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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

I wonder how many non-Swiss in this world really know what a "Metzgete" is. Yet *Metzgetes* are as Swiss as any of the Swissiest things we've ever heard of, including fondue, honey and money. I trust that readers of this piece will forgive my apparently superior attitude; after all, my job is to inform—not to impress. But since I have at one time or another been through the whole living-in-Switzerland business myself, I often forget and think that I ought to let everyone know how much I really know about everything.

But soon I realize, when the moment of truth arrives, when a piece of paper—clean, white and virginal—stares expectantly at me from the roller of my coldly mechanical typewriter, that I don't always know which key to push—and when. I have thus learned how little I really understand about anything, especially Switzerland, where two decades of hardening experience are barely enough to scratch the Alpine surface.

Now, just what is a *Metzgete* and what's so special about it? First of all, a *Metzgete* is not an "it"—it's a thing, something extraordinarily unusual, a way of life—at least in the German-speaking part of the country. All right, I know I'm exaggerating. But this week I feel particularly scurrilous, and I plan to exaggerate as much as possible just to prove my point.

It seems odd that some of the most fascinating traditions in Switzerland have something or other to do with eating. The *Metzgete*, however, doesn't just have something to do with eating, it has everything to do with eating. In fact, it's the heart, brains, lungs and guts of eating. One might even suggest that these are precisely the victuals one eats at a *Metzgete*, but such a thought might frighten away a number of prospective customers from what is generally a very pleasant evening of superior indigestion.

The first time I went to a *Metzgete* I was more naive than I am today, which, according to my wife, must have bordered on the improbable. Some very dear Swiss friends of mine picked me up one night at the little pension in Zurich which was my first home in Europe. This was many years ago, and I therefore ask the indulgence of my readers should some of the more salient impressions of this evening have become subsequently faded or confused. One thing I do remember: prices at that time were a good deal lower than they are today. People are supposed to be earning more money today, though, so that everything comes out even in the end. I'm not particularly concerned about this theory, mainly because I wasn't earning anything at all at that time—I was a plain, old-fashioned, un-hippieish kind of student. But, as I recall, I was nevertheless able to afford all sorts of luxuries. In any case, my tastes were modest and on the rustic side. This is why I liked my first *Metzgete*.

Walti, my very Swiss friend, arrived at my little pension with Ruthli, his new girlfriend, whom I rather liked as well. Ruthli was not aware of this fact, and I managed to conceal my innermost feelings by letting her think I came along because of the fine food we always ate together in such great abundance. (My editor just telephoned to ask why I never stick to one subject. "If you're writing about *Metzgetes*," he screamed, "why the devil don't you stick to *Metzgetes*?" He's right.)

Anyway, Walti appeared at the door of my little pension that evening with a strangely mysterious look in his baby-blue eyes. "What's up?" I inquired. "Why the strangely mysterious look?" "In Switzerland," he replied, "we usually begin a conversation by greeting our friends. I refuse to exchange any words with you until you do so. Understood?"

"O.K., O.K.," I replied. "Grüezi, goddam it! Now what's up, where are you taking me and, furthermore, where's your horrible girlfriend? Can't we ever go anywhere without that cow? Always around, always sticking her nose into our business. Ruthli this and Ruthli that!"

"Shutup!" said Walti with his customary politeness. "Ruthli's waiting in the car and we're going to a *Metzgete*."

"What's a *Schwetzgete*?" I asked, proud, as usual, of my newly acquired command of Swiss-German.

"*Metzgete*," said Walti. Metz-ge-te, Metz-gete, M-e-t-z-g-e-t-e! Got it now? A *Metzgete*, he carefully explained to me, was a so-called slaughter festival, which, I still have to admit (as I did then), sounds reasonably disgusting. This is the kind of slaughter affair where an innkeeper butchers up a pig or two and serves the various parts in various ways to various people. There's usually Swiss laendler music being played to keep the people from concentrating on what they're eating.

Walti and I and that girlfriend of his drove off in Walti's pre-war Mercedes to what a travel agent would describe as a charming, quaint old inn in the country. The area we ended up in was—and is—known as the Säuliamt (or pig's office) which no doubt had some symbolic meaning in relation to our planned *Metzgete*. "Aha," I thought, "this must be where all those Swiss pigs come from."

