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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

BY GOTTFRIED KELLER

When the Lockheed bribery story exploded a few weeks ago, the names of several internationally prominent personalities became bandied about. It then struck, not to say horrified, me to see how easily guilt is presumed and in particular how some of the Swiss media seemed to enjoy participating in witch-hunts.

The laws against defamation and libel in force in the United Kingdom afford, I think, much better protection to the individual than they do in Switzerland. At any rate the presumption in the United Kingdom still is, if I am not mistaken, that any man is a gentleman as long as the opposite has not been proved by a court. Mud-slinging and character assassination are, I think, much more dangerous in Britain than they seem to be here. Nor is contempt of court, once proceedings have been started, such a grave offence here as it is in Britain. And this, I think, is much to be regretted.

In connection with the Lockheed affair one very prominent non-Swiss personality has been mentioned again and again by the Swiss mass media and has been made the laughing stock in more than one cabaret radio transmission. Sensational headlines have been produced in several Swiss newspapers, some with question marks, it is true, but some also involving that particular gentleman's wife and, by implication, even the whole structure of the Monarchy to which the accused belongs.

I am, of course, referring to Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands into whose financial affairs and behaviour a Dutch Commission, appointed by the Dutch Government is now looking.

Without there existing, so far, a shred of evidence proving that the Prince has accepted money from the Lockheed firm, articles have appeared in some — not all, fortunately — newspapers, not

only taking it for granted that the Dutch Prince-Consort has "of course" been heavily bribed by the American firm but even insinuating that he installed a super luxury apartment for himself and a particular lady (not his wife) in Paris. All this is pure scandal-mongering. A new law concerning the Press is under active consideration in Berne. It is, in my opinion, to be hoped that once it becomes law, it provides more and better protection against defamation before any guilt has been proved.

THE BANKS HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY

It may interest the reader to learn that there are 497 banks with more than 4,500 branch offices, roughly 500 of them alone in Zürich, spread all over Switzerland. Some 70,000 people are employed by these 5,000 banks. Much has been written and said about Swiss banks, the banking secret, the numbered accounts, most of which have been stupidities down to that silly remark of Lord George-Brown's about the "Gnomes of Zürich". Without entering into any of these controversies, I think it nevertheless worthwhile mentioning that there is also such a thing as a *Banking Press*.

No fewer than about 130 banks publish news bulletins for the benefit of their customers — some weekly, some monthly. The actual circulation of the

banking press amounts to over 10 million copies per annum. The information which the banking press dissipates is generally concerned with economic developments and trends, with advice about customs regulations, with explanations about the Stock Exchange, and in some cases with legal questions and investment problems.

It goes without saying that the banking press has no interest whatever in competing with what is sometimes called the classical press. Yet more and more classical newspapers begin, it is said, to resent the activities of the banking press, which, having sources of information of its own, quite often seems to be the better informed of the two. If the 130 banks, which in one form or another publish bulletins or news letters, are secretive about their expenses for such publicity, this has nothing to do with obscurantism. It is, one learns, simply due to the fact that to establish the real cost of their publications is well nigh impossible: because the compilation of the material involves so many departments inside a bank. And just as it is practically impossible to establish the actual cost of issuing a bulletin, it is equally impossible to establish what gain, if any, has been achieved by any one issue or by the annual output. One of the features of the banking press is, of course, that the bulletins and news sheets are distributed free of any charge and can be had for the asking. They contain such a wealth of information that many teachers, students, officials and indeed journalists use them for background knowledge and for reference purposes. In this sense it can be said that the banking press offers a very comprehensive and useful service to whoever cares to avail himself of it.

SPEED LIMITS HERE TO STAY

Following a report worked out by a commission of road-traffic experts, it is now practically certain that the speed limitations of 130 kilometres per hour on motorways and 100 on ordinary overland roads will be made permanent.

These speed limits were originally imposed as fuel-saving measures when the so-called oil crisis started as a consequence of the Yom Kippur war. The experience since then has, according to official figures, clearly shown that the figure of people killed in road accidents has gone down by 28 per cent, while the



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number of accidents as such has been reduced by 15 per cent.

