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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

by Gottfried Keller

This is an important news item for the Swiss who live abroad: if everything goes well, they will be able to vote, whenever they are in Switzerland, perhaps already by the end of next year.

On 3 March the Federal Council, having beforehand consulted the cantonal governments, decided to send the appropriate proposals to the chambers of the Federal parliament. If no unforeseen impediments crop up, it is conceivable that the National Council deliberates and debates these in its June session, and the Council of States in the autumn. Provided they go through the two chambers smoothly and there is afterwards no undue delay in the formulation of the appropriate "Orders of Execution" (Vollziehungsverordnung), it becomes indeed possible for the Swiss abroad to exercise their voting rights when temporarily at home.

There will be no need for the whole country to vote on this, since the necessary amendment of the Federal Constitution — article 45 bis — has already been voted on and accepted way back in 1966.

If the principle sounds simple — "Swiss citizens who live abroad can actively exercise their political rights whenever they are in Switzerland" — its actual application will not be quite so simple. First of all a certain discrimination of those Swiss citizens who live very far away and are not so well off that they can travel home frequently, seems to become unavoidable. He who lives, as it were, just across the border, will be able to enter Switzerland frequently and to vote wherever he happens to be at the time officially reserved for this. But — and this is the second complication — how will the principle be applied to voting on cantonal and borough matters? Supposing, for example, that a citizen of Le Locle happens to be in Schaffhausen on a day when the people of the Canton of Neuchâtel elect their cantonal government and those in Le Locle their town councillors? Will he be able to join in these elections from Schaffhausen? The answer to this question, and to others, has still to be worked out once the law has been adopted by the Federal Chambers. This will be the task of the Federal Council. It will also be its duty to issue special regulations for those Swiss abroad who are in the home-country's

service in Embassies and Consulates and who can, consequently, not leave their posts at will in order to travel home and vote. It is thought probable that they will be given the right to vote by correspondence.

During the period of consultation with the cantons, 18 of them at once approved the principle. The idea of giving the Swiss abroad the right to vote where they are — in the Embassies or Consulates, for example — was rejected, because it was feared that in return the 18 per cent foreigners inside Switzerland might have to be accorded the same right. This, however, might have resulted in foreign political controversies being imported into Switzerland. Nevertheless, with the Federal Council's decision on 3 March an important step forward has been made.



Kind Regards

A British journalist who was sent to Switzerland by his paper told me some years ago that he was about to ask his Editor to post him somewhere else. When I asked why, he replied: "Because this is a quiet little backwater where nothing ever happens." It may well be true that little happened from his or his news editor's point of view — since according to the headline journalism of certain editors in Fleet Street, Switzerland did not — and does not — provide constant sensations.

What they were looking for were broken ankles by top class film stars in St Moritz, or stories about the Shah of Persia and Brigitte Bardot in Gstaad, or again juicy currency scandals involving people of the international jet-set, if not of the British aristocracy.

In actual fact a great deal happens in this little country of ours with its mere 15,940 square miles of territory, its roughly six million inhabitants, its many lakes, mountains, glaciers and rivers and four national languages.

If, for example, I tried to compress the happenings of just one weekend into a page or so of the *Swiss Observer*, I would find it extremely difficult, if not downright impossible to do so. For I would have to write about what happened politically, economically, socially, culturally, in the field of sport, as well as about activities in the trade

unions, in the many political parties, in rallies and assemblies, and so on and so forth. I would have to dwell on the sudden snowstorms we have had, ever since the beginning to the middle of April, and about the many valleys which were completely cut off, the many avalanches which came down, causing some 14 deaths up to the moment of writing, as well as untold misery and destruction. Furthermore I would have to mention the many road accidents which have occurred — partly owing to careless driving, partly to driving under the influence and partly again owing to driving cars with unroadworthy tyres. On the positive side I would be bound to mention the near-heroic deeds of the mountain rescue teams and helicopter crews, the latter rescuing cattle and other animals and bringing them lower down from spots high up where otherwise they would have perished. A word of praise would have to be said about the men and ancillary workers of the Swiss Federal Railways who worked up to 20 hours a day in order to free the many snow-bound and avalanche-blocked important railway links again.

As I write this and look out from my window across the lake it seems almost incredible that only a few days ago the whole Ticino, the whole Engadine and some more regions of Switzerland were completely cut off and inaccessible by road or rail or even helicopter. For today the temperature is suddenly around 18 degrees centigrade higher, the sun is fully out, the sky is blue, the lake is full of activity, the tulips and daffodils are pushing and the first bees are already out and looking for food. The change from near-Arctic winter to Riviera-type weather has been so swift that it seems a little difficult to adjust oneself.

If I were to write about the economic situation I would certainly have to mention a recessionary tendency which has brought about many closures of small factories and businesses. And I would have to mention that Switzerland suddenly has some 10,000 unemployed people — roughly about 2,000 Swiss and 8,000 of foreign nationality. As many of the foreign ones go back to their own country, it has been said that unemployed foreign workers are still one of the commodities Switzerland can and does export. But leaving this somewhat unkind remark aside and talking about



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exports, I have to mention that the value of the Swiss currency has become so high – or other currencies abroad have become so weak – that the export industry is going through very difficult times indeed. This is the reason why the Federal authorities are now trying to incorporate the Swiss franc inside the so-called “currency-snake”, which is simply a different word for the block-floating practised by a number – but not all – of the EEC countries.

