

Letters from Switzerland

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LETTERS FROM SWITZERLAND

By Gottfried Keller

A REMINISCENCE

It was in March 1936 that Hitler invaded the Rhineland, as a consequence of which London's St. James's Palace became a beehive of diplomatic activity. The Council of the then existing League of Nations met there under Anthony Eden's chairmanship, in the presence of French Prime Minister Flandin and the German roving Ambassador at large Ribbentrop — who was to end on the gallows of Nuremberg as a convicted war criminal ten years later.

Famous editors and journalists from all over the world flocked to London to cover this meeting, amongst them such celebrities as Dorothy Thomson and Geneviève Tabouis. Of the latter it was whispered that she was so friendly with Mussolini in Rome that she was always able to reach him on the telephone. The meeting in the St. James's Palace was held in an atmosphere of great nervousness and uncertainty as to whether Britain and France would resist Hitler militarily or not. As is only too well known they did not — but it has always been contended that if they had, Hitler would have had to draw back and the whole course of history would have been different thereafter.

The League of Nations' meeting in London was one of the first really important conferences I attended and covered in my capacity of representative of the Swiss News Agency. The League's Secretariat always gave priority and the best seats to the representatives of national news agencies and it was due to this principle that I had a seat in the relatively small innermost sanctum in which the deliberations took place, whereas dozens and dozens of newspaper representatives had to be content to sit in an outer room, which was connected to the inner one by badly functioning loudspeakers.

Amongst the newspaper editors sitting out there was the venerable Editor-in-Chief of the *Basler Nachrichten*, National Councillor Albert Oeri, who was already getting on in years and who had become a little hard of hearing. (Together with the two Editors Bretscher of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and Schurch of *Der Bund*. Oeri was later to be singled out by Hitler's Propaganda mouthpiece Goebbels as candidate for transportation to Siberia.)

Dr. Oeri had great difficulty in understanding what was happening in the inner room. He therefore asked me whether I would be prepared to come out from time to time and to show him my notes. This I naturally did — and this was the beginning of a connection which was

to lead, not very much later, to my becoming the *Basler Nachrichten's* London Correspondent. The deliberations in the St. James's Palace led to nothing and after some ten days or so the whole feverish activity died down and the visiting statesmen and journalists departed.

A few weeks later the then London correspondent of the *Basler Nachrichten*, a jovial, cigar smoking Estonian nobleman, was expelled from Britain and one day a telegram, signed Oeri, reached me asking whether I would like to work for the *Basler Nachrichten* and what would be my terms.

Thus this paper was to become the butter on the bread which the Swiss News Agency provided for me. During the 33 years I was to act for this paper, I have always been treated well and generously and have been proud to work for a publication of such a fine name and liberal tradition.

During World War II my messages from London have often been misquoted by the German radio and more than once have I been dubbed "that well-known lickspittle of Churchills" — coming from where it did this was a qualification I proudly wore. Having worked for the *Basler Nachrichten* for so long and having been so intimately connected with it during so many years, I naturally look on its forthcoming disappearance — after 31st January, 1977 — as on a real tragedy. Democracy as such and the Swiss newspaper scenery become the poorer by its death.

The *Basler Nachrichten* — the newspaper in Basle whose London Correspondent I have been during more than 30 years — is disappearing as a separate entity. And so is the other important Basle daily paper, the *Nationalzeitung*, because the two are being merged into one new *Basler Zeitung*. But there can hardly be any doubt that the *Nachrichten* is more or less being swallowed up by the *Nationalzeitung*, since the latter is financially the stronger with a circulation of 95,000 as compared with the *Nachrichten's* 36,000.

Some five years ago the *Nachrichten* suddenly dropped its then Editor-in-Chief Peter Dürrenmatt. The appointment of his successor, after a short interval, during which a three-man group headed the editorial team, then led to quite an internal upheaval and to quarrels, as a result of which several editors left the paper altogether. The style of the paper was then changed considerably in the hope of making it attractive for the young generation and in

no time the number of editors and editorial collaborators grew from about 12 to the overblown size of about 30.

It is no secret that both papers have suffered a considerable loss in advertising as a consequence of the economic recession. The need for new typographical investments on both sides then led to talks between the two boards, which were conducted in great secrecy. Their final outcome, the fusion of the two newspapers, has caused quite a sensation in the world of the mass media. Although the new *Basler Zeitung*, which is to appear as from 1st February, 1977 may be an interesting and lively new newspaper, there can be no doubt whatever that the disappearance of the *Basler Nachrichten* is bound to lead to an impoverishment of the press scenery as such.

