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**Autor:** Epstein, Eugene V.

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## LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

*It all began in 1965 with an experiment: On the initiative of the British Authorities for Adult Education, the Swiss National Tourist Office and the Swiss-British Centre, some 30 leading members of women's organizations from Great Britain participated in a holiday and study week at the Home for Swiss Living Abroad in the farm village of Dürrenäsch, Canton Aargau. The British ladies returned home with many new impressions of Switzerland—not only as a holidayland—and reported their experiences through lectures and newspaper articles. The result was that almost 700 women from all parts*

*of the United Kingdom registered for similar holiday and study courses at Dürrenäsch, where, in the meantime, the Swiss-British Centre had been officially created. By the end of October 1966, the ladies, attending the courses in various groups, will have completed this educational programme. An unbiased observer, an incorrigible humorist by trade and choice, describes in the following article his own impressions of one of the groups of fact-hungry British ladies.*

### LADIES OF BRITAIN, WELCOME TO SWITZERLAND

I have never visited Liverpool, or Newcastle-upon-Tyne, or Cardiff, Wales. This makes me relatively unsuited to discuss how a number of female citizens of those communities reacted to their first visit to Switzerland. But I am as impartial an observer as could be found, and, anyway, I had very little to do the day they asked me to mingle with 46 British ladies at the Swiss-British Centre in Dürrenäsch, Canton of Aargau.

Every Swiss community has its own special charm, generally having something to do with the rolling landscape, or, in the case of higher elevations, with the imposing peaks of the Alps. Dürrenäsch was especially charming the day I drove there—not only because of my presence, but because the 46 ladies, representing the National Association of Women's Clubs, had already arrived. Every week, for most of the year, similar groups from England visit Switzerland for study courses organized jointly by the London and Zurich offices of the Swiss National Tourist Office and the Pro Helvetia Foundation.

Dürrenäsch is a very small place, and I would say that the ladies had more than doubled the population of the village by just being there. They were strewn from one end of the main street to the other, some admiring the windows of the general store, others gazing over the cows and meadows, still others standing around confused and lost.

It therefore did not surprise me, when I had become accustomed to a tiny Swiss town with so many people in it, that the British women were so complimentary regarding the Swiss people.

"My," said one of them, a Miss Fitzwilliams, "wherever we go on this picturesque thoroughfare we find the local populace so friendly and helpful. And you know," she added, "they *all* speak English so well." "Amazing, really amazing," I said.

"But I haven't seen one man in this town," Miss Fitzwilliams continued. "Only women... all speaking English. Rather odd, don't you think?" At that moment, one friendly Swiss, the manager of the Swiss-British Centre, called the ladies in to tea, and the streets of Dürrenäsch were returned to their normal placid state.

I happened to sit down next to Miss Fitzwilliams, who, over tea and cakes, told me that she was the acknowledged leader of the group and that this was a study course—not a plain old tour of Switzerland. She was the only member of the group who had visited Switzerland before—on the very first study course. Miss Fitzwilliams was fascinated with Switzerland—there was no doubt of it.

"What part of England are you from?" I asked her.

"No part of England, young man. I am from Wales!"

She then proceeded to pronounce the longest town name in the world to prove it. I managed to write down some of the syllables, which I provide here for the edification of my readers: Llwg—dragùloch...pfrgm. "All right, then, Miss Fitzwilliams, perhaps we can't pronounce that rare bit of old Wales, but why don't you have a go at some *Swiss* name, for example... Dürrenäsch."

"With great pleasure," she replied. "Dürrenäsch!"

After dinner, the first lecture of the week-long study course was to be given. Its title was "How Switzerland Got to Be the Way Switzerland Got",

and the lecturer was a leading official of Swissair, an airline which obviously felt responsible for the British ladies, since they had flown them from London.

The gentleman in question knew how to handle the opposite sex. His talk—an introduction to Switzerland—was informative and witty, and the ladies apparently thought so too.

When Mr. Swissair had finished with Switzerland, there was a general discussion about what interested the group most, like why women don't vote in Switzerland. "Yes," said the gentleman from Swissair, "I can understand your deep-felt concern and sympathy for our women. But remember, we are one of the oldest democracies in the world. Think, if you will how much time has elapsed since the founding of the original Swiss Confederation in the year 1291—less than seven hundred years. Now in this short period, we cannot expect miracles or even..."