There was, originally, a great deal of opposition against these speed limits, but one has, generally speaking, got used to them to such a degree that a recent public opinion poll has shown 65 per cent of the motorists agreeing that 130 km. per hour on a motorway is fast enough.

Nor has it become true that a limit of 100 km. per hour on overland roads would produce a lot of "bunching", as had been argued by those who oppose speed limits.

The wearing of safety belts has now been compulsory since 1st January of this year. While it is too early, as yet, to draw any definite conclusions, it is nevertheless expected that the figure of fatal accidents will be still further reduced.

THERE'S A LESSON HERE SOMEWHERE!

Some 2½ years ago the Swiss PTT increased its charges — it has done so again on 1st January this year — and reduced its services by cutting down mail

deliveries from two to one a day and by cutting out Saturday deliveries except for the delivery of political newspapers. But now the situation has changed dramatically and with approximately 50,000 people unemployed in the country, the PTT is in a position to improve its services once again.

Not only will it be possible to recruit more people into the PTT Services, but the number of parcels, letters and postcards sent by mail is apparently constantly going down. These measures for re-improving the postal services are, it is learned, under very active discussion in the appropriate quarters, and they are to be followed by a conference with the PTT employees trade union.

Preliminary soundings have shown that the postal employees are, in principle, not against these measures — provided always that the number of working hours (44 per week at present) is not to be increased thereby. By comparison it has been stated that the number of working hours of postal employees both in Austria and in the Federal German Republic is 40. If everything goes according to plan, it can be hoped that Saturday deliveries of parcels, letters and postcards will once again become a fact before this year is out.

BRITISH LISTENERS DO WELL

How good is the news judgement of the general public? "Fairly accurate" was the view shared by senior Swiss, British and Canadian journalists working with the Overseas Service of the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation in Berne, after they had judged a listener participation competition called "Armchair Editor".

SBC listeners throughout the world were invited to submit their list of the top six international news stories of 1975. Entries were then compared with a list drawn up by SBC Editor-in-Chief, Dr. Rudolf Meyer.

Many listeners got three or four right but no one had an all-correct entry. The competition was won by two listeners — one a 56-year-old accountant in Cheshire and the other a listener in Santo Domingo — who each submitted a list containing five of Dr. Meyer's stories in the correct order. His list — 1 South Vietnam, 2 State of emergency in India, 3 Angola, 4 General Franco, 5 Egyptian-Israeli peace agreement, 6 Portugal.

Most listeners missed India and many included Lebanon — which was *not* on Dr. Meyer's list. And one listener gave as his top story "the ending of the war in Korea".

About 25 per cent of replies came from SBC listeners in Britain.



SWISS FIRM RESCUES ANCIENT THAXTED GUILDHALL

An historic reminder of old England, the 15th century Guildhall in Thaxted, Essex, was in danger of collapse until rescued by the Essex County Council and superbly restored with the help of Araldite epoxy resins. The resins were supplied by CIBA-Geigy's plastics division in the U.K.

The contractors for the restoration work, Kerridge (Cambridge) Ltd., used an Araldite filler on the external areas of decayed woodwork whilst, inside the building, damaged timber supports were given new foundations by casting around them a more liquid Araldite formulation.

The restored building will be used for various community activities, including meetings and concerts.

SWISS ABROAD GIVEN EASIER TERMS BY SICKNESS INSURANCE COMPANIES

Swiss abroad wishing to retire to their homeland will be able to subscribe to a sickness insurance scheme up to the age of 70. Following an agreement between the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad and the organisation grouping all sickness insurance organisations in Switzerland, it has been decided to raise the age limit which had, until now, been 60.

The new plan was approved by the Commission of the Swiss Abroad. Although the Secretariat had initially hoped that the insurance organisations would have lifted all age limit in favour of compatriots returning home after a stay of five years or more abroad, it said it was quite satisfied with the new arrangement.

Every year, at least a hundred Swiss make enquiries at the Secretariat about the possibility of taking a sickness insurance policy on their retirement to the Homeland.

NEW SNTD PUBLICATION FOR STEAM TRAIN ENTHUSIASTS

The Swiss National Tourist Office (SNTD) has issued a publication in English *Steam in Switzerland* containing information about all steam trains which will be used for special trips this summer. It is available free from SNTD, London.