

Reminiscences

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Frontier Occupation 1914-1918.

A book under the above title has recently appeared at the "Verlag" of Eugen Rentsch, Erlenbach-Zürich (Price, Fr. 9.50), and in view that next month will see the 20th anniversary of the outbreak of the World War, it might be a befitting opportunity to review same.

The authors are soldiers of all ranks, who served at the frontier during the occupation; the various tales, anecdotes and happenings during those four long years have been collected by Lieutenant-Colonel Hans Trüb, Corporal Fritz Utz and Private Eugen Wyler. The book is artistically bound and contains over 111 illustrations.

This excellent book is dedicated to the Swiss people and to the comrades in arms, and it contains an introduction by Federal Councillor Minger, head of the Federal Military Department. The profit from the sale is earmarked for the "Soldatenfürsorge," and the first edition of 10,000 copies is almost exhausted.

This book, so full of reminiscences of hard and yet happy times, has evoked in me a host of remembrances, both sad and gay, and during its reading I have once again lived through those anxious days of 1914-15, when I left this country in order to join my regiment. Back to my memory came those dreary winter days in the Jura Mountains, and once again I seemed to hear the roar of the guns in the far distance. I remembered that Xmas of 1914 in the trenches near Biafond. No sounds of bells greeted those who watched along the frontiers, so that the dear ones at home could sleep in peace and security. This splendid book should be included in the library of every Swiss soldier who took part in the frontier occupation; it will be a book well worth while treasuring.

The tales told by officers, non-commissioned officers and privates, in their simplicity, of how they lived, how they talked, ate and drank; how they hurried at the outbreak of war to the colours, will bring back unforgettable memories. Old comrades will be remembered once again. Half-forgotten incidents will be revived and fill one with joy that one had the privilege of being an actor in the greatest drama which the world ever witnessed. Listen to some of the tales:—

REMINISCENCES.

How I Got into the Sergeant's Good Books.

By ST.

For some of the bitterest and most unhappy hours of my pilgrimage through this valley of sorrow, I have to blame my old sergeant Rösti. (*This, of course, is not his real name.*) These distressing moments coincided with my *début* as a soldier — well do I remember the day, when I wended my way to the barracks in order to say valet to my civilian life for a few weeks, or as it then turned out, a few months. Never before had I felt more patriotic; I was determined to become a good and faithful soldier of my beloved country, and if my life would have been demanded for the protection of its independence, I would have gladly given it there and then. Visions of Sempach and Moorgarten flicked through my head, dying for one's country is so sweet — I was told — but, of course, being young, I preferred to live for it. These, and many others, were the feelings when I entered the portals which closed behind me with a loud crash.

I was then introduced to Sergeant Rösti, or to be correct, he introduced himself to me. I held out my hand, and told him how very pleased I was to make his acquaintance, but my outstretched hand was purposely ignored; I was rather a bit disappointed, but I argued to myself that some people have manners and others haven't.

It would lead too far to relate here how I discarded garment after garment of my civilian outfit, but by about five o'clock that afternoon I looked as near a soldier as could be expected. I have forgotten now, whether my figure was already then an awkward one, but somehow I did not like the look of myself, neither did the sergeant; he, *f.i.*, gave me such a blow on the top of my *képi*, that I got nearly stunned, and I attribute my slight flat-footedness to this *adjusting* attention; he also pulled the collar of my tunic in such a violent fashion, that I nearly choked, using at the same time rather strong language, which I tried to overlook, as I was told beforehand that sergeants sometimes do swear. By this time my enthusiasm for a soldier's life had received a bit of a damper; but worse was to come that evening. I somehow had a feeling that my sergeant did not like me. I do not know whether it was my face or my manner of speech which upset him; I tried to be so very polite.

Not having been taught yet how to salute, we were not allowed to go outside the barracks

"Das Bataillon stand in Zillis zur Rückkehr nach Glarus bereit. Da zwei Tage später dort ein Defilee vor dem General stattfinden sollte, besichtigten die Hauptleute ihre Mannen peinlich genau. Ein spezielles Augenmerk wurde dem Haar und Bartwuchs geschenkt, da wir in den Bündner Bergen uns nicht viel darum gekümmert hatten und ziemlich verwildert aussahen. Als nun Hauptmann F. in seiner launigen Art zu einem Sennen sagte: "Füsiliere Dürst, Euer Kopf gleicht dem reinsten Urwalde. Unbedingt vor dem Defilee haarschneiden und rasieren." meinte der trocken: "Zu Befehl, Herr Hauptmä, Haarschnitte und rasieren. Das mues ich aber scho säge, d'r Chopf han i dä bi d'r Muetter g'fasset und nid bim Bund, mit dem mach ich de sust, was ich will."

