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Letter from Switzerland

By Gottfried Keller

BRITISH FAIR PLAY NOBLY DEMONSTRATED

While looking through old files, documents and cuttings recently, I have come across several so-called "Now it can be told stories", which date back to the years of World War II and which, at the time, had to remain secret for obvious reasons. One of them is about a visit to Dublin, paid at the invitation and instigation of the British Government and another one about an attempt by a Nazi espionage organisation to recruit me into its service.

The Eire Government in Dublin, presided over by Mr. Eamonn de Valera, refused, during the first two-and-a-half years of the war, to black out its cities and the British contended that the blazing lights of Dublin kept guiding the German bombers to Manchester and Liverpool. Britain's protests – handed in by Britain's representative Sir John Maffey, later Lord Rugby, and seconded by America's Minister in Dublin Mr. David Gray – were of no avail whatever and the relations between Britain and Eire, which were anyway sour, became worse and worse.

It was against this background that Sir John Maffey's Press Attaché, John Betjeman – now Sir John Betjeman, Poeta Laureatus to the British Queen – thought that where official representations did not succeed, possibly a non-official citizen of a neutral country might succeed in persuading the co-neutral Eire Prime Minister that it would be in Eire's interest to support the Allied cause rather than to help (however indirectly) Nazi Germany in any way.

It was in a blacked-out old de Havilland aircraft that my wife and I were then flown to Dublin, where we were accommodated in the Shelbourne Hotel. Courtesy visits to Eire's Head of State, President Kelly, and afterwards Head of Government, de Valera, were arranged with the aid of the Swiss Consul, Mr. Baenziger – Switzerland did, at that time, not yet have a Legation in Eire.

Sleep on it

President Kelly received us in a wheel-chair and fell asleep after a few minutes, whereas Mr. de Valera made no secret whatever of his fanatical anti-British feelings. It was difficult to get a word in edgeways and took no fewer than three visits until I was able to make him accept my contention that a victorious Germany would undoubtedly not tolerate the further existence of both Switzerland and Eire in the new Europe.

About ten days after my return to London I was called to see the then British Minister of Information, Brendan – later Lord – Bracken. He showed me an official RAF message to Whitehall, the text of which read: "Dublin lights out."

Not long afterwards I received a telegram from Geneva, signed by a lawyer – Aubert was his name – offering me the London representation of what was called a "new, strictly neutral News Organisation in Switzerland". Its name was given as "Radiomondial".

Suspicion

The whole thing smelled fishy to me, particularly because the remuneration offered was so high that I became suspicious at once. I went to see Mr. Bracken, who showed interest and asked me to leave the telegram with him for a few days. When I was called to his office again, he informed me that according to official British information "Radiomondial" was nothing less than a Ribbentrop outfit for espionage, propaganda and disinformation, backed by and camouflaged with the name of the aforementioned Geneva lawyer.

On hearing this, I said "Well, that's that – I won't even send a reply to them." To which Mr. Bracken replied: "Wait a minute, Keller. We would like you to accept this offer. This would enable us to play ball with them." The implication was clear. "To play ball" would have meant that I would have become a tool of the British secret services – a thing I could not possibly do. With my journey to Dublin I had already gone to the limit of what I felt I could reconcile with my position as correspondent of the semi-official Swiss Telegraph Agency (plus a Basle newspaper.)

No pressures

For a fleeting moment I feared that if I turned down Mr. Bracken's proposal, my rations – including my petrol ration – might be shortened in order to put pressure on me. But nothing of the kind happened. On the other hand, I have kept to this day a letter from Mr. Bracken assuring me of his fully understanding and appreciating my decision – a letter which was, should I not have known it before, further proof for me of how fair the British could be.

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