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WALKS, A STORY AND A DOG

A NEW YEAR TALE BY DORI SOMERS

Because Swiss children from abroad spend their holidays in different parts of Switzerland, also in the Emmental where the author grew up, we are delighted to publish this charming New Year's story in the Swiss Observer.

We published "The changing of the clock" in our August edition, which was also written by Dori Somers.

Editor

On a fine New Year's morning we walked up North Cliff, Anna, Peter, Fluffy (who is the most beautiful of all mongrels) and I. As we came to a wide field we were dazzled by the glitter of the snow, which had fallen the night before. Thousands and thousands of diamonds seemed to have been sprinkled over the field. We admired these jewels for a while. Then the children started throwing snowballs for Fluffy, who meanwhile had pushed herself like a snowplough through the deep snow. She really looked like a snowhound. Now she ran after the snowballs and we all had great fun. As we walked on, the children asked for a story. Peter, as usual, wanted to hear about knights and castles. But today I was taken back half a century into my childhood. So both children were excited when I proposed to tell them events which happened when I was a child.

I had grown up in the Emmental. That is where the cheese with the large holes comes from. We lived in a farming area, where my father was a teacher. I had three sisters and two brothers. I was the youngest of the family.

On New Year's day after lunch we usually set off to visit uncle Paul and aunt Mary. They owned a farm and had six children, who were all very bright and polite and set a good example to all of us. We liked going there, although it took us nearly two hours' walking. They gave us a warm and friendly welcome, and we liked their house where every corner was nice and clean. After having shaken the snow from our clothes and shoes, we entered the living room, which with 16 people at least, was packed. Most of us sat round an enormous table, playing games, while the grown-ups sat on a stove, talking over domestic or farming problems.

The stove is built like a huge step against the wall, which divides the living room from the kitchen coming out two yards into the living room. Sometimes it stands in a corner. Normally there are two deep steps. It is fuelled from the kitchen and needs a bundle of branches, each as thick as your arm, to give enough heat for one day. The first step, made of sandstone, is about one yard above the floor. Children need to climb on a bench before they can reach the first step. The bench also serves the

grown-ups as a foot rest once they are sitting on the stove. The sides of the stove are covered with coloured, glazed tiles, either navy blue, golden yellow or deep green. Under the first step there is enough room to put about ten pairs of slippers for the family to wear after a hard day's work. On a cold day or in the evening the whole family would be gathered, sitting on this marvellous invention.

Aunt Mary always treated us to a delicious tea. A special loaf, which we called twist, fresh-boiled ham, cake and fresh cream, and all that in abundance. Before it got dark, the cousins took us round the farm buildings.

A farm in the lower part of the Emmental consists of at least four buildings, of which each has its own importance. The main building is the farmhouse with its enormous roof, which gives shelter to people and animals and everything which is needed for daily life. The roof nearly touches the ground on three sides and so gives you full protection. Where the house faces the road or a main path, the roof is lifted and shows two rows of shiny, clean windows. Where the gable is free, two artistically-carved beams support the roof.

On the ground floor is a large dining and living room. Next to it there used to be "die gute Stube", a room which was only used when important visitors came. Behind it is the bedroom of the parents. Often the youngest child would have its cot in that room. Above the ground floor are the "Gaden", which you reach by a staircase leading up outside the house. The "Gaden" are a row of smallish bedrooms for the bigger children and for the servants. In some very old houses there used to be a square opening above the stove in the living room with a lid on. In order to avoid going up the cold outside staircase, the children's "Gaden" could be reached through this opening.

Running behind the ground floor rooms is a long kitchen, leading you either downstairs to the cellar or through another door to a cobbled pavement.

Some farmhouse-kitchens had still an open chimney where the smoke of the cooker went immediately through the hole in the roof.

