

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

My friend Walti called me one evening, and instead of saying "good evening" he said "good wood". I knew that he had been working hard and that the strain was beginning to take its toll. Poor Walti, I thought. But I tried to humor him anyway.

"Good wood to you too," I said. "How are all the chips off the old block?"

"If you mean my children, they're fine. But apparently you don't understand the meaning of 'good wood' or you certainly would know what I'm getting at! The expression *gut Holz*—in German—is what one bowler says to another. It's the equivalent of wishing a skier friend a broken neck and leg when he goes on holiday."

"Oh," I said, "I thought 'good wood' might be a reference to the quality of our furniture, which, as you know, is made of the finest aged poplar. And I like our furniture—I really do—even *with* the oranges in it."

"Stop digressing," Walti replied. "I'm calling for a reason. Our bowling club is short one member since our ace broke his leg skiing last week. Would you like to bowl with us tonight?"

I regretted everything I had thought about Walti's having overworked. I replied that I would be delighted to bowl with the club, even though I had never bowled in Switzerland. "Thanks a lot, fellow bowler," I said. "See you in ten minutes... and good wood!" Bowling alleys in Switzerland are almost always located in a local inn or restaurant—usually in the cellar. There is a reason for this, one having to do with the fact that the alleys are then relatively close to where the wine and beer are stored.

When I met Walti and the other eight members of his bowling club, I was promptly introduced to the traditions and lore of the sport. We all spent ten minutes shaking hands and wishing each other good wood. This made forty-five handshakes, although my arithmetic could be wrong. In any case, the evening now began in earnest. Walti picked up a telephone which was on the table and mumbled something into the receiver. I was sure these were some sort of cryptic orders to the pinboy—if this was indeed what they called the person who sets up the bowling pins.

"What did you say on the telephone?" I asked him when he hung up. "What I said? Nothing special. I just ordered three bottles of wine and six beers, that's all."

"Excuse me for asking," I asked, "but when do we start bowling? I'm most eager to learn what I can." "Oh yes, of course," said Walti. "As soon as the drinks arrive and after the traditional bowling toasts."

"The bowling toasts... what's that mean?"

Walti did not have a chance to reply, for just then the waitress entered. When the wine and beer had been served, Walti stood up. He proceeded to say a few words relating to how nice it was that we could all be together on such a lovely evening in such a pleasant place under such fine conditions. He welcomed me, as a representative of a foreign country—a person, he said, whose interest in Switzerland was deep and genuine, as would be proved by the evening still ahead of us.

"Gut Holz!" Walti said as he held up his glass in a gesture of good fellowship. "Gut Holz!" the general membership repeated. "Who has a one-franc piece?" asked one of my new friends. I produced the coin. It was handed from one member to the other along the long bench in front the bowling alley proper. Then Walti dropped it into a slot in the bowling alley control center, and the pins appeared automatically at the end of the alley.

A young woman was elected to begin the session. She stood up, chose a ball and began to swing it back and forth. I was amazed at her strength, for these balls are not especially light. She let go of the ball, and a moment later the pins seemed to explode.

"Bravo!" I screamed. "A strike, a complete and utter strike—the best possible score!"

"Control yourself," said Walti. "That was good, to be sure, but it was only a *Säuli* or 'piglet'." I had noticed the sign light up with a pig on it, but I had not realized what it meant. "The best in Swiss bowling," continued Walti, "is a *Kranz* or 'wreath', where the middle pin is left standing. This is considered far more difficult and is therefore accorded a higher score than a piglet. Now it's your turn," said Walti. I looked behind me. "Your turn," he said again. If a wreath was the best possible score, I must shoot for one, I thought. I chose a big brown ball with two holes in it—one for the thumb, one for assorted other fingers. I took a professional-looking stance at the head of the alley and glared mercilessly at the pins at the other end. I swung the ball back... once, twice, three times... and released it. I am not sure whether it was a good shot or not. It did describe a beautifully full and even arc before it bounced out of our alley and into the neighboring one. Once there, it hit the side of the alley and bounded back to the middle, knocking over all the pins.

"Triple darn!" I mumbled. "And I wanted to leave one pin standing!" There were faint shouts coming from the alley where I had made my *Säuli*. I heard everybody saying that word over and over again, and I felt proud. Walti told me that they were swearing at me, but how could I believe him?

"Now," said Walti, "sit down and have a glass of wine, and I'll try to explain something about the game. There's an old expression—you can see it over there on the wall. In German it says:

*Kegle sanft und nicht als Flegel
Sonst verdirbst du Bahn und Kegel.*

This means that you must not throw the ball—just aim and gently roll it towards the pins. If you set the ball down in front of the line, everyone has the right to call you a *Sandhase*, which means 'sand bunny'."

