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ROUNDAABOUT SWITZERLAND

by Derek Meakin

More words must have been written about Davos than any other place of its size—and not a line has been wasted. For Davos is out of this world and fully deserves the spotlight that for so long has been thrown on it.

It is in the domaine of sport that Davos is best known, and this is not surprising considering it is the home of the largest ski school in Europe (with 50 full-time instructors) and the largest sprayed ice rink in the world (on which all existing records have been made).

But sport has not always been the outstanding attraction of Davos. Once it achieved a certain notoriety by becoming, instead of a paradise for sportsmen, a hotbed of spies.

It appears that before the war Davos was not too popular a resort as far as the Swiss themselves were concerned. The reason was simple. It was a firm favourite with German holidaymakers, and the Swiss and their Teutonic neighbours did not get on too well together.

More than that, many of the sanatoria were owned by Germans, and it was only natural that the area should become the nerve-centre of the German fifth-column network operating in Switzerland. The choice of Davos was admirable for the purpose, although it was quite a while before the authorities became fully aware of what was going on.

First of all it was a fairly isolated spot, and not one that would be apparent as an espionage base. More obvious towns would be crowded places like Berne or Zurich or Geneva, where furtive meetings would excite no suspicion, but on the other hand agents and their contacts could easily spend a few days "holiday" in Davos without anyone asking questions.

There is another point which would, under normal circumstances, cut out a 10,000-population town like Davos as an ideal espionage centre. Every spy knows that illegal radio transmitters should only be operated in densely built-up areas, so as to forestall pinpointing by direction-finding apparatus. But the electrical equipment used at the sanatoria solved the difficulty by flooding the wavebands with more than sufficient electrical interference and consequently made detection impossible.

Well trained observers also found Davos perfect for keeping their eyes on the small-scale Army manoeuvres held from time to time in the vicinity by

groups of highly-trained mountain troops. Swiss methods of mountain warfare, in which they specialise, were of great interest to the *Abwehr*.

Finally the position of the resort, so conveniently close to the frontiers of Austria and Italy, had many advantages, especially to couriers engaged on making urgent trips with microphotographs which are the modern means of conveying the more bulky of secret documents.

Now the sportsmen are back in force Davos may no longer be the scene of that frenzied underground activity that once animated this little corner of Switzerland. I cannot say. All I do know is that one of its most respectable inhabitants today is a man whose job it was once to put salt on the tails of some of the professional spies.

Captain Eric Saunders is his name, a colourful character who has done valuable work as a counter-espionage agent for both Britain's MI5 and the Bundespolizei the Swiss security organisation. In fact, he told me it was at the house next door to his own home in Davos that the one-time German fifth column leader was murdered.

"The Captain", as his neighbours now call him, was an international celebrity long before moving to Switzerland. Well-built and bronzed, he has been in his time world traveller, a Member of Parliament and diplomat.

His wife, whom I met in their well-furnished flat near the English church, is known to everyone as the courageous lady who rides a bicycle all the year round—even in the depth of winter, when all the locals take to their sledges.

The Saunders flat is piled high with relics of the past, like the signed photograph of Mussolini which was presented to Mrs. Saunders by Il Duce in 1927. When travelling in Italy before the war that photo was a godsend to them. It always lay face uppermost on top of the luggage so that whenever an over-curious Italian customs officer opened the case the first thing he would see would be his master's face and signature. The result invariably was a Fascist salute—and no more questions.

When Italy entered the war the framed photo was hung in the lavatory. Later it was decorated with

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black crêpe. Then, when Mussolini was murdered, the crêpe was removed—in case anyone thought they had any sympathies with the man. Now it stands on a bookshelf with its face against the wall.

Cats are a feature of the household. The collection started one day when the Captain was walking through a tropical downpour in Algiers. Seeing a poor miserable kitten soaked to the skin and not knowing what to do, he asked a passerby to whom the kitten belonged. "To Allah!" was the reply. So the Captain took over.

Now you cannot move in the flat without seeing a cat—in a basket, under the table, in bed, or even on the top of a cupboard. And when you have run out of live cats there are always toy ones on wheels, photos of cats and kittens (taken by Mrs. Saunders) or cats' heads embroidered on cushion covers.

The Captain, a stickler for truth and accuracy, declared war on certain British newspapers at the time of the big avalanches at the beginning of last year. One correspondent who particularly annoyed him stretched his imagination as far as it would go to write a lot of nonsense about death and destruction in "The White Hell of Davos". A photographer who would be well advised to steer clear of that region in the future took a picture of clouds of snow falling from one of the "suck and spit" snowploughs and called it an exclusive picture of an avalanche in action, taken at serious risk to the photographer's life!

His one big dislike at the moment is those English visitors who go to Davos ostensibly on the meagre foreign travel allowance of £25 yet manage to stay weeks in the best hotels sipping champagne and moulting caviar at £4 a spoonful.

When he is on this subject he loves to recall the time when "Dickie and Edwina" Mountbatten were there. After a rather hectic day at the ski school, where they were both enthusiastic pupils, Lady Mountbatten turned to her husband and said: "Dickie, I'm so tired. Do you think we could take a sleigh back to the hotel?" The Earl of Mountbatten, thinking of their swiftly dwindling allowance, replied: "If we do dear, there will be no coffee after dinner."

Her Ladyship had her way, of course. But the couple did not miss their coffee after all. The Captain, hearing the story, immediately went to their hotel and treated them to coffee himself!

* * *

Next — New lungs for old.

VISIT OF NATIONAL COUNCILLOR SCHMID-RUEDIN TO THE COLLEGE OF THE SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY.

On Thursday, May 29th, the College of the Swiss Mercantile Society was honoured by a visit from National-Councillor Schmid-Ruedin and Mrs. Schmid-Ruedin. They inspected the classrooms of the College and also the students at work in the various rooms.

Later on the visitors were introduced to the students as a whole by the Principal, Mr. C. Slade, M.A., who also took the opportunity of introducing the President of the S.M.S., Mr. W. Meier and Mr. W. Burren, Chairman of the Education Committee, and various members of the Society in their official capacities.

Mr. Burren, on behalf of the Education Committee, thanked Mr. Schmid-Ruedin for his visit to the College and mentioned, that despite his many duties as General Secretary of the "Schweiz. Kaufmännischen Verein" and as a member of the Swiss Parliament, he had always given his wholehearted support to the College. Thanks to his personal efforts, both in Zurich and Berne, the College had derived great benefits for which he deserves sincere thanks.

He expressed the hope that the students would make the most of the comparatively short time they studied at the College so that they would be able to follow the many thousands who have made the College a stepping stone to a successful career.

Mr. Schmid-Ruedin, in replying, expressed his pleasure at having been given an opportunity of once again visiting the College, saying that being in the midst of so many young compatriots of both sexes make him feel that he is "home again". He voiced the hope, that they were happy in this school, where they enjoy the privilege of having an excellent teaching staff. Referring to the accommodation at "Swiss House" Mr. Schmid-Ruedin said, that he was quite aware that the rooms were far too small and overcrowded, but this would be remedied shortly when the adjoining house would be again put at the disposal of the school.

In conclusion, he wished the students the best of luck during their stay in London, expressing the hope, that with the knowledge they have acquired here, they would be able to render great services to our country.

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