The *Basler Nachrichten's* 30 editors and more than 200 members of technical and commercial staff are, of course, all hoping that there will be jobs for them in the new venture. According to a communiqué issued by the two boards of administration a new generous social plan has been worked out which, it is said, sees to it that no collaborator will suffer any kind of need. All in all, however, it is difficult to imagine the Swiss media scenery without the *Basler Nachrichten*. Very difficult. The *Basler Nachrichten* has existed during 132 years and its disappearance means the end of a very great tradition.

WHO WINS?

The German Industrialist — Baron Heinrich Thyssen-Bornemisza-de Kaszon, a resident of Lugano-Castagnola during almost 40 years and owner of one of the richest art collections in Europe, has decided to leave Switzerland for good and to set up residence in Monte Carlo. The reason: the authorities of the Canton Ticino have decided to raise the income tax for the rich and to revise the tax agreements most of the 7,000 German citizens who live in the Ticino have been able to conclude with the Ticinese Revenue. If all or most of these Germans were now to leave, this could turn out to be a disaster: the golden goose could indeed stop laying golden eggs. Amongst the German Colony in and around Lugano-Morcote-Locarno-Ascona are some very well-known names. There is Professor Grzimek in Aldesagio, champagne manufacturer Otto Henkell in Montagnola, there are the writers Günther Grass, Hans Habe, Gerd Bucerius, the composer Franz Grothe, the violinist Helmut Zacharias, the actors Gert Froebe, Walter Giller, Nadja Tiller —

to name but very few of the well-known citizens of the Federal Republic who have found the revenue-climate in the Ticino much friendlier than the one in their own homeland. The same applies, of course, to the two multi-millionaire playboys Gunter and Wilhelm Sachs who have recently become citizens of the tiny Grisonais village of Surcuolm. Income-tax agreements have for long been an anomaly practised in certain cantons. They offer favourable treatment to certain rich foreigners — never to ordinary Swiss citizens — on condition that such selected owners of wealth will come and reside within their boundaries. It goes without saying that these tax agreements — which are now to be revised in the case of the Ticino — have always been a source of envy for the ordinary Swiss citizens. Another region which — to this day — allows special tax arrangements for rich foreigners is the Lake Geneva Riviera. Residing there, permanently or in some cases temporarily, are, for example: Saudi Arabia's Deputy Prime Minister Prince Fahd, the Emir of Qatar, Egmond de Rothschild, Ex-Queen Marie of Italy, Princess Ashraf (sister of Iran's Shah), Prince Sadruddin Khan, Richard Burton, Sophia Loren, Charles Boyer, Petula Clark, Jacky Stewart and Emerson Fittipaldi, Charlie Chaplin, Arthur Rubinstein, Oskar Kokoschka, Ex-King Michael of Rumania, as well as President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire and Felix Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast. It goes without saying that most of these potentates, artists and other well heeled persons possess magnificent villas with beautiful gardens, swimming pools and every other amenity to make life pleasant.

A mass exodus from the sunny Ticino or from the Romandie could indeed leave the respective exchequers high and dry. What the authorities would gain on the swings, they would lose on the roundabouts.

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During 1976 the following changes occurred among the staff of the Swiss Embassy in London.

Dr. Albert WEITNAUER returned to Berne to become Secretary-General of the Federal Political Department. The new Ambassador in London is Dr. Ernesto THALMANN, who arrived here on 2nd February.

Dr. Benedikt von TSCHARNER, Counsellor, who was in charge of the Economic and Labour Section, left on 26th January for Berne, where he was promoted Minister at the Division of Commerce of the Department of Public Economy; he was replaced in London by Mr. Jean-Pierre ZEHNDER, Counsellor.

Mr. René SEREX, Counsellor, joined Switzerland's Permanent Representative at the Council of Europe in Strasbourg at the beginning of September, and his place here was taken by Mr. Jacques RIAL, Counsellor, for-

merly Secretary-General of the Swiss National Commission for UNESCO in Berne.

Mr. Johann Friedrich LÜTHI, Counsellor (Commodities and Agriculture), retired, leaving London for Switzerland on 24th April. His successor is Mr. Hans BUCHMANN, Counsellor, who took up his appointment on 31st March.

Mr. Alfred BÄHLER, Vice-Consul, left London on 1st July for his new post at the Swiss Embassy in Moscow.

Mr. Robert REICH, a diplomatic trainee, arrived in this country on 30th March, having been assigned to the Embassy until September, when he started an intensive one-year course in Russian at a specialised school. He has been succeeded at the Embassy by another young diplomatic trainee, Mr. Andreas FRIEDRICH, who arrived on 25th October.



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