Im Jahre 1916 war in Altdorf eine Rekrutenschule für nachgemusterte Gebirgler und Säumeruntergebracht. Der Kommandant dieser Kompanie, ein grossgewachsener stämmiger "Zürbieter" sagte in seinen tägl. Theoriestunden, dass nur begründete und glaubhafte Urlaubsgesuche bewilligt würden. Noch am selben Abend gingen recht zahlreiche Urlaubsgesuche ein, so dass der Hauptmann ordentlich zu lesen und zu entziffern hatte. In einem dieser "begründeten Gesuche" war folgendes zu lesen: "Ich hätte gerne Urlaub, Begründung: Ich habe drei Weibervölker zu Hause und ein Kalb und zwei davon sind krank."

Fahrer Binggeli sitzt traurig vor dem Stall und stützt den Kopf in beide Hände. Die Postordonanz geht vorüber und fragt teilnehmend: "Was isch, Binggeli, hesch Liebesgram?" — "Nei, Ränzweh."

And so I could go on and on. What a treasure of anecdotes this book contains. I feel sure many of my readers will remember similar tales, I should be glad if they would send them to me for publication. In order to start the ball rolling, we insert some of the reminiscences which appeared in the "Swiss Observer" two years ago.

THE EDITOR.

that night, and our next job was to make our beds. Now I had never made a bed in my life before; some general instructions were given, and my comrades in arms set to work. I looked left and right trying to copy them, but somehow my bed showed various *outstanding* features, which were not noticeable with the others. Suddenly the sergeant's argus eye detected my intended resting place; he called the inmates of the whole room together to have a good look at my bed; was the tide turning after all, was I to be held up as an example of neatness and tidiness? My heart beat quicker; a word of praise then would have gone a long way to restore my waning enthusiasm.

It was not to be; with a sarcastic smile on his face, the sergeant invited me to demonstrate to the *audience* how I expected to enter my bed, and I must now confess, to my everlasting shame, that try as hard as I could, I was unable to find a convenient opening. Oh, how I hated that night, the malicious smiles of my comrades, who courted favour by making fun of one of their comrades in distress.

I tried to put on a brave face. After all, I thought, greater people than I have been laughed at, and I set to work again and managed to make a fairly good job of it; but as it happened I had not yet emptied the "cup of sorrows" to the bitter end. On laying an aching heart to rest that night, I unfortunately covered it with a pair of pyjamas, which in those days, was quite a novelty, and I will spare my readers an account of the remarks which were hurled at my bewildered head; but early next morning the following letter was despatched:—

Dearest Mother,

For Heaven's sake send me a nightshirt.

Your disillusioned Son.

The following days somehow were not much more successful; gone were those visions of Sempach, Moorgarten. Was this, I reasoned through a sleepless night, what was called the romance of a soldier's life? Did not all the cheerful soldiers' songs tell miserable lies? Oh, how utterly unhappy I felt.

But it was so ordained that even the darkest hour has its glimmer of hope, and it so happened that one day Sergeant Rösti had to make a report to his C.O. Now, I have not the slightest hesitation in admitting that he was an efficient soldier. He could swear and drink like a trooper; he was a bully of the first order; but he could not spell. I watched him trying to compose this report, which seemed to have unnerved his martial countenance. Here at last was a chance for me. "Can I help you, Sergeant?" I asked timidly.

AUX SOCIETES SUISSES A L'ETRANGER.

Zurich, Juin, 1934.

Monsieur le Président et Messieurs,

En vertu d'une belle tradition, les Suisses à l'étranger prennent une part active à la collecte du premier août. Il en a été ainsi l'année dernière, pendant laquelle 125 organisations de nos compatriotes à l'étranger ont collaboré à notre œuvre. Nous avons reçu de leur part 8,810 francs, provenant de la vente des insignes et 1,841 fr. 48 en dons volontaires. Au nom de notre Comité, nous leur exprimons nos plus vifs remerciements; la reconnaissance des ligues pour la protection de sites et de la nature, qui sont les bénéficiaires de la collecte, ne leur fera pas défaut non plus. Cette collaboration des Suisses à l'étranger est extrêmement réjouissante et pour nous le meilleur des encouragements. En s'associant à notre œuvre patriotique et d'utilité publique du premier août, ils prouvent leur fidélité et leur attachement à la mère patrie et à ses institutions.