Such a chimney had a wide opening at the bottom under which the cook would stand and stir the soup, and it finished cone-like towards the top. These kitchens looked black and had a smoky smell. They were very cold. Therefore the womenfolk used to wear clogs with leather uppers in order to keep their feet warm. If you looked up you could see some treasures of the farm: hams and long sausages hung dangling high up to get smoked.

In a corner near the window there was a huge stone sink. It was used for washing-up. Often there was no water tap. The water had to be fetched in a large bucket from the water fountain outside the house.

In a far corner, quite in the dark, stood a wooden trough, looking like a cradle, on four legs. It was the trough for mixing every fortnight the dough for the delicious farmhouse bread.

On a bench nearby stood a coffee grinder. It was used regularly to grind the freshly roasted coffee beans for a fortnight's supply.

Once or twice a week the cream was made into butter. Therefore a narrow tub was used. In it stood a long, round stick with a perforated disc at the bottom. The stick fitted into the lid. With moving the stick up and down the cream was beaten and finally turned into butter. After the butter was taken out, it was pressed into special moulds. These moulds showed the most beautiful pictures: alpine flowers, Swiss crests, a man with an alp horn and many others. Now in winter the butter and cream looked white like the snow, but in May and June it would get a golden colour because of the dandelions which would become part of the cow's food.

The cobbled pavement really goes round the building. The next door takes you to the barn, which divides the dwelling-house from the stables and the sheds with all the carts and farming equipment. The stable, where the milkcows live, is separated from where the heifers and the calves are. Above the stables is the loft, where hay and straw are kept. In a well-protected yard you find the water fountain, where the animals drink. Here the washing is done and in winter the pig is slaughtered. At the end of the yard you come to the stable for the horses, their harnesses hanging on the outside wall.

As you walk on, you get to the pig sty. The pigs live in a separate building. So do the hens. The hen house stands in a large fenced field. Often there are some ducks, geese or a turkey among the hens. A multicoloured cockerel might greet you.

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Now that we have seen the main building, we return to the front door, which is between the living room and the "gute stube". From there we have a good view over the garden. It is a neat little Paradise. The garden paths are bordered by small box-hedges. Behind those hedges you see a collection of beautiful flowers. There are also kitchen herbs, such as rosemary, sage, basil, thyme, chives, parsley, peppermint, balm-mint and many others. They are all planted in an orderly way. There is rhubarb, and in a corner are strawberries, raspberries and red and blackcurrants. Lettuce is also to be found. All the other vegetables you would find in another garden, quite a long distance from the house. There the farmer's wife would plant peas, runner beans, french beans, carrots, cabbage, sprouts, onions and all the other vegetables, according to her taste and to the nature of the soil. What they did not eat at once, the farmer's wife would preserve. "Sauerkraut" from cabbage and the beans would be boiled briefly and then dried by threading them on fine pieces of string and hanging them up in a shady place till they were dry and then put in linen sacks.

Behind the garden you see a nice little house, made of wood like the other buildings. It is called "Stöckli". In here live the grandparents. When they retire they give the farm to their youngest son, and when he gets married they make way for the young couple. That does not mean that they stop working; but they have left the responsibility to the younger ones who also might make some alterations or do the farming in a more modern way. If the old parents have sense, they are pleased with the new methods and will give a hand. Granny will look after the children, help in the kitchen or do a bit of gardening. If the young wife is sensible she will ask granny for her advice here and there. It can be heavenly on such a farm, but if people are unco-operative, it can be hell.

There is still another house to be seen: it is the "Spycher". Its richly carved beams are often dark brown from old age. The "Spycher" is the treasury of the farm. Everything of great value is kept behind its door: large sums of money, bank books, jewellery, good clothing, such as the womenfolk's local costumes, but also dried beans, dried apple- and pear-segments. With an enormous key the farmer's wife goes regularly to check whether anything is missing. One would ask, why don't they keep their treasures in the main building? The reason is that if a fire broke out in the hayloft, the whole house would burn down in no time.

