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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

GETTING ABOUT UNDER WARTIME CONDITIONS

During World War Two travelling was not as simple as it is in peacetime and a number of journeys I made then — to Northern Ireland, to Eire, to an Air-Sea Rescue Station in mid-Channel, as well as to Weimar to see the just liberated Buchenwald Concentration Camp — turned out to be near-adventures.

In February 1945, while the last German offensive was in progress in the Ardennes, I badly wanted to go to Switzerland for personal reasons. One had to have an exit permit stamped into one's passport and I was reluctant to leave Britain without also having a re-entry permit as well.

To get this was very difficult and took time, but with the help of the then Swiss Minister Ruegger and the Ministry of Information's Chief Censor, Admiral Thompson, I succeeded. To facilitate matters further, Mr. Ruegger nominated me his diplomatic courier and handed me a heavily sealed envelope which I was to deliver in Berne.

The American Air Force flew me to Paris in an Army Dakota. In Paris I went about in bicycle-taxis — other means of transport not being available, not even the Métro — and was housed for three nights in the American-requisitioned Ritz Hotel, until a sleeper berth became vacant in a military night train to Dijon. The man with whom I had to share the compartment happened to be the Mayor of Dijon who was able to tell me some very interesting things about life under Nazi occupation.

On arrival in "his" town, a ramshackle placard indicated where one was, the station building having been bombed to rubble by the Germans. It was bitterly cold when we arrived at around 4 o'clock in the morning and a biting north wind blew right through one.

As I had to wait for about three and a half hours until a "Micheline" (a single carriage tram-style train) was due to leave for the Swiss border in Les Verrières, I spent the time in the nearby locality of the Salvation Army in the company of the town's "clochards" — or down and outs.

A single half-candle stuck into an empty red wine bottle provided some dim light and the available food consisted of a horsemeat sandwich. The Micheline arrived with some delay and became packed to capacity. Entering tidy Switzerland after leaving war-torn France felt like entering paradise. I went straight to Berne — in an incredibly clean Swiss train — to

By Gottfried Keller

hand in the diplomatic envelope in the Federal Palace and afterwards to meet the newly appointed Manager of the Swiss Telegraph Agency, Professor Siegfried Frey.

To my immense surprise he told me that he had just received a telephonic invitation for me — from, of all people, the Press Attaché of the German Legation! How on earth had they known that I had arrived in Switzerland about two hours earlier? They must, I think, have had an agent in Les Verrières and probably in several other frontier stations.

A few days after my arrival in Aarau I was then visited by a Captain — Favre was his name — of the Swiss Army's Information Service. He came in civilian clothes and wanted to know a lot of things about bomb and rocket damage in Britain. I acted as everyone was told to act who was permitted to leave wartime England: I told him nothing. But I was amazed to see how much the little man knew — about bomb

damage, about the location of certain army units, about the Royal Air Force and other things which were strictly kept as military secrets in Britain.

It was, in a way, comforting to notice that Colonel Roger Masson's military news service was so well informed. As one was able to learn later, the Swiss were equally well informed about inside happenings in Nazi Germany.

My return journey — the Allies had by then crossed the Rhine at Remagen — took me again via Les Verrières to Paris and from there in a British Air Transport Command plane to Croydon. And when I arrived in Hampstead in front of the house in which we lived, the first thing I noticed on looking up towards my study was that some windows were missing and the frames were covered by cellophane sheets. And then the air raid siren went and I knew I was really back in London.

Some two and a half months later Germany capitulated, but a fortnight before that happened I was to leave Britain once more: for Weimar and Buchenwald. That journey, however, would be material for another article.

THE "SOVEREIGN" SPEAKS

Our loyal contributor, reader and friend Mr. J. Eusebio can once again sleep soundly in his bed. His brissago is safe — see story in our March issue.

In the 18th February voting on various topics the Swiss electorate rejected a proposal to ban advertising for alcoholic and tobacco products. The voting was 1,114,485 against with 772,842 for the proposal.

Of perhaps much greater significance for the future was the rejection by the Sovereign, albeit by a very small margin in a pitifully small turnout, of a proposal which could have deprived Switzerland of its existing nuclear power stations and put a stop to the construction of any new ones. As one British paper put it 'the Swiss obviously fear unemployment due to an energy crisis more than they fear nuclear contamination'.

Another proposal to be rejected in the recent "bonanza" was for the lowering of the voting age from 20 to 18. The votes cast were 933,676 in favour and 964,105 against.

The only proposal to be accepted, by a majority of over one million, was that the Federal Government should assume responsibility for protecting the country's dwindling number of footpaths.

WGS

LOCAL MUSEUM AT VNÀ

The little village of Vnà in Lower Engadine, situated at 5,350 ft above sea level where the Val Sinestra opens into the Inn Valley, now has its own local museum. All the exhibits come from the homes of local residents (81 people still live in the village).

The tools and apparatus on show were still in use in their parents' and grandparents' day. On view also are items from agriculture, crafts, hunting and culture. Incidentally, Vnà is just the place for anyone who wants to relax and likes the simple and unsophisticated life. Two guesthouses and many chalets are available for visitors.