

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

Courage that carried Britain through

WHENEVER I have an opportunity of talking to members of the younger generation in Switzerland it strikes me how little they know about the momentous events of not yet half a century ago.

History lessons in school, it seems to me, are all about those age-old battles of yesteryear, like Sempach, Murten, Morgarten and others, but they somehow never seem to reach the present century. Perhaps the name of Hitler and the term Auschwitz are vaguely known, but if this is the case, it is due to the TV serial "Holocaust" rather than to history lessons in school.

Mussolini is already forgotten and names like Goering, Goebbels, Ribbentrop, Eichmann mean little, if anything. Much the same applies to Churchill, Roosevelt, Stalin, de Gaulle.

If Churchill is mentioned, some youngsters may remember that he was "that man with a cigar who used to give a V sign," but what he did for Britain and what Britain did for the free world and Switzerland very few youngsters know. Contemporary history

seems not to be included in the current curricula of Swiss schools, and this, I submit, is a great pity.

Sneering about Britain has become quite fashionable among youngsters – but nobody seems to explain to them that many of the present economic difficulties of Britain have their roots in the fact that the beleaguered island spent practically all its gold, dollar and currency reserves in the deadly fight against Nazi Germany and that evil man on top.

But perhaps one can only really appreciate what happened at the time if one was in the thick of it oneself. Personally I have had untold opportunities of observing and admiring the courage and steadfastness of the British people.

One such occasion was when I attended a symphony concert at

the Royal Albert Hall during Goering's air blitz. The hall was filled to capacity, which means that about 8,000 people were assembled in that extremely vulnerable building.

The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra was playing Dvorak's New World Symphony under the unforgettable Sir Thomas Beecham when, suddenly, the air raid siren began wailing.

Sir Thomas interrupted the performance, as he was ordered by regulations, and said that if anybody wished to leave the hall and go to the shelters would they please do so now. Not one person stood up and went. Not one.

Whereupon Sir Thomas whispered something to the orchestra, which began to play a Viennese waltz as beautifully as I had never heard it before.

On another occasion I walked down Regent Street when the siren went, but nobody took the slightest notice of it or hurried to the underground shelters for safety. Life and business went on just as if nothing at all extraordinary was happening.

One well-known shop, which had been hit before and had no glass windows, exhibited a poster saying "We are open as before." They were, literally, very much open, as it were.

Somehow the British masses behaved as if Hitler's bombs and V weapons had not been introduced to them: they ignored them.

One man I knew – he was a town councillor of Paddington who had come up from Cockney stock – had a direct hit on his home and was actually brushing lots of broken possessions into the street when I happened to see him.

"There," he said, "goes me 'appy 'ome, but I'm damned if I don't get another one in due course."

Living among the British at that time and sharing their dangers, sorrows and difficulties was as unforgettable an experience as getting, from time to time, that almost incredible moral uplift when Churchill spoke to the nation.

As far as I was concerned I fortunately never doubted, not even during the darkest and bleakest moments, that the Allies would be victorious in the end.

That helped me enormously, for by nature I am by no means a hero. I was often frightened and scared, especially when my wife and I were bombed out, but the British example forced me not to show it.

When things were at their worst I was offered a transfer either back to Switzerland, or across the Irish Sea to Dublin, but I felt strongly that my job was to stick it out in battle-scarred London.

Today, looking back on all this, I still feel proud to have been in Britain during what Churchill called its finest hour. And all the more I am sorry that the younger generation of my compatriots does not seem to be told in school what Britain did by holding out alone against Nazi Germany's might before first the Soviet Union and later the United States became Allies.

Gottfried Keller



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