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The Swiss Observer

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The two articles in the recent editions of the *Swiss Observer* about au pair girls have sparked off some interesting correspondence. The following two letters, both from ladies interestingly enough, are worthy of publication without further comment.

WGS

Sir,

I have been interested in Mr. Campbell's account on the "au pair" situation as I was an "au pair" myself and now employ an "au pair". If I come back to this subject — at the risk of boring your readers, but I shall be short — it is because I disagree with Mr. Campbell on one point, that is letter (c) of his list of criteria:

"The children, if any, should be at least 12 years of age"...

First, one has to be realistic and take in account that the "au pair" girl is most needed when the children are very young and no longer when they are over 12 years of age. Secondly, it would be wise to enquire if the possible teenage-children are not at a boarding school, in which case the benefit of their existence would be very small for the "au

pair" girl. Thirdly, I have personally experienced that young children offer a very suitable ground to practise the theoretical knowledge that are those of a foreign youngster: unless they do not understand, they do not bother if one makes mistakes, which encourages one to speak; even if the conversation with them remains at a very low level, intellectually speaking, it is, at least for a start, a very useful apprenticeship, especially when the "au pair" girl has a very modest knowledge of English, if any; for a more intelligent English the "au pair" girl has at her disposal plenty of free time to attend classes.

To keep my promise, I finish my comment.

Yours sincerely
C. de Tschanner
London NW1.

Sir,

After your first article on the subject of Au Pair girls, I and several of my colleagues felt that you had printed a one-sided view without sufficient reporting and background knowledge from professionals.

The second one, the version of Mr. Campbell in the September issue, really demands a strong protest.

I myself am Swiss, principal of an Au Pair agency recognized by the BIGA as well as the British Council, working in

conjunction with the Freundinnen Junger Maedchen — amongst others — known well by the Swiss churches and the Swiss Embassy for now 13 years, I can assure you that the kind of Au Pair position Mr. Campbell describes would put all Au Pair agencies out of business.

Let's first take his minimum criteria:

(a) We certainly agree that the head of family or spouse must be born in England or be able to speak standard English. It seems that Mr. Campbell does not know the regulation of the Home Office which says we may NOT place Au Pair girls in the households of foreign nationals (even Swiss) unless they have diplomatic status. That takes care of that.

(b) In these times of financial stress, a majority of our hostesses (the household wife-mother) either have a part-time or a full-time job. This is why they need an Au Pair or for that matter even can afford her. We accept these families only if there is a cleaner for the rough work such as floor polishing, toilet and wall washing etc., if the girl can go at least six hours weekly to an English-language school and is NOT required to be on duty more than 35 hours a week.

(c) Children of 12 years of over have no need or even any use for an Au Pair in the home. They go to school from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. and then have their homework to do. The only time the Au Pair would be of any use is when the parents go out evenings and need someone to sleep in the house. There are agencies specializing in English babysitters for such occasions, a much more economical way of solving that problem. In the few cases where families have young children in addition to teenagers, the latter never have shown any inclination to make friends with the Au Pair girl or take them along on their outings. On the contrary: many of our Au Pairs complained about the disorder of these youngsters and what they leave behind when either studying for their A-levels or going to work as school leavers. Small children need Au Pairs to help them get dressed, go for walks, play and be bathed and put to bed. Their vocabulary is often a much wider one than the Au Pair will understand on arrival. Somehow she has to start by learning words like "hoovering," babysit, baked beans, etc.

Our conception of Miss Au Pair 1975: The Strasbourg Convention gives her a "quasi-student" status. Last year Switzerland closed its doors to foreign Au Pairs because they were grouped under

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ON PAGE 1

Autumn is the time for gathering in crops and for giving thanks. The front page picture, by courtesy of SNTG, shows farmers beside Lac Léman gathering in their grapes ready for the new wine.