"L'instruction des jeunes Suissesses en économie domestique" est l'objet de la prochaine collecte. On s'efforcera aussi de préparer les jeunes filles sans travail aux travaux de ménage. Vous approuverez certainement ces résolutions. De la prospérité de la famille dépend celle de l'Etat; avoir de bonnes ménagères est pour la communauté une question vitale. En nous efforçant de ramener aux travaux du foyer les jeunes filles sans travail des professions encombrées, nous obéissons à un impérieux devoir du moment.

Nous espérons, comme d'habitude, pouvoir compter sur votre bienveillant appui. Le prix de l'insigne est d'un franc par pièce. Vous voudrez bien nous faire connaître sans trop tarder, afin de les recevoir à temps, combien vous en désirez.

En attendant de vos nouvelles, veuillez agréer, Messieurs, nos remerciements anticipés et l'assurance de notre très haute considération.

Au nom du bureau d'affaires du

Comité suisse de la Fête nationale.

Le Président: VICTOR SCHUSTER.

Le Secrétaire: Dr. J. BRANDENBERGER.

A growl answered me; but I was not to be put off.

There was not the slightest doubt that Sergeant Rösti was in dire distress; he had started his report with a perfectly new pencil, and after he had jotted only a few lines down, he kept on biting bits off it, thus reducing it to an infinitesimal size. Surely, I argued to myself, he can't be that hungry, especially as I have seen him doing full justice to his evening meal barely half an hour before. I could not watch this mental agony any longer. In spite of his having made the first few days of my soldiering career a perfect hell, a feeling of sympathy and pity took hold of me, and mustering all my courage, I asked him again to let me write the report for him. I could see a battle raging within him; on one hand he welcomed my offer; on the other hand, he was afraid to lose some of his authority. He gave me a searching look. Was I going to take advantage? Should he submit to my entreaties? He no doubt turned over in his mind; but there I stood in all my humbleness, two large brown eyes filled with human understanding, with an expression of willingness to relieve him of this arduous task. Even a sergeant has a heart sometimes. With a deep sigh he passed on his papers to me, saying, "Let me see what you can make of it." After a few explanations, I set to work. I put heart and soul into it. Never before in my life have I racked my brain so much in order to make a good job of it.

Line after line, page after page followed each other, and when, on finishing, I passed it on to him, I eagerly watched him reading it. "Not so bad," was his verdict. "I'll copy it." And that night I could perceive the silver lining on the dark clouds which overhung my young soldiering career. The next few days brought me some relief. I saw a slight improvement in the treatment towards me. His authoritative voice sounded to me less harsh, and once or twice he even had a word of praise. I began to think that even a soldier's life has its recompenses.

Then came the great day, which proved to be the turning of the tide. Sergeant Rösti asked me to meet him later in the evening at a certain restaurant in the vicinity of the barracks. This request completely unnerved me for the rest of the day. I was at a loss to understand what the reason of this unexpected meeting could be. Punctual to the minute, I turned up at the appointed place; he was awaiting me. He greeted me rather cordially, saying that he had turned over things in his own mind, and that he had come to the conclusion that I was, after all, quite

LUMINOSITA.

... molto meno forse. Per descrivere tutto il fascino, l'incanto che presenta una città luminosa ci vorrebbe ben altro che povere parole — parole nere, buie, che dicono nulla. Bisognerebbe poter usare qualche cosa di sfavillante... una scia di lucciole, per esempio, che trapuntino, con la loro luminosità irrequieta, la descrizione — o poter usare, almeno, inchiostro fosforescente.

Ci sono spettacoli, punti di vista, che ci prendono tutto l'animo, entrano in noi, ci muovono, fanno soffrire quasi, ma come, dove trovare le parole adatte per poi esporli a terzi? Ci aiutiamo spesso pescando fuori certi aggettivi pomposi, bei toni, assomiglianti a quei palloni d'ogni colore panciuti, che però basta una piccola punzecchiatura per sgonfiare, e allora non rimane altro che un po' di gomma raggrinzita, floscia... parole vanagloriose, ricercate... ma lo spettacolo è ben altro invece: il suo fascino sarà forse tutta una gamma di semplicità e di puerilità.

