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LOOKING BACK OVER 30 YEARS

*A letter from former Federal Councillor
Dr. F. T. Wahlen*

In the spring of 1947, the Federal Council entrusted the then Councillor of States (Zürich) Prof. Dr. F. T. Wahlen with the task of discussing grain deliveries with the Governments in Washington and Ottawa and the International Emergency Food Council.

Swiss grain stocks had sunk to the lowest level since the beginning of the war. After successful negotiations, Mr. and Mrs. Wahlen went by car on a lengthy trip through Canada and the U.S.A. They visited many friends, and the letter below is one which Mr. Wahlen sent to them on his return to Switzerland in November 1947.

For many years, the former Federal Councillor, a great friend of the Swiss abroad, has been a reader of the Swiss Observer, and he has recently sent me this letter by way of gratitude to the S.O. which, he says, has given him much pleasure. It reflects his views at the time and his admiration for Britain and Sir Winston Churchill. In a way, the opinions expressed at the time by one of our greatest Swiss contemporaries have proved prophetic. It is with great pleasure that I am passing on the letter to the readers of the S.O.

MM

Dear Friends,

Almost three months have elapsed since we returned to Switzerland, and apart from a few notes written on the boat, our friends in Canada and the United States have had no news from us.

I had meant to do much better and must apologize for so long a delay. There are some attenuating circumstances, of course. First of all, it took us quite a while to get back on our European feet again. Five months is a long time to be away, and a lot of work had piled up.

Almost immediately upon my arrival, I had to attend the F.A.O. Conference in Geneva, and the presidency proved to be a full-time job. Shortly afterwards, the regular September Session of the Council of States began, followed by the fall term of examinations and the winter course at the Federal Institute of Technology.

Now there were slack hours in between, of course. But somehow I had the feeling that our wonderful experience in America called for a real good letter, a letter than can only be written with a certain amount of peace of mind. Now I realize my mistake. Instead of waiting for the hypothetical peace of mind which will never come, I am set on beginning right now, regardless of what the result may be.

And there is going to be just one letter, and it will go to American friends, Canadian friends and Swiss friends, friends of all descriptions. Thanks, dearest reader, for accepting this wholesale manner of approach in good humour, and for putting up with the fact that this circular will be a rather rambling

affair. For those who do not agree, the circular letter itself offers a pleasant way out. Its proper place, read or unread, is the waste-paper basket, anyhow.

The old "Veendam", our boat, gave us a most pleasant trip home. In an old-fashioned, leisurely way she took ten full days for the crossing, and the Atlantic was smooth as a piece of that marvellous American stuff called plastics, and sometimes as brightly coloured. It was wonderful to be able to put some notes in shape, to label Kodaslide, and to loaf. In mid-Atlantic we celebrated our national day, the first of August, and it was wonderful, too, that nobody asked me for a speech. Which goes to show that the passengers of the "Veendam", two nice ladies from Basle included, are more considerate than my compatriots at home. The two ladies had scissors and a red pencil with them, cut little paper flags out of Dutch stationery, embellished them with the white cross in the red field, and thus decorated we went on upper deck, thankful once more for our dear wee country. Crossing the ocean eastward bound, one realized far more what it means to own a Swiss passport, to have been set by fate exactly into that free and peaceful spot of Europe and not a few hundreds miles east, west, south or north.

England! We saw only ports and shortlines, but many a passenger leant over the rail, looked at the chalk-cliffs, and wondered where we would be if in 1940 a great leader and a great nation had not said: "Liberty first!" Switzerland follows Great Britain's struggle with intense interest and deep sympathy. We are, more or less by force of things, the political mirror of Europe. If the elections to Parliament, which took place last Sunday, had been held two years ago, there would have been quite a swing to the left. But things have moved on since. The Labour experience in Great Britain and elsewhere is not convincing, to say the least. So our Socialist party lost about 10 per cent of the seats, and the Communists gained only 7 out of 194 in the National Council, and none in the Council of States. Sum total, there is not much change, in keeping with the traditional stability of our political institutions. But seeing that there has been a slow but steady trend to the left, even this small set-back is symptomatic.

Steaming up the Maas, prisoners of war were still occupied demolishing the iron and concrete wall that was to protect Hitler's Reich for a thousand years. And so we were back in torn Europe, back to cities which in their outward appearance will forever have lost the link with a long and glorious past. Rotterdam has lost its heart. As regards human relations, and relations between nations, at least 99 per cent of humanity must have remained in an infantile stage, or surely one should not hear such light talk of the next war. Or is it only that too many consider themselves too weak as one of two billions to raise their voice and influence? At any rate, our drive through Antwerp, Mecheln, Namur, Luxembourg, Lorraine and Alsace formed such a contrast with what we left behind in America and what

we found in Switzerland, that we joined the ranks of the most determined peace-mongers.

Belgium surprises through an economy which seems to recover very rapidly in comparison to the rest of Europe. One wonders how much of this fact can be attributed to the natural resources of the Belgian Congo, and what a part of the British and Dutch difficulties reside in the loss of their colonies. There is no doubt that at least part of these losses must be offset by harder work. Once more I understood why the Swiss, without natural riches and colonies, must work hard in order to stand the pace. From now on the whole of Europe is in the same boat. Only production, and production means hard work, can save the situation. Very unfortunately the war has materially lowered the will and the capacity to work in many European countries, and perhaps more so among the younger generation. From this angle, the Italians and the Germans, as soon as they have the possibility, will recover more rapidly than other countries. Let's hope Marshall Aid, as a necessary first step, will come forth, and in such a form that self-aid and self-healing in Europe will be stimulated. No doubt, the material side is very important, and the political side no less, but there is also a moral issue that looms just as big.

