

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Herausgeber: Swiss Railways Society
Band: - (2017)
Heft: 130

Artikel: A commune takes pride in its past : Richard Parker reports on how Château d'Oex remembered its role in WW1
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-853888>

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British POWs arriving at Chateaux D'Oex 1916.

A Commune Takes Pride in its Past

Richard Parker reports on how Chateau d'Œx remembered its role in WW1

Last year in the UK the centenary of events that occurred during WW1 in 1916 mostly centred on trying to understand the carnage that took place during the Battle of the Somme, the ill-fated campaign that saw more British armed forces killed and injured in one day than had occurred before or since. However, in a quiet corner of Switzerland there was more of a celebratory atmosphere at the end of May 2016 as Chateau d'Œx in the Pays-d'Enhaut recalled with pride how it had come to the aid of British and Commonwealth (Empire then) soldiers 100 years earlier.

It was in the late spring of 1916 that the Government of neutral Switzerland agreed to take into their country numbers of injured and sick British troops who were being held in Prisoner-of-War camps in Germany. By this stage of the war the German medical authorities were struggling to cope with the increasing numbers of their own injured servicemen being repatriated from the front, so passing some enemy casualties on to the Swiss was a practical, as well as a humanitarian, move. The Swiss Government invited communities to come forward with plans, availability of accommodation, and the ability and willingness to take on the role of hosting these men. The first to do so was Chateau d'Œx, shortly followed by Leysin and Murren. In many small alpine resorts hotels had stood empty following the exodus of tourists after the start of hostilities in 1914. Also, as the PoW's national governments had agreed to fund the accommodation, this was seen as a boost to these local economies. In the long term it was considered that most hotels, etc. made little, if any, profit from this exercise. However, their use in this manner probably saved many from closure, whilst offering employment to local people. In many of these resorts there were also small resident communities of ex-pat British who were on-hand to help with any of the potential issues

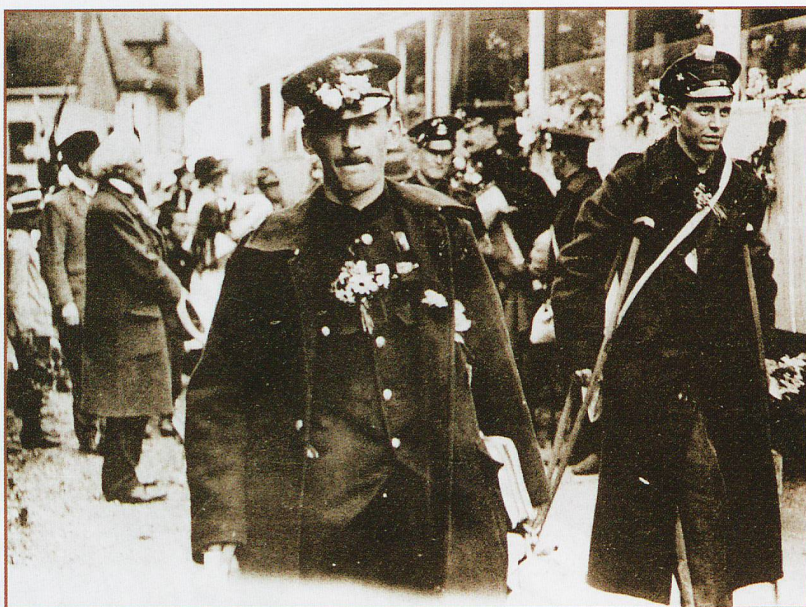


British POWs en-route through Switzerland in 1916.

that might occur. Switzerland at the time was a poor country and was a retirement destination for many UK citizens, whilst others sought relief from TB in Swiss Alpine Sanatoria.

The selection of the men to be moved from Germany had been organised by the Swiss Army's Chief Field Medical Officer, Colonel Hauser on visits to that country as a neutral observer in association with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). So it was in the afternoon of Monday 29th May 1916 that some 550 injured British and Empire POWs arrived by train at the Swiss/German frontier station of Konstanz to a wait processing by the authorities before they were able to enter neutral territory. The agreement reached with Germany through the ICRC was that only those men whose injuries meant that they would no longer be able to take a combatant role would be allowed into Switzerland, so further medical checks were to be undertaken. This resulted in over 100 being returned to their detention camps, whilst some 32 officers and 272 men were allowed into Switzerland. A further 150 would follow the next day. The agreement also required that the men admitted to neutral Switzerland should not be repatriated to their own countries whilst hostilities continued, unless they were declared to be medically non-combatant. It was not just the British sick and wounded that Switzerland welcomed. French prisoners also came from Germany, whilst German prisoners were accepted from France. In all some 68,000 sick and injured PoWs were taken-in by the Swiss between 1916 and 1918.