"Would you please answer the original question, sir," said a voice from the back of the room. "Why don't women have the right to vote in Switzerland?" Mr. Scuola, the man from Swissair, then answered the question with great aplomb and with the help of his wife, who happened to be present and who happened to be a member of the Zurich Women's Federation, which happened to be fighting for women's rights.

The ladies were satisfied. One of them, a Mrs. MacTavish, stood up and thanked the speaker, Swissair, the Swiss people and the President of Switzerland for giving the Scottish people so great an opportunity to improve international understanding and amity. Mrs. Humbrey-Jones then thanked everyone in the name of the English. Finally, Miss Fitzwilliams added her gratitude on behalf of Wales by singing the middle stanza of a Welsh folk song, *Thrp Llwyn din Brogh*. An appreciable lump was forming in my throat—it was all so beautiful.

From Dürrenäsch the "girls" (I take the liberty of using their own term) visited virtually everything one could visit during a single week in Switzerland. First came Berne, with a trip to a model cheese and dairy farm. When they arrived, one of the ladies seemed disappointed. "It's just as big a farm as anywhere else," she said. "I thought it was supposed to be a *model* farm." The ladies twittered in chorus.

Then came side trips to Interlaken and Grindelwald, folklore evenings and the inevitable fondue, flag-throwing and alphorn blowing. "Where did you find your alphorn player?" I asked the young lady from Pro Helvetia. "Don't tell anyone," she said, "but he's Heiri Müller, who lives in New York City and works at the Matterhorn Cheese Restaurant there. He's visiting his parents in Winterthur and kindly offered to play the alphorn for us."

On the final day of the study tour, the group traveled to Zurich by alpine postal coach where a young gentleman climbed aboard and began to explain the sights of the city. One fact followed another, and the ladies listened attentively:

"To your right, Zurich's main station—old building—now 900 train movements a day. Zurich's population 440,000 inhabitants. Now front view of main station. Inside are sixteen tracks. Coming to main post-office, crossing one of city's rivers—the Sihl River—spelled S-i-h-l."

The guide continued: "In front of you, you see a typical Zurich tram, or streetcar, in the official colors of this city—blue and white. Blue because of the everlasting blue sky. A bit cloudy today," he said, as the raindrops hammered against the windows of the coach. "White because of the innocence of our people."

Many of the women, whose interest in Switzerland was deep and genuine, were copiously taking notes, as they had been doing since their arrival in Switzerland.

"Zurich receives 800000 tourists annually," the guide pointed out, "and they spend two million nights in our city." This last remark seemed to impress the ladies, for there were two or three who were quietly dozing in their seats and several others who were beginning to look sleepy.

As we drove out to Rapperswil, an old town on the Lake of Zurich, for the farewell dinner, I discussed with the ladies some of their strongest impressions of Switzerland. "First of all," said Mrs. Switherton, "we're going to tell all our club members at home just how hospitable and

beautiful and clean this country is and how much we have enjoyed it, even the yodeling and alphorn blowing!"

At this point, with the lake to our right, one of the girls asked if all Swiss lakes contained salt water. "No," said the patient guide from Pro Helvetia, "none of them do." "Are we cumin' soon to Rapperswil?" asked a lady from Liverpool. "Yes," said the patient guide from Pro Helvetia, "all of us are."

A brief tour of Rapperswil and a candlelight dinner officially concluded the week's study tour. Now the tearful farewells to Switzerland began in earnest. There was a special and profound sort of glow on the faces of the ladies, all 46 of them, as they re-entered the coach for the trip to Zurich Airport. They looked blissful, as if they had learned something no one else had known before. When the alpine coach began moving off the market square, a window in the rear of the bus opened and I heard a voice say, "we'll always remember your lovely country which hasn't had a war since 1848 which lasted three days..."

## SWISS CULTURAL EVENTS DURING SEPTEMBER

### THE JOYS OF THE VINTAGE

Who can resist visiting the beautiful wine-growing districts of Switzerland in the autumn? On the sunny shores of the Lake of Bièvre, the first of five joyous grape-picking Sundays falls on September 25, and the vintage festival in La Neuveville will take place on September 24 and 25—the same days on which the wine fair will be held in Locarno-Monti. In the first weekend in October, we have the choice of visiting the great vintage festival and procession in Lugano or in Neuchâtel, and the choice is made still harder by the fact that on October 1 and 2, vintage festivals will be held in Lutry on the Lake of Geneva and in Morges in the La Côte district; both occasions feature colourful processions. In Spiez on the Lake of Thun, the vintage festival begins on September 19, and many visitors are expected here and at the festivals in Canton Valais, in the St. Gall Rhine valley and in Hallau in the canton of Schaffhausen, to mention but a few of the attractive and sunny wine-growing districts.

