

First time in Switzerland

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FIRST TIME IN SWITZERLAND.

By D. J. GILTINAN.

(This article is reprinted with due acknowledgment from the "IRISH PRESS," July 18th, 1947.)

"I have always regarded it as presumptuous for anybody to write articles purporting to give a picture of conditions in a foreign country after a stay of a few days or weeks. We ourselves have suffered from that kind of journalism. But there can be no harm in giving one's impressions, so long as it is understood that they are impressions based on a very cursory knowledge of a country, acquired in a fortnight's stay.

The deepest and most abiding impression one obtains from Switzerland whether one has climbed to the Alpine plateaux to which, in early June, the tinkle of a myriad cowbells rises from the valleys below like the silver hammers of a thousand leprechauns; or driven through the winding passes between mountains, wooded on their lower slopes, cloud-wreathed round their heads, or sailed on her lakes, walled in by towering Alps, snow-capped even in summer, is one of scenic beauty on a scale so grand that the capacity for admiration cannot stand up to it. It becomes impossible to estimate either height or distance. The mountains, with their little wooden huts and houses perched at incredible heights become Disney mountains, and the houses Disney houses. One travels dreamily in a fairy-land, a lovely land of Never-Never.

The Swiss towns and cities fit perfectly into the picture. Chur, with its 17th-century buildings, as one sees it from above, speeding down from Chur-Walden in the mountain bus that blows a little fanfare on its horn is a toyland settlement. Zurich by day, with its rivers, the Limmat and the Sihl, flowing into the broad lake where yachts and pleasure boats glide below the pineclad slopes of the Zurichberg; with the Hans Anderson eeriness of its older streets, narrow and cobbled, winding up steep hills between picturesque old houses; Zurich by night, and the floodlit beauty of old churches — the Grossmünster, twin-spired, across the river from the Peterskirche, where Luther preached. Basle and its marvellous vista of the Rhine from the high terrace of the Pfalz. Lucerne, still with its medieval walls and towers. Davos, where from the Schatzalp high above the town one looks across the valley to the nursery slopes and the miniature airfield, where pleasure planes like coloured dragonflies rest in the sun. Every one of them is beautiful with the beauty of period, or the beauty of setting.

One's next impressions are of the speckless cleanliness and order which prevails everywhere, as if the clean air from the mountains has influenced the character of the people; and of the honesty and self-respect of everyone with whom one comes in contact. It is inevitable that, arriving at Basle into a bright, spacious terminus after the long run from Paris during which the war damage suffered by France and the post-

war laissez-faire of her people are all too much in evidence, one's reaction should be extremely favourable.

One is pleased by the commonsense arrangement which enables the traveller to go through both French and Swiss customs on his arrival in Switzerland, so that he is spared the discomfort of a customs examination on the train. But one is still more pleased when, in the station buffet, the standard of which is almost incredibly higher than that of any railway refreshment room in these islands, and waitress smilingly declines a tip, saying that it is included in the charge. And this is not an isolated instance. If in a beer-hall one experimentally gives no gratuity it is quite likely that the waitress will not show the slightest sign of dissatisfaction. While I was there I never saw an outstretched hand.

Again, railway porters have their fixed scale of fees of carrying baggage, scaled according to the number of packages, and according to whether they are to be carried only to the street or to one's hotel. These charges are not particularly low, but at least one knows exactly where one is. There is no such thing as "I'll leave it to yourself, sir."

On my first morning in Basle I walked through well-kept streets in which even the Bahnhof was an architectural asset to the city. I bought some cherries in a fruit shop. I ate one and dropped the cherry stone in the street. At once I felt a sense of guilt. All the other stones went back into the bag. Strange to say there are no receptacles in the streets of any of these cities for the disposal of litter. Yet there is no litter in the streets. A mystery.

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There is, I believe, some jealousy between Zurich and Basle; some of it, no doubt, allied to the quiet disapproval which seems to exist in the German-speaking 60 p.c. of Switzerland for the French-speaking 30 p.c. A German-speaking Swiss said to me one day in Chur: "In Basle they are becoming too like the French."

I confess I had not noticed it. But in any event, have we not our own inter-county disagreements? Is not Limerick supposed to be at loggerheads with Cork? One thing is certain — neither differences of language, of which there are four official ones (German, French, Italian and Romansch), nor cantonal patriotism (there are 22 cantons in the Confederation) affect the national solidarity of this intensely nationalistic people.

Everybody in Swiss cities is well, even expensively, dressed. The shops are full of excellent things. The cost of living is higher than in Ireland, and most goods are more expensive. That is why the Swiss Government allows the tourist 17.30 Fr. Sw. to the £ instead of the ordinary rate of about 11. Taxation is also high. There are, for example, two income taxes — one to the State and one to the Canton. But one may judge by the people's clothes that the standard of living is a high one.

In Zurich there was a campaign designed to foster civic spirit, although, to the foreigner, there seems little need for it. But there were street banners bearing such mottoes as "Noise disturbs sleep!" With this I found myself heartily in agreement. It is true that the streets were deserted by midnight, but the Swiss do not appear to sleep after 6 a.m. At 6.30 the

streets are buzzing with activity. Schools and universities are open at 7. One morning at twenty to seven a brass band came playing gaily into the Bahnhofplatz.

Each afternoon a gendarme with a microphone mounted on the roof of the principal tram-stop gave a satirical commentary on the jay-walkers which invariably sent them scuttling for refuge from the laughter of the lookers-on.

The night before I left I met an old Italian-speaking Swiss who had been for many years director of a famous St. Moritz hotel. He told me, much more in sorrow than in anger, of an article which had appeared in the "*London Daily Mail*" of a few days before, in which the writer made an attack on the Swiss for alleged fleecing of tourists.

"It was what he wrote in his concluding paragraph that hurt most," my friend said. "He declared that if William Tell had not shot the apple off the head of his son, the Swiss would have sold it at an exorbitant price."

Personally I disagree profoundly with the implication contained in that article. It is true that the Swiss are keen business people, and that they endeavour to make as much as they can out of tourism, which is their third largest industry. It is true that a holiday in Switzerland can be expensive—that depends largely on oneself. But my own experience tells me that, whatever the cost, one thing the tourist does get in Switzerland is value for his money.

And that is a great deal more than one can say for some other countries in Europe to-day.



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