Nella sera profonda il grillo cantò. Lanciò alto la sua stridula nota. Tacque, attendendo quasi una risposta. Nulla. Senza scomporsi, arditamente continuò solitario. In lontananza squillarono le ore: otto e mezza. Allora, d'improvviso, ubbidendo ad un solo comando, la città tutta scintillò. Lugano s'era tramutata in un cofanetto di gemme preziose. Una collana di diamanti fulgidissimi era posata tutt'intorno al lago; ed era un rincorrersi di luce da Castagnola, a Melide, Bissone, Morcote. Il ponte di Melide soffuso così com'era di luce aranciata, dava un senso di pace, di riposo completo. L'immensa croce federale — luce bianca in campo di luce rossa — posata sopra Caprino, salutava dall'altra sponda la regina del Ceresio. E su su, lungo tutto il Brè, a centinaio le lampadine elettriche. Rigida, verticale quasi, la linea della funicolare del S. Salvatore, sembrava un altissimo razzo di fuoco d'artificio, lanciandosi arditamente ad incontrar le stelle, e fissatosi così nello spazio, il fiocco in alto formato dallo scintillare del ristorante lassù. E scintillava il Generoso. Il Boglia. Tutto il golfo di Lugano. Meraviglioso. Sulle acque, dai riflessi cupi, rotti di bagliori rossastri, verdastri, filavano via rapidi in battelli pure trasformati in cofanetti di gemme... Scherzi di luce davan l'illusione che i quattro boschetti del parco Ciani, rientranti nel lago, fossero altrettante isolette, così, come risalta-

a decent fellow, to which I replied that I never had any doubts about it. This reply was perhaps a bit unfortunate, as it seemed to put a slight doubt into his head whether I was really congenial. Anyhow, after much fidgeting and coughing, which betrayed a certain nervousness, which I had never noticed before, he acquainted me with the fact that he suffered from a complaint which is commonly called "love-sickness." — As an explanatory remark, I ought to mention that Sergeant Rösti was a member of the worthy guild of bakers. — The cause of this not unfrequent disease was apparently the daughter of a well-to-do miller, from whom the sergeant bought his flour. "Oh, you artful devil," I thought to myself. He bargained, no doubt, not only for the sacks of flour, but also for the daughter of his supplier; this man had an eye for business. To cut a long story short, he asked me point blank whether I would be agreeable to compose the letters to his heart's desire, as he was not very handy with his pen, and considering the report which I had written previous for him, he thought I would be the very man for this job. This request put me somehow in a quandary; first of all, I had but little experience in this kind of work; secondly, the person to whom I had to address myself in the most endearing terms was a complete stranger to me. An undertaking of this kind was certainly not as easy as it looked. Was it an honest thing to do? I asked myself; but after Sergeant Rösti assured me with a faltering voice (so different to the one I used to hear) that Rösti was awfully fond of him, and asked him, before taking a tender farewell, behind the garden wall, to write to her, I made up my mind to accept his proposal. To enable me to execute this task in an efficient manner, I had to cross-examine the sergeant rather thoroughly, a task in which I found a certain delight; his stammering answers to some of my searching questions made up for a few of the humiliations I had undergone previously.

I explained to him that, as he did not possess a photograph of Rösti, he must give me an accurate description of her appearance, as I could hardly talk in my letters of heavenly blue eyes, when in reality they were green or black; nor could I write about a dainty little rosy mouth, when this organ was rather an outside, or again about the sweet little ears, in case they were like cabbage leaves. Then the colour of the hair would be of great importance, in case I alluded

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vano, rischiarate da potenti riflettori, nell'oscurità intorno. Due altri riflettori (poca roba... ventisettemila candele ognuno!) si fissavano ora qua ora là, sui monti, formando così chiazze biancastre, interrompendo la monotonia d'una massa oscura.

Capriccio scherzoso di luci e spruzzi d'acqua le fontane. E alta, leggera, saliva l'acqua soffusa di tenui colori, per poi cadere silenziosa, come un fiocco di seta, nella vasca sotto.