I had no idea where such an expression could have originated, since Easter was long past. But I was enjoying this lesson in bowling—and it was so relaxing, especially with the fine Swiss wine I was drinking.

"When do I shoot again?" I asked. "In a minute," Walti replied. "As soon as everyone has bowled once."

"In that case, I'll step outside for some fresh air. I'll be right back." It was a clear Swiss night. The lights on the mountains twinkled from across the lake, and the moon—now almost full—was reflected in the water. It was so peaceful. Just the rumble of bowling balls in the distance and the crack of pins as they reached their target. How magnificent, I thought. All this natural beauty—the moon, the lake, the mountains and the traditional sport of bowling. What a combination!

I re-entered the alley and sat down. Walti said that I had missed my turn and would have to wait for the next round. This time I decided to stay and watch the progress of the game. I soon noticed that Walti's club seemed to be doing quite well. The women were, for the most part, even better than the men—at least I thought so. I mentioned this to Walti and he said that I was most observant. I was flattered.

It was my turn now. This time I was determined to bowl carefully, to show everyone that I wasn't so bad after all. Ready, aim... fire! Now the ball seemed radar-controlled. It left my hand delicately and deftly. It appeared to gather momentum as it headed for the center pin... and through the middle! I was too excited to look! Then I opened my eyes and observed that my shot had indeed gone

through the middle—and knocked over exactly three pins. How bitter my shame!

“Congratulations!” my bowling friends said in chorus. “Ninety points for the *Gasse*.” Walti came up to me and placed his arm around my shoulder. “That was a beautiful *Gasse* or ‘alley’. Right down the middle!”

I was confused. Now how was that again? When all the pins are knocked over, this is good—but not quite as good as when one is left standing. Next on the list was my *Gasse*, where only three pins

were knocked over. I hesitated to ask what the absolute best was for fear that someone would tell me to leave all the pins standing for a total of ten thousand points.

But why fight tradition? This had been a most enjoyable evening of wine and bowling, and I shall probably go down in local history as the first foreign visitor to achieve so remarkable a score—and on two different alleys.

“Good night,” I said to everyone as the evening drew to a close.

“Good *wood*,” said Walti. “Now you’re one of us!”



Marc Chagall, 1910: Die Ernte. – Das Kunsthau Zürich zeigt bis 30. Juli eine grosse Retrospektive des Werkes von Marc Chagall. Der bedeutende Maler feiert am 7. Juli seinen 80. Geburtstag. Selbst Bilder aus russischem Staatsbesitz sind in dieser Ausstellung und damit erstmals in Westeuropa zu sehen.

Marc Chagall: La récolte (1910). – Jusqu'au 30 juillet, le Kunsthau de Zürich présente une grande rétrospective des œuvres de Marc Chagall, qui fête son 80^e anniversaire le 7 juillet. Pour la première fois, l'URSS a prêté des œuvres du peintre.

Marc Chagall, 1910: Il raccolto. Al Kunsthau di Zurigo è aperta, sino al 30 luglio, una grande mostra retrospettiva dell'opera di Marc Chagall. Saranno esposte, per la prima volta in Europa occidentale, anche tele del maestro che sono ora proprietà dello Stato russo. L'insigne pittore festeggerà il 7 luglio l'ottantesimo genetliaco.

Marc Chagall, 1910: The Harvest.—The Kunsthau in Zurich is presenting until July 30 a great retrospective show of the works of Marc Chagall. This leading painter will celebrate his 80th birthday on July 7. Even pictures from State collections in the Soviet Union are to be seen in this exhibition, for the first time in Western Europe.

Schulreise in die Berner Alpen: im Mittelpunkt des Bildes steht die dunkle Pyramide des Tschuggen hoch über Wengen, links darüber der Mönch, rechts die Jungfrau. Photo Giegel SVZ

Voyage d'école dans l'Oberland bernois. Au centre de notre photo: la sombre pyramide du Tschuggen, qui domine Wengen; à gauche au-dessus: le Mönch, à droite: la Jungfrau.

Gita scolastica nelle Alpi bernesi: al centro dell'immagine, la piramide scura dello Tschuggen alta sopra Wengen; a sinistra, il Mönch; a destra, la Jungfrau. ▶

School excursion in the Bernese Alps: In the centre of the picture is the dark pyramidal shape of the Tschuggen high above Wengen, upper left, the Mönch, right, the Jungfrau.