

Berne and its lions

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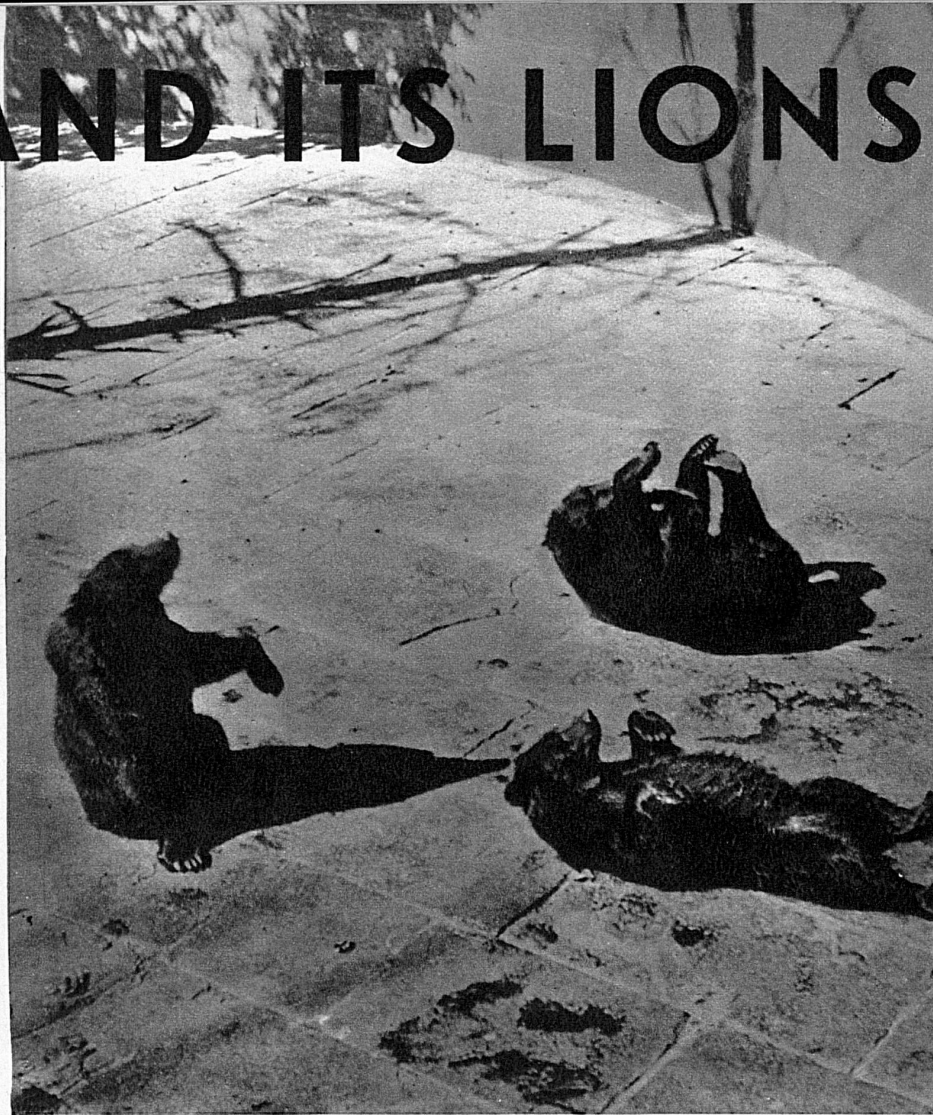
BERNE AND ITS LIONS

Most English tourists seem to think that the only «lions» Berne can boast of are its Bears! In the opinion of a British resident the main lions, the chief attractions of Berne are its picturesqueness and its wonderful view of the Oberland. Its situation on a somewhat precipitous hill surrounded on three sides by the swift-flowing River Aare was chosen by Berchtold V. von Zähringen in order to obtain a fortified centre for the protection of his country from the inroads of the Burgundians in the early thirteenth century. Being a sportsman, the worthy Count determined on having a final hunt in the splendid oakwood, which then covered the little promontory, before the trees were felled, and moreover he vowed to name the town after the first quarry that fell to his spear. It proved to be a good old bear. Hence this name was given to the town, which rapidly grew in importance. A bear is blazoned on the town's escutcheons, carved on hatstands and inkstands, and impressed on its gingerbread (made by the way of honey) to this day.

