sihl also cascades down from behind the hills to take it by surprise, making an urbane but romantic waterfall on its way and joining the Limmat by a tree-grown tongue of land where the soft roar of waters drowns the noise of the nearby traffic. Here James Joyce used to come down and meditate on summer nights, while I looked down from my window on the other side of the stream and was not even aware of his presence.

But quite apart from the rivers, there are numbers of backwaters quite near the city centre where foliage droops towards its own reflection and ducks and waterhens go about their private lives. The water birds, in fact, are one of the living emblems of Zurich. Gulls animate the picture of river and lake so much that the surrounding streets would seem dead without them. Swans come to the shore or sail past the walled river margins, and

there could be no more perfect black-and-white than that of their plumed majesty moving among the sable flocks of the waterhens. Water birds and water. Even as you walk down the platform of the main station you may sometimes be aware of the familiar water-smell, for the Sihl flows beneath your feet. And to return yet once more to James Joyce: wasn't it on the calm surface of this lake that he gathered ideas for his great book of the waters, "Finnegan's Wake"? No wonder the very name of Zurich stems from the Celtic word *dur*, meaning water.

The second beauty of Zurich consists in its wooded hills. Reminders of the last ice age, they encircle the city in green, sheltering ridges: to the south the Uetliberg, to the north the Zürichberg, between their tips the Käferberg. Wandering along the edges of their woods, you can look down over the sea of buildings by day or the sea of lights by night. And if in the town you see a placard that says "Uetliberg hell", there is no need for alarm. It only means that, though the town itself may be in the mist, the hills are in the sun.

Even though you leave the wooded heights and descend into the residential areas and the city centre, the trees never cease to shade your steps. Zurich is full of avenues and modest boulevards. I know streets where rows of Japanese cherries break into a rich pink foam in spring. There are others where on summer nights you can walk, for hours if you wish, through the gently intoxicating fragrance of the limes.

Just as nature, in wave and foliage, blends easily with the architecture of the city, which is nowhere grandiloquent or pompous, so a sense of history blends with the present. The old town on the north bank of the Limmat forms an impressive unity, yet the atmosphere of its ancient guildhouses and inns radiates unobtrusively into the rest of the city. The past is also preserved in customs that seem to fit into the life of the citizens with a certain natural grace. Each spring, for instance, the guildsmen ride round an effigy of winter that is consumed in crackling flame, and the streets blossom into a colourful riot of costumed tradition that almost takes the breath at the grey end of winter, and among an otherwise sober populace.

For this must be admitted by any objective critic: the people of Zurich are sober. Their compatriots in French-speaking parts and even in Basle accuse them of a chronic lack of gaiety. Certainly they are not exactly volatile, and the spark of imagination does not burn perpetually bright in their eyes. Yet many foreigners who have had that spark have felt at ease here, for the Zürcher, as they call themselves, are friendly, hospitable, open-minded. This is no soil to bring forth Byrons or Baudelaires or Boccaccios; but such incandescent minds are admired and appre-

ciated here by folk who themselves prefer to remain what they have always been: hard-working, orderly, clean, efficient and reasonable. Zurich is a far too down-to-earth city to have any ghosts of its own; but I feel sure that if a genuine, foolproof ghost could be imported from some dismal Scottish keep, the Zürcher wuld treat it like a king.

Many people claim—especially when the lights begin to go out after midnight—that the spirit of the puritan reformer Zwingli can still be felt in Zurich. Whether that is so or not, tra-

dition is certainly strong and acts counter to excesses in whatever direction. There are no vertical concrete deserts here, just as there are no slums, but everything has been kept to the measure of man. Starting from the busiest crossing at the heart of the city, you can be on the Lindenhof within two or three minutes, where the trees sleep in a contemplative and inviting peace, pigeons drink from the fountain and lovers sit lost in a dream. If you wait till dusk, the neon host that looks at you from over the river and floats in

reflection on the water is never cheap or garish, but quietly bright with an unassuming and thoughtful beauty. And that in a way mirrors the soul of this city. For the people of Zurich, though they have never aspired to glory, have done something perhaps more commendable: they have kept the measure. And their city, once a great centre of humanism, has remained to this day a human city.

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