As to Switzerland, we feel more keenly every day that we are sitting between the two powers which make the world's destiny. The sitting is uncomfortable. In the last analysis, neither Russia nor the U.S.A. can save Europe. Europe must save itself, but there is one important point every American must understand: It is America, and America only, that can help Europe to save itself. There lies the whole justification of Marshall Aid. I have enough faith in Europe, and enough appreciation of the spiritual and cultural riches she still harbours, in spite of her sad state, to know that whatever investment America ventures, will be a good investment. Sometimes we feel in Switzerland that, having found one way of living peacefully regardless of creed or tongue, we should be able to make a larger contribution to the reconstruction of many countries with somewhat similar problems. Perhaps our way of democracy might even be more suitable than others, but then we understand that we are a small country, and that those who carried the heavy burden must have a bigger say. Nevertheless: the more the big democratic powers can make use of European experience in grown democracy, the better the job will be done. One unfortunate thing particularly about Germany is the very widespread, childish belief that you can take over democracy in pre-fabricated form, just as easily as you change a shirt. There is bound to be confusion, disappointment, setbacks.

But I was not going to write a letter to the editor of the Chicago Tribune, and am almost ashamed to tell you things that you know well enough. What I meant to say is that so many things you look at from a more or less comfortable distance

are of very great concern to us. I felt the difference very acutely coming back after five months, and also the responsibility we all have. Within the three months since our return the political picture has been changing rapidly in many countries. The voters, losing faith in Europe's genius, range themselves to the Right and Left, pro U.S.A. or pro U.S.S.R. If hunger cannot be avoided, this cleavage between extremes will be still more accentuated. But enough of that!

As you would expect, many people ask us about our impressions of America. The interest in things American has grown tremendously. But we have not been able yet, and know that we shall never be able, to bring the wealth of impressions and information into one formula. And then: so many currents and cross-currents of thought and tradition would need an analysis which lies far beyond the possibilities of a casual visitor. It is easy to criticise many American ways of living, many superficialities, and it is just as easy to be over-enthusiastic about other things, but very hard to form an all-round fair judgment. So I am going to close this letter with a purely personal statement. My wife and I think that a most wonderful experience lies behind us. To get away from business and worries for three months is in itself a blessing to be thankful for. To see so much new country, receive so many new impressions, to hoard up information and new knowledge to last for a digestive period of months, and to draw from for years, is a privilege that seldom comes to a man fast moving towards his fifties. And to be received everywhere by kind people, old and new friends, to see that the policy of good neighbourhood does

not only figure in the foreign-policy programmes of the United States and Canada, but is put into effect from man to man, is a heart- tonic not to be forgotten. So this little *tour d'horizon* must end with heartfelt thanks to you all and to many unknown "neighbours" who were just kind because we were strangers, and very often more particularly so because we hailed from Switzerland. Of all of you who have read so far — and I hope that those who decided for the waste-paper basket solution started at the end — I would ask one great favour. This letter, taken as a whole, is a very impersonal affair. But please take at least our expression of thanks as being very personally meant. And seeing that we have already November, permit us to add our Christmas greetings. Mrs Wahlen has a rather checkered and difficult family of four children, two Swiss and two Red Cross fugitives. So there will be hardly any time for Christmas and New Year's letters.

With kindest regards and best wishes to you all,
sincerely yours
Helen & F. T. Wahlen.

Editor's footnote:— although referred to more than once as "material for the waste-paper basket", nothing could be further from the truth.

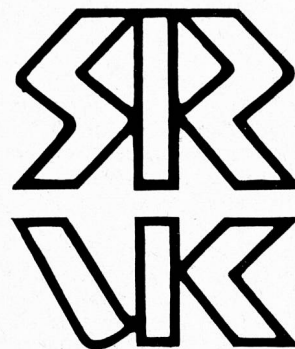
This letter, if read carefully, must rate as one of the most perceptive analyses of immediate post-war Europe as seen through the eyes of a contemporary observer. We thank Mrs Meier for making it available to us. Thank God things are different now — OR ARE THEY? REALLY?

Goliath frustrated

The friendly international football match played at Wembley between England and Switzerland on Wednesday, 7th September was prefaced by a reception at the Swiss Embassy to enable journalists and other invited guests to meet the Swiss team managers and other officials. Needless to say, the team was not present — they were busy training.

And train well they obviously did. The 0-0 draw was a surprise to all but a very few seasoned observers. At the reception the Swiss team manager, conscious always of the necessity to preserve his team's morale to the very end, refused to admit publicly that Switzerland was likely to lose the match by a substantial margin. What he did admit, albeit very privately, was that he would consider a draw an achievement almost beyond his wildest hopes. How prophetic his modestly-voiced hopes turned out to be.

To say that England was surprised by the result is an understatement. BBC Radio 2's commentator, however, proved that the match was indeed intended to be a friendly one — despite a rather unfortunate injury. Having expressed his own regrets that England had not won he was gracious enough to say "Well played Switzerland". We agree.



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