Säuliamt is simply the name of a most attractive area not far from Zurich as the crow flies. In Walti's pre-war Mercedes it seemed to take us most of the evening to get there. Walti always drove slowly when Ruthli was sitting next to him. At first I thought he was just safety-conscious. When I mentioned this to him, he replied that he simply liked girls, especially when they were sitting next to him on the front seats of pre-war Mercedeses.

We finally arrived at the "Gasthaus zum Ochenschwanz"—a quaint, lovely, picturesque inn in the middle of a pine forest. Walti parked, wiped the lipstick off his cheek and announced that we had finally arrived.

I could hear the heart-warming strains of Swiss laendler music emanating from the cracks in the walls of the "Gasthaus zum Ochenschwanz". I had an odd feeling that something was about to happen to me, something I would be writing about two decades later. I made a note to this effect on the back of a ticket I received that day for talking back to a policeman.

We entered the quaint and lovely inn, and somehow—despite the thick clouds of acrid smoke which greeted us—we found our way to a table where three seats were still free. The place was horribly crowded. It was noisy, hot, smoky and smelled of grease from the kitchen. Our neighbors at the table—an elderly, rather corpulent Swiss gentleman and his wife—had napkins tucked into their collars and their mouths were stuffed. They gasped the standard "Grüezi" as we sat down.

Now what, I thought to myself, can be so unique about so uncomfortable a situation?

The waitress appeared. Walti asked for three *Bratwursts*, three pork chops, three liver sausages and—the most ominous-sounding of all—three blood sausages. On top of this, he ordered side dishes of sauerkraut, potato salad and lots of bread. And then he asked for three large bottles of beer.

"What should we order as a main course?" I had the temerity to ask, as we all tucked napkins into our collars. "Enough of your infernal wise-cracks, young man," said Walti. "Just do as you're told and you'll eventually learn how to get along in Switzerland."

Now, two decades later, I know that Walti was right. We ate and ate that night so many years ago. I realize there's nothing especially romantic about pork chops. And those ghastly, ghoul-ish blood sausages represent a culinary delight I would prefer not to describe at the moment, since my stomach tends to become upset whenever I think of them. Even the liver sausages would fit into the same category. They come on platters: huge, bloated balloons of sausages waiting to be stabbed with the nearest fork or knife. I sincerely caution all would-be sausage stabbers to stab carefully.

I was not very careful that night at the "Gasthaus zum Och-senschwanz." I stabbed at my first liver sausage and a geyser of thick brown liquid shot up at the lamp hanging over our table. But I learned that there is nothing better than liver sausage oozing out all over one's plate. This is precisely why I find *Metzgetes* so interesting. Everything is rough and seemingly primitive—yet good at the same time. The music is loud and noisy—yet it too belongs to the whole scheme of things. The pork chops are

sometimes greasy. And they are good, too. The sauerkraut is usually quite tasty, and the Swiss always knew how to make good potato salad.

So, all in all, a *Metzgete* is a most acceptable kind of local tradition. Today I am still fascinated by them, and I have attended "Metzgetes" all over the country. One of the worst took place at an extremely expensive and elegant restaurant in Zurich. The pork chops were exquisite, the sausages succulent, perfectly spiced and well-behaved. The sauerkraut contained caraway seed and champagne. Even the blood sausage was edible, especially when you closed your eyes. But it was a terrible *Metzgete*. I later learned why. You see, there was no greasy smell coming from the kitchen and no acrid clouds of smoke from dozens of Swiss cigars. The place was simply too fashionable, and, what's more, one never has neighbors at the same table in such elegant restaurants. Perhaps I was also dreaming of my very first *Metzgete*, of Walti and Ruthli, of that battered old pre-war Mercedes and how carefully Walti drove on his way out to the Säuliamt.

SWISS CULTURAL EVENTS DURING APRIL

Festival time by Lake Geneva

Is the season of music and theatre festivals already with us? It will indeed again claim all the summer months with Lausanne starting the ball rolling as early as the end of April. The sixteenth "Festival international de Lausanne" opens on April 27 to offer an outstanding range of the most varied performances during the two months prior to June 26. A concert will be given at the official opening by the Orchestre de la Suisse romande and will feature a performance of Verdi's Requiem, accompanied by two choral societies from Vaud canton. In May, there is to be a piano evening given by Arthur Rubinstein, a jazz concert with Ella Fitzgerald and a concert of old music in the cathedral. In Montreux, where international choral societies are to meet from April 14 to 20, the television entertainment competition will be held for the eleventh time from April 29 to May 7. The winning entry is awarded the highly-coveted "Golden Rose of Montreux" prize.