### NATIONAL FESTIVITIES

The enthusiasm with which the national military sport of shooting is regarded is demonstrated by the keen anticipation which precedes the shooting competition for boys of school-age, to be held in Zurich from September 10 to 12 on the modern rifle-range in Albisgütli. The occasion invariably gives rise to a general celebration in which young and old take part. In Windisch, near Brugg, the spacious Roman amphitheatre is the scene of a magnificent spectacle on September 25, when national costume groups from all over Switzerland gather in celebration of the sixth Swiss National Costume Folk-Dance Festival, folk-dancing being the main activity of the National Costume Association. In the town of Delsberg in the Bernese Jura, the "Fêtes du Vorbourg" will be held from September 11 to 18, and in the lively county-town of Appenzell, the "Hoferkilbi" on September 25 and 26 will be combined with a cattle market. The holiday town of Baden will hold the autumn festival of the Town Harmony Society on September 10.

### EXHIBITIONS IN LUCERNE

As well as the second half of the International Music Festival which includes three symphony concerts and other musical events, Lucerne's autumn season is enriched by an exhibition of medieval paintings and sculptures from the Jan Coray collection in the Kunsthhaus, and an exhibition entitled "The American Space Programme" in the popular Transport Museum, which is of particular topical interest.

### RE-AWAKENING OF THE CULTURAL LIFE IN AUTUMN

Following the relaxation of the summer holidays, we feel refreshed and eager for cultural occasions. We are happy to make a short journey to visit an important exhibition, such as the collection of works by the inter-

nationally esteemed Lucerne painter and designer, Hans Erni, beginning on September 10 in the All Saints Museum in Schaffhausen. Then there is the exhibition in the Kunsthalle in Berne which opens at the same time of new works by Victor Surbek, a master of the portrayal of a nature-loving and human view of life and the world. In the Kunstmuseum in Berne, the Swiss Art and Antique Fair with its many different attractive stands will be open from September 25 to October 4, and occupies a place of honour in the cultural life of September. The Fribourg Art Museum presents an exhibition of the works of Sergio de Castro, combined with a pottery show, which will be open until September 25. The Kunstgewerbemuseum in Zurich (Museum of Applied Arts) is preparing an exhibition of Turkish folk art for the middle of September. In St. Gall, the exhibition entitled "Contemporary Art from Lake Constance" is open until September 25 in the Kunstmuseum. In the famous chapter house library of St. Gall, an exhibition of valuable medieval books (8<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century) will be open until October. Another important event is the archaeological and historical show "Trésors de l'ancien Iran", where treasures from ancient Teheran can be seen in the Musée Rath in Geneva until September 25.

### GUEST CONCERTS AND BALLET PERFORMANCES

The band of the Grand Master of the Teutonic Order can safely reckon with an enthusiastic reception in Interlaken on September 23 and on the three following days in Basle, Berne and Baden. The same applies to the ballet of the Finnish National Opera who will perform in Lausanne on September 14 and 15, and the National Ballet of Canada, who will appear in Zurich on September 22, in Geneva on September 23 and 25 and in Lausanne on September 26 and 27.

### MUSIC IN WESTERN SWITZERLAND AND TICINO

Music lovers from far and wide are expected to come to Montreux to enjoy the varied programme of the International Festival of Music, the 21<sup>st</sup> "Septembre musical". In the first half of the month, the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra dominates the festival with various conductors and soloists, as well as in a concert with the Prague Philharmonic Choir—six concerts in all. The Bamberg Symphony Orchestra will give four concerts, and the Viennese Baroque Ensemble will add variety to the programme. The autumn guest concerts in Ticino also provide varied musical treats in the 21<sup>st</sup> "Settimane musicale" in Ascona. As well as solo recitals, there will be a symphony concert on September 14 given by the Italian Swiss Radio Orchestra and soloists of music by Vladimir Vogel, who lives in Ascona. Concerts by the London Anglian Chamber Soloists and the Società Cameristica Lugano are followed by symphony concerts with the Salzburg Mozarteum Orchestra and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra in October.