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NEWS FROM THE COLONY

BACK HOME AFTER 38 YEARS

In the following article, Mr. Gottfried Keller, former London Correspondent of the Basler Nachrichten and the Swiss Telegraphic Agency, describes his impression following his return to Switzerland for retirement after having made nearly all his career in this country. It is gratifying to learn that the rise of the cost of living is not a nightmare in Britain alone.

Some, possibly quite a few, of the readers of the *Swiss Observer* who may be toying with the idea of transferring their residence from the United Kingdom to their native Switzerland may be interested to hear about the first impressions of one who has done so very recently.

Right at the outset I have to admit that I tended, during my 38 years of residence in London, to look on Switzerland as if it were still the country it was back in 1934. I saw Switzerland as the land in which everything functions smoothly like clockwork, in which promises about deliveries were kept, in which workers and handymen appeared at the agreed time, trains ran to the minute; where one would never get wrong connections on the telephone. In short, in London I made the mistake of looking on Switzerland through the rosy end of a telescope.

COURTESY IN THE SHOPS

Now, having lived here for roughly two months, I am seeing things as they really are. The price inflation is, according to official figures, running at 7.5% per annum but wages and salaries are, compared with England, very high. This means that services are very expensive. Goods in the shops are expensive too, even though they are generally admittedly of very high quality and standard. I have yet to see any shop here which sells shoddy articles. The older generation of shopkeepers and assistants are still extremely courteous, whereas some of the younger generation tend to be snappy and impatient. Shopping can be easy insofar as one can still have things—most things anyway—sent home. Many shops have tape-recording systems for orders made over the telephone after closing time and this seems to function admirably.

One thing which strikes me is how easy it is to get credit in shops, or how difficult it is to get accounts after delivery

of goods. One has to beg shopkeepers to send in their accounts and one thus gets the impression that they are not at all short of funds.

This, however, does not apply in the case of public enterprises, such as the telephone administration of the PTT. I was lucky enough to be able to take over an existing telephone—people who want new telephone connections installed usually wait 4 to 6 months!—but soon received a peremptory demand for a deposit of 200 francs (£20) “until it is established that you are credit-worthy”. No doubt the PTT must have had very bad experiences in the past.

THE TAX INSPECTOR'S WELCOME

On arrival in Kussnacht, where we have taken up residence, we received a very charming letter of welcome from the local authorities, together with an extremely pretty and useful illustrated booklet about the borough, its amenities, shops, services and possibilities, in which the rights and duties of the inhabitants are also set out. That friendly letter of welcome was followed, not quite a week afterwards, by the first enquiries of the Income Tax Inspector whose tone was somewhat less welcoming and rather more demanding. Having on entry into Switzerland, paid customs on my new car, I very soon also received a letter from the Road Tax people in Zurich, enquiring with what sort of number plate I drove and mentioning “the extremely unpleasant consequences of any contravention of the cantonal road circulation laws”. However, the matter has been satisfactorily straightened out. Paying things by bank cheques is, as I soon saw, not really the done thing in Switzerland. Of course, bank cheques are accepted, especially if one has a so-called cheque card from a known Swiss bank, but the easiest and simplest way to pay things without cash transactions is by way of the postal cheque-giro system. So I am now in possession of a private postal cheque account.

Swiss drivers are certainly less patient and less disciplined than British ones. In fact, some can be downright rude and some also very selfish and dangerous. At the same time I am rather horrified to see how many of them disregard pedestrians on pedestrian crossings. Swiss drivers also tend to drive fast, but from January 1st, 1973 onwards every-



body has been limited to 100 kilometres per hour on all roads except the officially marked motorways. One hundred kilometres corresponds to a little less than the British 70 miles per hour, enforced in the whole United Kingdom.

In shops, restaurants, garages, one cannot help being struck by the fact that very many of those who serve one are foreigners. The petrol station attendant, where I go, is a Yugoslav, my barber is a German, the staff in the hotel where we lived during the first week were Italian, Spanish, Turkish and Tyrolian—most of them very friendly, very pleasant and also very eager to earn Swiss money. Many of them have to go home to their countries now for some 6 or 8 weeks as they are classed as “saisonniers”.

BETTER THAN BRITAIN?

Another thing which strikes me very forcibly—and painfully—is how very remote the United Kingdom now seems to me to be from Switzerland—infinity further away than the 1,000 kilometres or so it really is. English newspapers arrive irregularly and are very expensive—a *Sunday Times* costing 4 Swiss francs. The news services of the Swiss Television System do not seem to be very interested in British things and but for my old friend Theo Haller (Radio) and my former colleague Roger Bennheim in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* I would feel very cut off.

These are first impressions, objectively put down. An English journalist who is stationed here and lives on the other shore of the lake asked me a few days ago on the telephone: “Are you happy to be back in Switzerland?” My reply was: “I really do not know yet. It is too early to come to any conclusion.”

If the United Kingdom goes through a period of difficulties, some due to the cost-inflation, much the same seems to be the case in Switzerland, even if in the latter country they may make themselves felt on a different level. Life in each of the two countries has its advantages and its drawbacks, neither of them being hell or paradise.

Gottfried Keller