The Swiss Press and other media are, of course, full of stories about the tragic happenings in Vietnam and Cambodia. Some Swiss doctors who have recently returned from there – from Kontum in the over-run part of South Vietnam, for example – have told some heart-breaking tales about their experiences. One also reads a great deal about the recent Common Market debate in the British House of Commons and about the forthcoming plebiscite on 5 June which might well decide the fate of Britain in many ways, as well as the future of its present Labour leader and Prime Minister.

The “Swiss-British Society” incidentally, a sister, as it were, of the “Anglo-Swiss Society” in Britain, is becoming quite active in the near future, organising various lectures, followed usually by a dinner and the Zürich Comedy Club will presently be showing a farce written by Derek Benfield and entitled “Wild Goose Chase”.

This letter from Switzerland is, for once, not about any particular political or economic subject. It is rather in the nature of a kind of general round-up of news. At least it should show just how wrong it is to say that “nothing ever happens in Switzerland.”



The following is a mildly amusing, but true, story about a kind of unrest in the diplomatic missions of those “quiet backwaters” Berne and Geneva. Some 200 dissatisfied drivers, only 16 of them

Swiss, of CD cars have formed a trade union and called a press conference in the very top class hotel in Berne in which the Swiss Government usually receives the Corps Diplomatique. They are disgruntled not only on account of the remuneration, but particularly on account of the way some of the accredited diplomats treat them. “Like parias,” complained one of them during the Press conference, in the course of which it was also revealed that the CD drivers have compiled – and published! – two lists of Embassies: “good” ones and “bad” ones. The list which contains those diplomatic missions which remunerate and treat their drivers well is, fortunately, fairly comprehensive showing amongst others – who would expect anything else? – the name of Great Britain. But the “black list” is, unfortunately, also rather lengthy and contains a number of names of countries which one reads with surprise. In between these two camps there are a number of countries which are not specially mentioned by name: they are the ones which pay their drivers “not very well, but not too badly”, and with which they have otherwise no special problems.

Relations with the Swiss authorities in Berne – which means above all with the Protocol Department of the Federal Political Department (Foreign Office) – are described as “very good”, whereas those with the authorities in Geneva have been called “superficial and somewhat from high on”.

Some of the stories revealed during that Press conference could have come straight out of that amusing American musical *Call Me Madam*. But since it was Shakespeare who said – in *Henry IV* – that discretion is the better part of valour, it may be best not to go into these. Nevertheless it can be mentioned that the Geneva CD drivers organised a private collection for themselves last year, and received, it has been revealed, also contributions from a certain milieu . . . The newly formed trade union now hopes to extend its powers and activities and will be making every effort to recruit

more members from amongst all the other service personnel of the Embassies. Who was it, incidentally, who said that CD on a car plate stands for “chauffeur dangeureux”, or even for “Contrebandier distingué”?



Alexander Solzhenitsyn has recently said, in the course of a press conference he has given in Paris, that his domicile in Zürich “is surrounded by a complete web of Soviet Secret Police, KGB”. This raises the interesting question: “How efficient is the organisation for the protection of the Swiss state?” To answer this question, it can, first of all, be said that there exists intimate co-operation by the police forces of the Confederation, the Cantons and the boroughs. It goes without saying that if so prominent an expatriate as Solzhenitsyn is granted domicile in a town like Zürich, the police authorities of the town and those of the canton are bound to take a fairly keen interest in a man who has, as it were, become their “protégé”. And according to the Zürich police what Solzhenitsyn has said in Paris appears to be a colossal exaggeration. So far so good.

In addition a spokesman of the Federal Justice and Police Departments in Berne has stated that as far as the Federal Authorities know there has not – repeat not – been any increased KGB activity in Switzerland since the arrival of Solzhenitsyn. Foreign secret service agents, the spokesman continued, are divided into legal and illegal ones, the former ones being disguised as diplomats and enjoying diplomatic immunity, but liable to be declared “personae non gratae” if they overstep the limits. It sometimes happens that certain countries try to send expelled “diplomats” – or agents – back to Switzerland under different names and guises. If this proves impossible owing to the efficiency of the Swiss frontier or airport police forces, new ones are then sent. Still according to the above mentioned official spokesman it can, however, be extremely difficult to trace so-called illegal agents who indulge in sending political information abroad. A case of an alleged Swiss has been mentioned, who came back to Switzerland for good after many years abroad, and who – after marrying in Scotland (Gretna Green presumably) opened a radio, television and electronics shop just outside Berne.

Even if it is true that there has been no general increase of agents’ activity since Solzhenitsyn’s arrival in Switzerland, it is nevertheless also true that since 1948 the authorities have discovered more than 100 cases of illicit behaviour, ie roughly about four cases per year. At any rate it is good to know that the federal, cantonal and borough authorities seem to have a sound aversion against James Bond-type activities on Swiss soil and try to prevent the weaving of spy networks as far as this is possible.

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