"foreign workers". We objected to this definition and insisted they were working language students at reduced hours. As such, they must be given the opportunity to follow English language classes, they must be treated as members of the family, i.e. eat with the family, speak in the home as though one of their grown-up children, but NOT to be treated as a "paying guest". As grown-up students, old enough to go into another country, they should be able to organize their free time and private life in an intelligent manner. Unfortunately, many Au Pair girls do not avail themselves of all that London, its governmental institutions and agencies, offer in the way of facilities. Perhaps five per cent of them ever see the British museum. Pubs and discotheques are more in their line. If we are lucky, we can convince about 20 per cent to join one of the many subsidized and extremely varied recreational classes offered by the Education Committee of each borough, classes where they can meet English keep-fit enthusiasts or join in hobbies such as flower decoration, ballroom dancing, ceramics, sports etc.

A last word on the financial commitments of the English hostess: she receives a foreign girl in her household, always an intrusion however nice the girl may be. The Au Pair is willing to help with light housework and the care of children for five and one-half hours a day, six days a week for an average pocket money of £6.00 a week in London. She either will be homesick, have boy friends come to visit her, often make expensive telephone calls to foreign countries on STD, misunderstand instructions in English in the first two months with sometimes disastrous consequences, complain about the food, the upbringing of the children, the distances in a major city. In exchange for these five and one-half hours of untrained help, the hostess must offer a private bedroom, meals, access to television and often basic training in household duties and behaviour which the Au Pair girl's own mother neglected. We all know that a room with three meals, heat and hot water can fetch a minimum of £16.00 and a maximum of £20.00 from a full-time foreign student weekly. Add to this £6.00 pocket money and you could afford an English charwoman without the language barrier five hours a day for five days of the week. This should make it eminently clear that only Mums with small children who either work or have too many children to cope with are in need of an Au Pair or willing to have one. We are living in 1975 and not in the time of the "house daughters" of pre-war.

Since you have been so generous in granting space to TWO articles by amateurs on the subject of Au Pairs in England, please grant me the same generosity in publishing what a professional has to say to keep the record straight.

Yours sincerely,
Mrs. R. H. Reedy
London SW20

LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND by Gottfried Keller

LOVE WILL FIND A WAY!

During my long term as London Correspondent for a Swiss newspaper I occasionally wanted to get out of the sphere of politics. I then did a number of feature articles. One of these was about odd professions or unusual means of earning a living in England, on top of which I listed the Toastmasters and their guild with whom during my two terms as President of the Foreign Press Association I had had a lot to do. I also mentioned the buskers and queue-entertainers and as the oddest of all a fellow somewhere in Bognor Regis. He specialised in cutting and preparing rattan canes for beating naughty boys with and did, so he claimed, enormous business both inside the United Kingdom and on the export side.

But now I find it amusing to learn about one Christian Roth, aged 30, who has moved from his native Zürich to a small village in the Canton of Aargau and who makes a living by writing love letters for shy males. He is a skilled lino-typist and has written two novels and a number of short stories. Before he sits down to write a love-letter on commission he asks for a detailed description of the lady to whom the letter is addressed. Amongst other things he wants to know her age, the colour of her hair and eyes, whether she is the emancipated type, whether gay

by nature or inclined to be sad, and also if her taste is conservative or if she is progressive in her views and ways.

"No love-letter" Ruth says, "is similar to another one. Love-letters are not mass-produced." However, there has been such a rate of success with his letters, that he has become known and has actually come under some pressure. His tariff varies. Chaps who make a well-heeled impression pay 50.- Francs (approx. \$9.50) per letter, but fellows who are obviously poor pay a nominal fee or nothing at all. And here, taken and translated from a Zürich paper, is an example of Roth's art: "I have only seen you for a short moment, but dreamt of you the whole night. The picture will not fade from my mind: In a blue, thin dress you walked through the street. Your body was swinging lightly on your long, shapely legs. Dark, silky hair played about the face with the two gay eyes. In my mind I followed you step by step and tried to reach and catch you. But you kept escaping until suddenly we found ourselves again in a dreamlike park. And where do we go from here? This I intend to tell you when we meet again, for one thing is certain for me: I just have to see you again and my dream has to become reality. When and where do we meet?"

Lovely, isn't it—but 50.- Francs still seems a little steep to me.

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