Un intreccio di lampadine rosse, bianche il Municipio, la stazione, il Kursaal, gli alberghi,

i negozi. Illuminati a giorno la Cattedrale, le altre Chiese, le ville sparse sulle colline.

Luce, luce ovunque. E così per una quindicina di giorni Lugano brillò, salutando... elettricamente i molti che venivano a goderne la sua bellezza, a subirne il suo fascino.

E l'aria esalava lieve profumo di caprifoglio e di rose...

E le rondini, ritornate a primavera, intesevano i nidi, gorgheggiando le loro canzoni d'amore, nella luminosità del sole...

E. G. L.

to golden locks, when in reality they were straight and ginger.

I also wanted to know approximately the size of Rösti, explaining that I could hardly write about her tender, slight appearance, in case she should weigh over 12 stone; also the size of her boots would be required, as I had visions of bringing in the "fairly feet which had stepped into a lonely soldier's life."

These questions were very embarrassing to Sergeant Rösti, and also to me. He blushed violently on several occasions; but when I, as a final shot, asked him with a piercing look whether he had ever before kissed his Rösti, he simply went purple. He flatly refused to answer, but after I had explained in so many words that this was a most important matter, as sooner or later that would have to appear in the letters, he admitted that he had tried, but somehow had missed the mark. I looked at him in a sort of "how could you, sergeant, way. I also found out that Rösti was fond of dancing, and could play the piano with one finger; also that she was rather sentimental; the latter fact was important. I made my mind up to rub it in thickly.

After having devoured a bottle of Neuchâtel in honour of Rösti and the future happiness of the two lovers, I was told to depart, the sergeant explaining to me that it would not do for us to be seen together. This rather hurt my pride a little. Here was I asked to collaborate in paving the way to eternal bliss, and yet I must not be seen with the one for whom I was willing to expose some of my tenderest and innermost feelings; but with a click of my heels and a brave military salute, I drowned those feelings, and went back to the place which harboured so many disappointments. That night I could not sleep for a long time; visions of Rösti kept me awake. From the description received that night, she answered many of my longings. Was I in love with Rösti, too? I asked myself. What a disaster that would be; and for the first time since I slept with 36 of my comrades in the same *sanctuary*. I did not mind the awful snoring of some of them. It sounded like music; it was like a symphony of love, and the last words which I whispered into a hard pillow were, "Good night, Rösti, dear."

The following evening, instead of going out, I stayed behind, in order to compose the first letter to the unknown one. It was what I considered short and sweet, not too much to the

point, and yet intimating that an aching heart was filled with a great longing. It was so to say, the opening chapter to life's greatest drama. When I showed it that night to Sergeant Rösti, it met with his approval, although he thought that a sign depicting a kiss, or a mark intimating a falling tear might have conveniently been inserted. But I strongly objected to this, as I thought it wiser to play the big guns later on, when the signs of her affection would be more apparent. That letter was copied the same night by the sergeant on pink paper; the envelope bore a stamp rather crookedly put on, which, according to the sergeant's explanation, meant exactly the one thing which I would not mention in the letter.

These were days of anxiety for both of us. What would happen to me, I argued, should this letter rudely end Sergeant Rösti's love aspirations? Would not his wrath fall on my innocent head? and what would my life be then? Curiously enough, I dreamt that night of a soldier's funeral. Was it prophetic? I wondered the next morning on waking up. Then one morning came a blue envelope addressed to Sergeant Rösti. One sharp glance at it revealed to me that the stamp, too, was pasted on at an impossible angle, which evoked in me a sigh of relief. With eager eyes, I watched the recipient opening this little *billet-doux*. After persual he put it in his tunic, with fingers which slightly trembled, and when we were alone a handshake from the sergeant rewarded me for my labours of love. "She liked it," he said, and two days later a second letter left the barracks, a little longer, a little more tender, containing "one chaste kiss" for the first time. I had again to rule out tears, explaining that a sergeant should not weep over a thing like this, anyhow, not in the beginning. If it should be necessary later on, we could always hold the letter under the pump.

Again a reply came back, in which Rösti wrote that she never thought that her admirer could write such loving letters. That evening we drank another bottle of Neuchâtel in a far-away little inn, lest the sergeant should be seen in company with the one who could not make a bed, or the one who wore a pair of pink pyjamas.

In the meantime, the treatment which was meted out to me by the sergeant improved considerably, and dark hints were passed round amongst my comrades that I must have bribed