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Discovering the real Switzerland

EVER since my all too brief sojourn in "La belle Suisse" (1970 to 1972), I have been trying to find a way to return and make my home there. I have lost my heart to Switzerland and her people, and anyone could be forgiven for thinking that I can see nothing wrong with either.

However it was not always so. If I had trusted to first impressions I would never have gone back to Switzerland of my own free will. To this day, I still do not know what went wrong. Perhaps one of my readers can enlighten me.

My paper had sent me to Basle to cover the 1967 INEL exhibition and, since I had never before been to Switzerland, I was looking forward with pleasant anticipation to exploring the town and meeting some of its inhabitants.

The flight from London had arrived at Mulhouse without incident and the airport bus had deposited me safely at the air terminal in the Bahnhof. The weather was fine and the outlook was good.

First of all I had to find the hotel which had been booked for me by the exhibition authorities. A policeman was standing by the exit from the station surveying the passers-by and I wondered if he spoke English.

There was only one way to find out so I went up to him and said: "Excuse me. Can you direct me to the Hotel Steinbok?"

The man looked at me disinterestedly but said nothing. "Oh dear!" I thought. "That will teach me not to be so arrogant and expect everyone to speak English."

But never mind. I had learnt French at school and I had been able to make myself understood in Paris. After all, it was one of the Swiss languages so it was reasonable to expect that I would be understood here.

So I tried again, in self-conscious and probably atrocious French, but to my amazement the only response was that the policeman turned on his heel and walked away without a word.

To say that I was flabbergasted would be an understatement. Such a thing had never happened to me before in the course of travelling extensively in numerous countries worldwide.

For a moment or two I stood undecided what to do. Then I noticed a newsvendor sitting by an adjacent exit. Perhaps he would know where my hotel was.



By Peter E. Slater

This time I tried French first and then English, but to no avail.

I was ignored completely and I was utterly baffled. I began to wonder if I had suddenly become invisible or perhaps I was only imagining that I was speaking.

Then I noticed a sign across the road a few hundred metres away. It read in letters that seemed a mile high "Hotel Steinbok"! I felt extremely foolish. No wonder nobody could be bothered to answer my stupid questions.

I hastily departed and booked into the hotel. About half-an-hour later, I was back in the Bahnhof Platz on my way to the exhibition. I found the number of the tramcar that would take me to the Salon des Expositions but I needed to know where to get off. Accordingly, when I boarded the tram I asked if the conductor could tell me when we got there.

"If you don't know where you are going, you should not have got on", I was told. What sort of place had I arrived in? It was very obvious that I was a foreigner and not familiar with the city so why was everyone so rude? I had heard that the Swiss were cold and reserved, but this was ridiculous.

Luckily the passengers were more obliging and I arrived safely at the correct destination. Inside the exhibition I had no problems. I was, so to speak, on international ground.

My problems commenced

again when I returned to my hotel. It appeared that the exhibition authorities had neglected to pass on the payment for my room although my paper had sent the inclusive fee before I left London and they had received it.

Although it was a simple administrative slip-up, the hotel treated me as if I were trying to defraud them and a great deal of bitterness ensued which was only cleared up just before I was due to return to London.

To add to my miseries this was a period when Britons were severely restricted in the amount of money that they were allowed to take out of the country with them when they went abroad. Basle, like London, was only a "swinging city" for those with ample supplies of spare cash.

Consequently I found myself that evening wandering aimlessly and not a little bored through the streets of the Old Town, wondering how I was going to pass the evenings during my stay.

Fortunately one of the exhibitors at the exhibition was having similar problems and so it happened that we both found ourselves sitting at the same table in a cafe drinking coffee. Naturally, we soon found ourselves commiserating with one another and so commenced a friendship which has lasted ever since.

Heinz Bellersheim was a sort of electronic/electrical subcontractor who lived near Baden

and had a workshop beneath his home. He is one of the most friendly and kind-hearted men I have ever met, which, now that I know what the Swiss are really like, is the highest praise that I can give him.

Heinz has since moved to Eien/Klein Döttingen, where we visited him during our stay in Switzerland. He also designs excellent modern furniture.

Thanks to Heinz I was able to enjoy a part of my stay in Basle, but I was by no means eager to return in 1969 for the next exhibition. Consequently I was delighted to find that things could not have been more different.

This time I stayed at the Hotel Rheinfelderhof in the Old Town near to the Salon des Expositions. Everyone was most helpful and friendly and I began to discover the real Switzerland and the charms of the ancient city of Basle itself.

Naturally I looked up Heinz as soon as I arrived and we spent some time at his home. He introduced me to the Swiss practice of taking their evening meal at the local Auberge as well as showing me something of the charm of a Swiss valley.

I have no idea what went wrong during my first visit but it certainly taught me to beware of first impressions and not to make snap judgements. Perhaps it is also a warning to us all to beware lest our "off-days" create the wrong impression for the visitor and harm, not only personal relations, but also international understanding.