Right: Who said Carrots?

Below: Berne, general view

Phot. Wehrli-Verlag, Laur



On the land-side of his town Berchtold had a wall built with towered gateways. Two of these remain still; the more famous is called the Zeitglockenturm, for on it is the great clock with mechanical devices. Every hour folk are seen watching the cock that flaps its wings and the procession of little bears round the feet of Father Time. The streets are arcaded, and down the centre flows a little stream (now, like the Fleet in London, it runs underground), which feeds the line of quaintly carved and richly coloured fountains which once formed the town's water supply and add so much to its mediaeval aspect today. One of them, the 'Child Eater', is said to depict the loss of life to children falling into the river; round his feet too dance the bears.

It is due to the contour of the river that the distant view of the mountains may be had from all parts of the town; but if the weather is favorable it is worth while taking the funicular up a thousand feet to the top of the Gurten. From thence the view extends on all sides. Beneath you rests the town, now spreading on both sides the river, and encircled with forests and cultivated hills. To the North is the long line of the Jura which parts Switzerland from France, and to the South is the view we have come to see! Forty miles off they are, those giants of the Oberland, the Jungfrau, the Blumlis Alp, the Wetterhorn and a host of

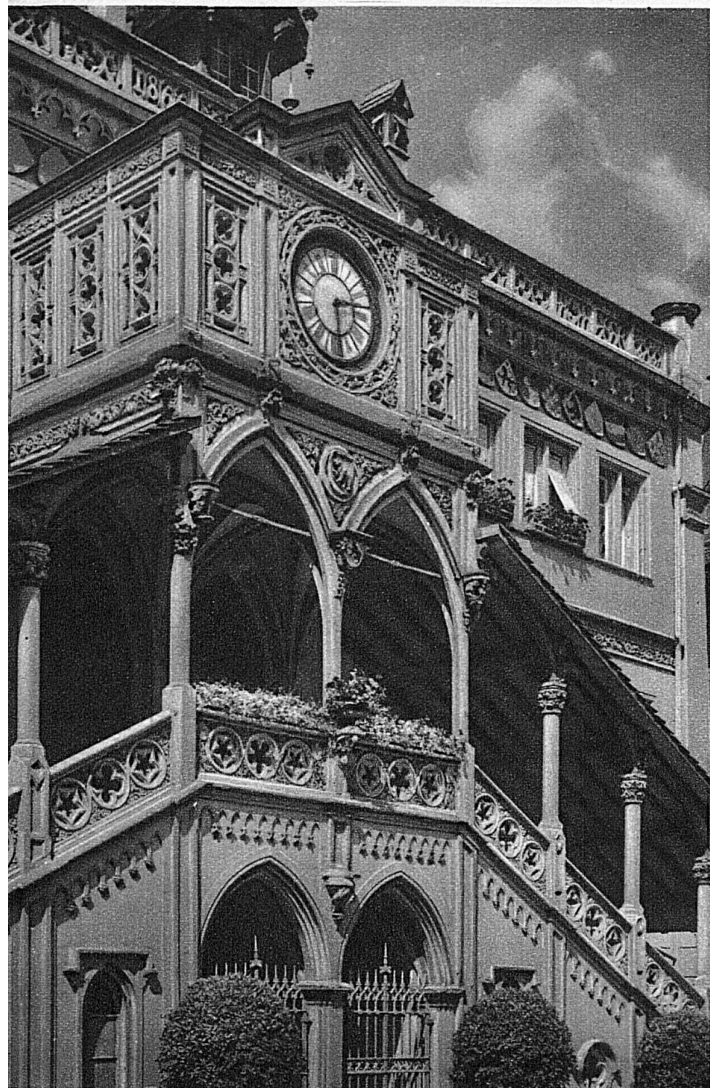


A typical old corner of Berne

other resplendent heights. See them on an autumn evening when the setting sun irradiates their snowy peaks with shades of mauve and pink and gold. See them in the winter when the fresh snow flashes like silver in the sunshine. Or best of all, see them through a semi-transparent haze, which gives them a mystic appearance. As they hang high above the earth wreathed in fleecy clouds, one seems to be peering into the very portals of Paradise.

