

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

Eugene V. Epstein

For those who wish to delve into the eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of Swiss life, there is nothing more rewarding than to learn *Jass*, the Swiss national card game. In most countries, people play cards for want of something better to do. The Swiss, however, play almost as a profession, relegating other occupations to those times when it is impossible to round up a *Jass* foursome.

Jass is reputed to be one of the most relaxing games ever invented. I am more inclined to think that the participants relax from the murderous tension of the game only when it has ended, which it never seems to do.

Some months ago, I considered it high time to begin learning the intricacies of this age-old game. How could I hold up my head in Switzerland without knowing something of this important tradition? What would I do if, late at night, one of my Swiss acquaintances would invite me to join a *Jass*-playing group? I simply had to participate or be socially ostracized for the remainder of my stay in this interesting country.

And so, one evening, I met secretly with two old friends, Walti and Heiri, who were determined to initiate me into the solemn formalities of their favourite indoor sport. I say "secretly" because the Swiss themselves are intuitively aware of how to *Jass* (they are apparently born with this knowledge), and how could I inform the population at large that I had stopped playing cards years earlier — when "casino" was the game in America? Even then I had been singularly untalented for this sort of thing.

Our *Jass*-learning session took place in the back room of the Gasthaus zum Kibitz, famous for its intercantonal *Jass* championships. We sat down and Heiri ordered the "tools", as he put it.

I was frightened. The light was dim and the look on the faces of my adversaries was determined. "What tools do you plan to use?" I croaked. The waitress then arrived with a small rug for the table, a pack of strange-looking cards, two pieces of chalk and a slate. I was informed that these were the tools of the *Jass* trade.

Now the evening began in earnest. Heiri flipped through the cards like a bored trans-Atlantic gambler. He asked me if I knew their names and those of the various suits.

"Of course," I replied, "Ace, king, queen, jack and all the rest. And everyone knows the suits: spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs, naturally." "No, my friend," said Heiri. "No such thing in Switzerland. You should know by this time that *everything* is different here. We have *Schilte*, *Schelle*, *Rose* and *Eichle*. And if your Swiss-German isn't good enough, this means 'shields', 'bells', 'roses' and 'acorns'." This must be, I thought, the origin of the expression, "Large roses from little acorns grow." "So what do I do with the acorns, plant trees with bells on them?" I looked around to see how my humour had affected everyone.

"Listen," Walti said, "stop this funny business. *Jass* is serious, and if you want your residence permit renewed, you'd better learn it while you have the chance. Opportunity doesn't knock *that* often." And I learned and learned and learned. I learned on that evening and on many evenings that followed. I went to *Jass* clubs and *Jass* cellars, studied

treatises on the subject written in the Middle Ages in Middle High German and took courses in memory improvement at the Federal Institute of *Jass* Technology.

My personal advice for beginners is to concentrate on learning the four suits — shields, bells, roses and acorns — then the cards themselves. Aces are high all over the world, but only sometimes in *Jass*. Here the jack, or "farmer", is high, followed by the "nell", or nine. Then come the ace, the king and the queen. Only they don't call her a queen because women, until recently, were not permitted to play the game. As a matter of fact, as women become more and more emancipated in Switzerland, they begin to do things like playing *Jass*. First *Jass*, then — who knows? — perhaps the right to vote.

Jass vocabulary is quite unique. The queen is not really a queen because she not only looks like a he but is also seen smoking a pipe on two of the four suits, and a cigar on a third. She is called *Ober*, which means "over", and the jack, or farmer, is officially called *Under*, which means "under". The ten is under the under, but it's not called a ten because this would be too simple, and *Jass* is a complex game. The ten is a "banner" because that's what it looks like on the old cards. *Bock* means "high card" with various other connotations, while *Stich* (literally, "sting") means "trick".

When the game gets going, it resembles pinochle, which was probably derived from it. One suit is usually trump, except if somebody decides to play *Obenabe* or *Untenuffe*. This means top to bottom, starting with aces (and now they are high) or bottom to top, when sixes are high and aces low. Thus aces can be high, low or more or less in the middle. This would not in itself be so difficult, except it happens to everything in this incredible game. First high, then low, then worth nothing. Then worth everything. If you have a particular card at the beginning of a game, your partner will praise you for your cleverness. Later in the evening you receive the same card and hold it for the psychologically perfect moment. You slam it on the table with a crack of your wrist. Your partner looks at you and calls you a stupid *Löffel*, which means "spoon". Your opponents call you a *Jockelikopf*, which means "farm labourer". This is what happened to me at the Gasthaus zum Kibitz.

"Don't you remember," said Heiri, my partner and one-time best friend, "that a *Stöck* (marriage) and a *Drüblatt* (three-leaf clover) are worth twenty points? And you can certainly recall my telling you that in *Obenabe* or *Untenuffe* the score is trebled and the eights count eight points each because the jack is no longer high but only worth two!"

"But I didn't realize we were playing *Obenabe* — I thought we were playing acorn trumps, or was it roses high with banners flying?" "Acorn, schmaycorn," said Heiri, "you are no *Jass* player, that's what you aren't!"

"I'll try to improve, I swear it! Give me one last chance!" I begged. "No. Finished, concluded, *aus*," everyone shouted at me. "From this day on," said Walti, "you may kibitz, but your playing days are over. Now turn in your cards and your membership button and drink your beer."

But I was pleased with myself anyway. Think of all I had learned — how I had enriched my life with new and vital experience.

"*Jockelikopf*," I said to myself, "you're one lousy card player!"

(By courtesy of "Switzerland"
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