This first British contingent was quickly placed onto a train for a two-hour journey from Konstanz to Zürich, where they arrived at 9.45pm to be greeted by the Consul-General and a large crowd. Apparently there had also been crowds welcoming the party as the train passed through stations en-route. From Zürich the train moved on to Bern where it arrived at 1am to another reception and its passengers were entertained to supper. Two hours later the former prisoners left for Lausanne where they were greeted by an estimated crowd of 10,000 at 5am, and given breakfast. A short trip along Le Léman brought them to Montreux to be welcomed by many British residents, further crowds of locals, and to be given presents, plus another breakfast. From Montreux the MOB provided two trains for the final leg of their journey to Chateau d'Œx and it was reported that en-route *"The little cars of the train were everywhere bombarded with bouquets and posies of flowers."* Arriving at their destination there were yet more crowds, an official welcoming party from the Commune and the British and Swiss organising committees, speeches by the British Ambassador and a



TOP: British POWs disembarking at Chateaux D'Oex in 1916.

MIDDLE: British Prisoners Of War on the MOB in 1916.

BOTTOM: Passengers on a MOB service train greeting British POWs just arrived at Chateaux D'Oex in 1916.



French POWs on the Aigle-Le Sépey-Les Diablerets in 1916.

Swiss parliamentarian - and a third breakfast! By this time apparently even the fittest of the former prisoners admitted to being exhausted by the trip and the welcome that they had received. As one soldier put it they were *"dropped from hell right into heaven"*. In later post cards sent home comments included; *"hearty welcome in this dear country"*; *"grand reception from Swiss people"*.

The first and subsequent allocations of men proved too many for Chateau d'Œx to accommodate. Records show that by the 25th August 2016 404 PoWs were based in 13 hotels and pensions in the commune, 43 in two hotels in Rossinière and 77 in four hotels in Rougemont. Also by then British PoWs were being accommodated in Leysin (47) and Murren (376) with the final totals in these communities reaching 200 and 759 respectively. More arrived in Chateau d'Œx with the total peaking at 61 officers and 632 men on the 20th January 1917, and even by the start of December 1918 some 442 PoWs were still present, although 168 left on the 20th December apparently intending to be back in Britain by Christmas. Even in late January 1919 some 54 were still present. In total by Armistice Day, 11th November 1918, just over 4000 British service personnel had been given refuge in Switzerland, with some 1774 having already been repatriated and a further 51 having died.

As can be seen many stayed in these communities for a considerable time, allowing many to make good recoveries from their wounds and illnesses. It was reported that a number of the troops expatriated to Switzerland were suffering from TB and no doubt the alpine air assisted them more than had they been in military hospitals at home. As a large number of Swiss men were themselves away on military service defending that nation's frontier, many of the fitter of the ex-PoWs living in and around Chateau d'Œx volunteered to help on farms, and to become involved in various community projects. The internees, as their health returned, also took up other activities including sport, and there is a recorded case of a Private enrolling at Lausanne University in 1917. A lot of this information has come to light through the work of postal historians who have collected a considerable amount of related letters and post

cards over the years. The Swiss authorities issued all those arriving, with pre-printed post cards for them to inform their relatives and friends of their new location. For the duration of their stay the PoWs were entitled to unlimited free postage to addresses in Switzerland and the UK. Many took advantage of this and a surprising amount of this correspondence survives. Given that Europe was enveloped in a brutal war the postal service from Switzerland worked remarkably well, with examples of items taking only 3 days to travel from Chateau d'Œx to Edinburgh.

Officers were able to invite their families to join them for short periods, but for the other ranks it was only their wives who were allowed to travel to Switzerland - in all cases at their own expense. This would have been beyond

the means of most wives or families, although it is reported that in some UK towns local committees raised funds to enable poorer wives with very sick husbands to travel. However, it is unclear how many relatives made the trip across France. It must have required some skilful organization to plan a route that avoided the war zones and relied on a skeleton service of very slow trains. Thanks to surviving correspondence we know that the wife of a Private Clark of the 2nd Manchester Regiment had, by the end of October 1916, been to visit him at Chateau d'Œx. Others followed. Some two-and-a-half years after the first of the injured troops arrived in Switzerland the Armistice was signed that then allowed for the repatriation of all former prisoners - not only those from Great Britain, which then included Ireland, but other countries were involved such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India and other parts of the British Empire.

Over the years this act of hospitality by Chateau d'Œx had drifted into the mists of their communal memory. One of the few tangible links to this aspect of its past was a memorial in the Anglican Church (Chateau d'Œx still hosts a British community as well as welcoming tourists) to those servicemen who had stayed, some dying there. A local resident, Guy Girardet, had noticed this, and following much research decided that 100 years on the generosity of his Commune should be remembered. So, over the 29th and 30th May 2016 Chateau d'Œx celebrated its past with a series of events. This included a service of remembrance and thanks in St Peter's Church that was followed the next day by a reception in the 'Grande Salle'. The current British Ambassador attended this along with representatives of the Commune and many local organisations, plus some descendants of those who once found refuge from the horrors of war in this peaceful community.

SRS Member Richard Parker, a sometime resident of Chateau d'Œx, thanks Guy Girardet, Michael Clode, and the Editor, for their assistance in preparing this article. The comprehensive postal research undertaken by Derrick Slate of the UK Helvetia Philatelic Society, and freely made available to the SRS, has also added to our understanding of this period. The photographs are from the above persons collection. 