Honesty compels the admission that the mountains are not always to be seen. Of course this fact is sometimes very provoking. But few good things are to be had for the asking! And coyness may lend an added attraction to beauty itself. For instance, how really beautiful is the Minster Tower when, illuminated by a score of searchlights on the night of some civil or religious holiday, the carved and fretted stonework gleams against the dark sky like a triumph of architecture wrought in incandescent ivory. But one does not want it illuminated every night. The impressiveness would be gone.

The Cathedral itself is late Gothic, dating from 1418. Typically mediaeval is the presentation of The Last Judgment over the West portal, and the ten Virgins are delightful. But do not go inside, unless the great organ is playing, for Zwingli's Reform has left it painfully cold and bare. There are some fine Bells in the tower. The angelus still rings each day, but four centuries have passed since its call to prayer expected any answer. The 'Burghers' Bell' cast in 1403 contains, they say,



Left: The old Guildhall



The Clock Tower

relics of St. Theodule mixed in with the metal, to protect the belfry from lightning! The charm has proved a great success, but unfortunately the supply of ingredients was small and soon exhausted! No remains remain of this fire-proof saint.

The bells chime the curfew very sweetly every evening. A watchman too, lives up in the tower to ring the Tocsin bell that warns the townsmen of a fire.

To pay our tribute to the Bears of Berne, we must go down to the Lower Bridge, once the main approach to the town from the South, as the fine avenue of trees a mile long testifies. Just across this bridge is the famous Bear Pit, a circular structure divided in two by a high wall. Here admiring or curious spectators lean over the parapet at every hour of the day watching the antics of these hairy and clumsy quadrupeds as they sprawl on their backs lazily catching carrots, or rear themselves on their hindlegs with extended jaws against the wall to entrap a draught of milk! Very uneventful is the life they lead, and inconceivably monotonous. Fresh blood has been introduced since the War, and each Easter another brood of little Bruins make their bow to the circle of enchanted admirers. Indeed a kindergarten has now been erected where these youngsters smack each other on the head like little humans, or climb a forlorn and leafless tree in lieu of a pillow fight. The stout heart of the stoutlimbed Bernese is unmoved by the presence of Princes or Presidents, but it overflows with emotion when one of these Bears appears in a Procession.

Right: West Door of Cathedral

Jubilant cheers herald his approach as he waddles nonchalantly along.

Many enquiries are made as to the origin of the establishment of the Bears at Berne. It dates as far back as the early sixteenth century. It appears that when Louis de la Trémouille was marching into Italy to recover the Duchy of Milan, which Ludovico il Moro had taken from Louis XII of France, he passed through Lucerne; and the inhabitants of that town made him a present of a pair of fine Bears. The General was badly beaten at Novara, and on his retreat the Bernese, who had assisted in gaining the victory, carried off the aforesaid bears as a trophy to Berne. They were kept in a hut in the Bärenplatz where may now be seen a statue of drinking bears. Unfortunately, when the French Revolutionaries under Marshal Brune conquered Switzerland, they carried off the original stock of bears to the Jardin des Plantes at Paris. The present Bears are descended from a pair imported from Hungary after the fall of the first French Empire. Some five years ago another bear was sent from Hungary in acknowledgment of the generous care bestowed on many Hungarian children by the Swiss during the War. So that it remains a fact that Bears are the most popular though certainly not the only lions of which Berne, Switzerland's attractive capital can boast.

A. B. Winter.

Phot. Dr. Wolff

