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Autor: Epstein, Eugene V.

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

Society is society the world over, and Switzerland is no exception. Yet there is little pretentiousness among the Swiss, who are a pragmatic, down-to-earth people. As a result, the height of high society is a bit lower than in most other parts of the world. After all, the Swiss have virtually everything they want—and thus considerably less reason to display their snobbery on their sleeves. One or two examples may serve to make this point clear:

In New York, it is considered “in” to speak French at a garden party. In France, it is considered “in” to speak English at a garden party. In England, it is considered “in” to speak American at a garden party. Where does this leave us?

In Switzerland, one can speak any language at all—with no fear that anybody will even notice. This means that language is not the “in” thing with the Swiss, but just a sorry old means of communication, which it was supposed to be in the first place. But what about that insidious little word “in”?

A lot of people enjoy doing what everybody else is doing. I would not suggest that many popular hobbies be abandoned merely because one's neighbors are up to the same tricks. But I am suggesting that following the crowd has never really gotten anyone anywhere, except into trouble. So, “in”-keepers of the world, return to the olden days when “in” was an innocent and unsuspecting preposition, meaning what it was intended to mean.

Remember that “in” things invariably become “out” things—and then they become (I swear it) “camp” things. *Camp* means something so bad, so banal and inane—in whose eyes I don't know—that it becomes “in” again. Old comic books are one example. Comic books are not only “in” but they cost more than the complete first edition of *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Perhaps there's some connection.

Anyway, I think it high time we discard “in” and “out” in favor of other prepositions. As for camp, we should bury it in the deepest hole available. In other words, “in” and “out” will no longer be in or out: in is out, out is out and camp is far out in left field, or whatever it is they say these days.

Now we must choose another preposition, one which will not spread too quickly, for it should be reserved for special people, and special people are not to be confused with crowds or masses. One word which seems to reflect the spirit of our times is “up”. So, instead of saying in and out, we can start with up and down and see how we fare. In and out already have an old-fashioned ring, and this won't do anymore. They seem to suggest “in and out of traffic”... “in trouble”... “out of breath”... “in heat”... “in winter”... and so on. Such archaic ideas are useless in this super-modern world of computers and jets.

Enter, if you will, the Jet Age, where some things are “up” and others “down”. “Up” implies the wind, freedom, flights of fancy. “Down” means time to land or time to go home. So “up” means “in” and “down” means “out”, while “down and out” is quite horrible.

Now you can forget your French grammar and stop worrying about how to impress the local insurance salesman at your next party. Now you only have to fly somewhere—or say that you are flying somewhere—to achieve the same effect.

But flying from New York to Waterloo, Missouri, to visit an old aunt, is not enough. This is “out”—I mean, “down”. If you really want to be “up”, you've got to fly at least eight hours by jet over some strange ocean—then you are definitely “up”, not just rising or gaining altitude. “Down” therefore means coming in for a landing, and if you're “up” before coming down, this

could mean São Paulo, Singapore or Hongkong. Once is not enough, either—you've got to fly all the time, or say that you're flying all the time, even if you can't stand flying in the first place.

Imagine now that you are attending a social gathering at some villa on the Lake of Zurich (Schweiz—Suisse—Svizzera—Switzerland). It's a modest sort of place: forty-four rooms, five or six servants, lots of lovely things to eat and drink—fine French wines and all the rest. Now look carefully, because everybody who is anybody is here tonight—you can tell by the way people are dressed—like old cowpokes back home in the United States! For this is a typical Swiss Zurichsee Barbecue, and the grand old villa on the quiet lake has been transformed into “Alphorn Ranch”, and there's plenty of genuine Western music, too. The point here is that while people all over America are trying so hard to act Continental, old Europe is acting cowboyish, with all the fixin's.

My wife and I happened to attend the Alphorn Ranch party and, I must say, it certainly was a humdinger of a blowout. Who would have thought that such things happen on the crystal waters of the Lake of Zurich! Anyway, I was sitting in my freshly pressed cowboy suit at a big long cowboy table (in the most elegant English garden one can imagine) when a woman asked me if I'd ever been to São Paulo (see above for hidden meaning). I told her I hadn't, but that I *had* visited St. Peter's in Rome, and would that do? She gave me a look which was definitely “down” her nose, and continued.

She told me that she often jetted to São Paulo, but that she preferred Thursdays to Tuesdays, because of some difference in airlines. She said one airline insisted on serving ham with aspic *all* the time. That's why she preferred Thursdays, when she could have her choice of ham or tongue in aspic. But Thursdays, on the other hand, were difficult because of Moochli. Oh, I thought, of course... “Who the devil is Moochli?” I asked.

“Moochli's our dog,” she replied. “He gets nervous if I leave him with the butler for more than five days.”

“Well, what do you do in such cases?” I inquired.

“No problem,” she said. I just don't go to São Paulo for more than five days. Then I jet back to Zurich, make sure that Moochli's all right and then whoosh back to meet my husband in Paraguay, where he sells plumbing equipment and billiard tables to the king or whatever they have there.”

“But why can't you take Moochli with you on your trips?”

“On our *flights*, you mean? Moochli is much too sensitive to changes of altitude. No, I'd rather return and see that he's happy and enjoying himself, as a good dog should. Then I always jet off again and meet my husband somewhere. You see, the world is our stamping ground and private oyster...

tra-la, tra-la, la-la.

I was impressed, and I felt quite unimportant, especially when this important lady told me that she buys her suits in New York, her furs in Paris, her shoes in London and her unmentionables in Moscow. She and her husband have an island off the coast of Greece and another in Polynesia, so that they have at least one island wherever they happen to be.

I have since learned that the next step on the way “up” is to have one's own private jet, first a two-engine job, later a full-fledged DC-8 or something. Then you don't have to depend on airlines who only serve ham in aspic. You can have your own genuine Alphorn barbecue way up in the sky above the Indian Ocean... Tuesdays as well as Thursdays.