Musical and theatrical delights

The Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra directed by Jean Fournet, is to make a Swiss springtime tour. It can be heard, accompanied by pianist Reine Gianoli, in Lausanne on April 25 and on the three succeeding days in Basle, Geneva and Zurich. Works by Schumann and Brahms form the major part of the programme. The string ensemble "Festival Strings of Lucerne" with harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick is to play in Geneva (May 4), Zurich (May 5), Berne (May 6) and Basle (May 7). The early season in the Ticino is likewise to be enriched with music. In Lugano on April 15 the Radio Orchestra of Italian speaking Switzerland can be heard, while at the end of April begins the official series of "Concerti di Lugano". A sequence of concerts of this nature has been in progress since March in Locarno. From the wealth of operatic performances at Swiss theatres the new production of "Parsifal" by Richard Wagner in Zurich is worthy of special mention. This moving drama is to be performed several times following the Saturday before Palm Sunday.

Exhibitions far and wide

We begin the review in Ticino where the "International Arts and Culture Exhibition" in Lugano will offer something unexpected and surprising to claim the attention of visitors to the canton between April 3 and June 27. Bellinzona, too, must not be forgotten since the regional art and folklore collection will again be on view during the summer months in the uppermost of the three castles (Castello di Sasso Corbaro, Unterwalden Castle). The wide panorama afforded from this vantage point alone makes a visit to this romantic lookout tower worthwhile. In the Lake Geneva region the collective exhibition of the two Associations of Swiss male and female artists in Lausanne, to continue until May 2, may be considered an event of special significance. Of shorter duration will be the "Salon international de l'aviation de tourisme, de sport et d'affaires" in Lausanne (to be held in the Palais de Beaulieu from April 24 to

May 2). Geneva is to hold the exhibition "La Lumière dans la Maison" in the re-arranged gallery of the armoury at the Musée d'art et d'histoire. Thematic exhibitions of this nature from museum stocks are to be held there every six months. A visit to the federal capital should not omit the pleasure of contemplating 19th century works at the Berne Museum of Art which once aroused admiration but have subsequently had to be stored out of sight. Far more up-to-date is the commemorative show in the Berne Art Gallery to continue until May 2 for Johannes Itten (1888–1967), born in the Berne region, who in addition to enjoying wide prestige as an art teacher in Germany and Zurich, also revealed versatility as a painter. The Basle Art Gallery is also to give prominence to modern art with works by Bram van Velde and Antonio Gaudi; likewise the Zurich Art Gallery with a retrospective show of the work of the Russo-American painter, Mark Rothko, who died in the spring 1970 at the age of 66 years. In St. Gallen, on the other hand, Negro art is to be featured in the "Waaghaus" from April 3 to May 9.

While we have to leave many further events to the delight in discovery of visitors to our towns, we would, however, point out that the Swiss Industries Fair in Basle has taken over an entire building with four spacious floors as a comprehensive Building Fair.

A guide to art in Winterthur

Although Winterthur presents the agony of choosing which of the famous Oskar Reinhart collections to visit first, the Museum of Art will be given preference at the moment since here can be found the exhibition "Paul Klee and his Painter Friends" until April 18. It is displaying the Felix Klee collection (Berne) in numerous rooms which, as the inheritance from his father, includes works from four decades together with fifty or so specimens by his major contemporaries in Germany. Rarely is such an opportunity afforded to admire a collection from a private source in which so much avant-garde work is featured from the early part of the century. Paul Klee surrounded himself with works by artists closely associated with him or who had previously been close to him. These primarily include Kandinsky, A. von Jawlensky, Franz Marc, Emil Nolde, Marianne von Werefkin and Gabriele Münter. Then in the old town of Winterthur, two recently opened collections can be found. On a stroll through the traffic-free Marktgasse, which as an architecturally charming shopping street traverses the entire inner town, our eye is caught by the "Rathaus" with its open pillared arcade (not to be confused with the monumental "Stadthaus" built by the famous architect Gottfried Semper outside the old city). This new beautifully renovated group of buildings with the classical façade and intimate shopping gallery, which passes through the ground floor, houses a collection of paintings donated by a citizen in beautifully panelled rooms. It comprises some seventy pictures mainly by Dutch and German masters of the 17th to 19th centuries. Then we find an important collection of watches in the upper room. It illustrates the development of the watch-making art from Gothic iron timepieces to the elegant watches and pendulum