Near the "Spycher" lie the beehives. Often it is granddad's job to look after the bees. In winter he feeds them with sugar water. As soon as the sun starts warming their surroundings they try to come out. But don't come too soon, little furry friends, for the frost might kill you. There are lots of bushes planted round the beehives. They have to produce early food for the bees.

Nearly every farm has its own pond. The pond has a fence to prevent children and animals falling in. More than once during my childhood a child was drowned in a badly fenced pond. In case of fire at the farm, they can act immediately.

As we walk on we come to the orchard. Now in winter its apple and pear trees are bare. In February a man comes to prune them. The children then have to collect all the twigs and branches and take them to the "Stöckli", where granddad ties them with a wire into bunches and puts them neatly on top of each other against the wall. Once they are dry, they will serve granny as kindling.

After having been let into the farmer's castle, the cousins took us back into the warm living room, where meanwhile the grown-ups had enjoyed their long chat. It was now time for the men to go and milk their cows, and for us it was time to go home. We took our leave, thanked them, said goodbye and God bless

you, and in glittering, crunching snow we walked homewards.

When we got towards the Pass which further down led to our village, night began to fall. Having reached the highest point, father made us turn round and look over the vast valley surrounded by steep hills, which are characteristic of the Emmenthal. From here we had a good view over the "land of our forefathers", as father put it. In the far distance we could see the "giants" of our Canton, the Bernese Alps with their everlasting snow. In the twilight they showed the sunset pink, the "Alpenglühn". While we stood in the darkness, the tops of our mountains were kissed goodnight by the sun. Father now gave us geographical and historical instruction. He was quite an authority on local history. Often it ended in the world of sagas.

Now we had our last bit of excitement before getting home. We met the milkboys, coming from different farms, with their dog-drawn sledges. Every farm dog had its specially made harness and specially made sledge. They were on their way to the dairy to deliver the milk, which they had to do twice a day. All the milk was collected in the dairy, mornings and evenings, where part of the cream was turned into butter and the rest went together with the milk for the "Emmentaler" cheese.

Mother now told us to hurry, for we had to fetch our milk before the dairy closed. The older sisters ran home and took a rather large bucket and went to fetch the milk.

Now the rest of the family had come home too. Happy and tired we were. After our tea we all gathered in our living room and were very satisfied the way the first day of the new year had gone.

Meanwhile our walk had come to an end. Fluffy had had a good run and many happy barks at birds, and the children were satisfied with my story too.

The End

CROSS-COUNTRY SKI MARATHON – 11th MARCH 1979

Each year, at the beginning of March, about 10,000 enthusiasts gather in the Engadine area of Switzerland to compete in the "Ski Marathon", Switzerland's biggest cross-country ski-ing event. Some 9,800 skiers attempt the 26-mile course from Maloja past the Upper Engadine lakes to Zuoz, aiming to finish within the six-hour time limit. To the keenest competitors, the magnificent scenery is of little interest, as they finish the course in under two hours. Participation, however, is more important than winning to the majority who may take over double

the winner's time and enjoy every minute. Thousands of people line the race track to watch this fantastic spectacle.

This season's event, the 11th Engadine Ski Marathon, is open to those born before 1959. The route is Maloja (5,960 ft.) — Isola — Sils — Surlej — Silvaplana — St. Moritz — Pontresina — Samedan — Bever — Zuoz — S-chanf (5,487 ft.). Applications must reach the organisers by 1st February. The enrolment fee of Sw.Fr. 45. includes start number, participant's badge, refreshments, bag, and the return transportation from Zuoz to Maloja. Forms are obtainable from

11th Engadine Ski Marathon
7514 Sils-Maria/Switzerland

Special "Ski Marathon Training Weeks" are organised from 20th to 27th January, and 24th February to 3rd March, with 7 nights' accommodation (full board) at Zuoz.

The price of Sw.Fr. 345. also includes a "Welcome Drink", four hours of *Langlauf* training daily on the Engadine Ski Marathon course, transportation, badge, and a Farewell Dinner. Information and enrolment:

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