

The XIXth international P.E.N. Club

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THE XIXth INTERNATIONAL P.E.N. CLUB**Congress at Zürich/Bâle, June, 1947.***By* ANDREW GUERSHOON COLIN.**An Internationale of Writers and Poets.**

Those who have seen a copy of the "*Schweizer Illustrierte Zeitung*" of the 11th of June last, will have noticed the prominent position given by that journal to the pictures and the text dealing with the last P.E.N. Congress. No wonder! It was an event of world-wide importance. Switzerland had opened its hospitable doors to the second International Congress of the P.E.N., to be held since V.E. day. The first post-war Congress was held in Stockholm last summer, but the time was so soon after the conclusion of military operations that the 1946 Congress could hardly claim to be a peace-time gathering, although its arena was the capital of neutral Sweden.

The Zürich Congress, however, was almost like a pre-war affair. I was there, as a member of the English Centre of the P.E.N.

Of course, the P.E.N. stands for what it means — the PEN: but it is also an abbreviation for Poets, Playwrights, Publishers, Essayists, Editors and Novelists. Well, there were over 300 members of the various P.E.N. world centres who came to the Zürich Congress, the 19th International meeting of the P.E.N. Practically every country in the world was represented, except those few countries which have no P.E.N. Club, or those who had not been able to send a delegate, or a member. Every country which was represented had at least one official delegate, sometimes several, and there were also guests of honour. The remainder were members who had come at their own expense, some all the way from such places as Rio, Helsinki and Los Angeles.

The largest contingent was from Switzerland — which is quite natural; it included both Centres — the Zürich and the Bâle ones, Mr. R. Faesi and Mr. E. Stickelberger being among the prominent hosts,

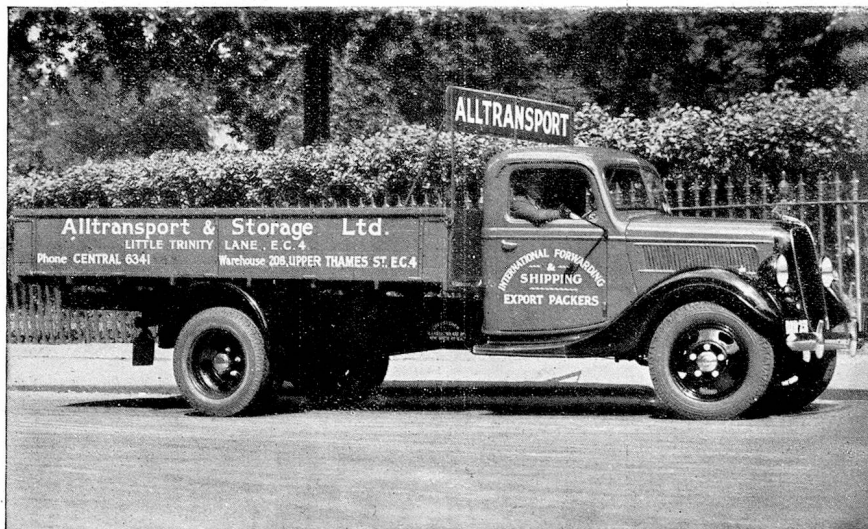
ably assisted by the untiring Secretary of the Zürich P.E.N., Dr. R. P. Hafter.

The next group, to go by numbers, was that from these islands: — the English, Scottish, Northern Ireland and Eire Clubs. The guests of honour were Desmond MacCarthy (The English President), Hermon Ould, the General Secretary (not only of the English Centre, but of the International P.E.N., one of the oldest and best known officers of the P.E.N.), Denis Saurat and Margaret Storm Jameson — a past-president and a standard bearer throughout the darkest days of the war; the guest of honour from Scotland was Eric Linklater. Ireland sent the following delegates: Dr. D. A. Chart and Patricia O'Connor, from the Belfast Centre; and D. Sears and D. J. Siltman — from Dublin.

Quite numerous and correspondingly vocal was the French contingent. The two delegates struck us with their passionate eloquence. They were Henri Membree and Vercors; the latter became famous thanks to his "*Silence de la Mer*," written and circulated in secret during the occupation of France. France's neighbours, Belgium, and Holland were also well represented, and usually voted on the same lines as their French colleagues; but so did the delegates of the other victims of German occupation — Czechoslovakia and Poland. Yugoslavia was supposed to be represented, but I failed to find a single representative from their P.E.N.

As to Poland, no doubt the Warsaw Government wanted the world to see that, although the eyes of the new Poland looked east, they should also behold the other side of the horizon, at least in matters cultural. Hence the presence of several Polish writers, who had actually arrived from Poland for the Congress.

As I said, the Czechs and the Poles usually voted as the French, the Belgians, the Dutch and the Norwegians did, to say nothing of the delegates from the Hebrew Centre in Palestine. Their reserved voting applied in the first instance to the most important question of re-admitting the German P.E.N., which

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had ceased to exist in 1933, when Hitler had taken over the destinies of the Reich. Whilst willing to discuss the admission of a new German P.E.N., the representatives of the occupied countries and of Jewish Palestine demanded, as a rule, much more stringent guarantees and were advocates of slow motion in this connection. All this was perfectly understandable to all members of the Congress, but certain delegations, principally the U.S.A. and the English one, took the aims of the P.E.N. more broadly, despite what had happened. We heard a most impassioned appeal from Thomas Mann, the veteran German writer, an exile from Hitler and now an American citizen. In fact, he was there as the guest of honour from the U.S.A. The leader of German letters for the last quarter of a century appealed to the Congress, speaking both in German and in English, to allow the liberal tendencies in Germany to find an adequate expression, if entrusted to certain German writers whom he named and for whom he personally vouched.

The impression of his speech was enhanced when the English delegates supported him, subject to definite safeguards, which would make it impossible for the P.E.N. to be used as a façade for Nazi-like machinations. England, though not actually occupied, had also suffered so much that no one would think of accusing her of wishing to render undue assistance to the Germans. There were actually three German "consultants" present. One of them, no doubt genuinely believing in what he was saying, actually pointed out that there was "Résistance" not only in France, Belgium, etc., but also in Germany. I looked at the members, and saw that this assertion had made the same impression on them as it had on me, namely of being rather out of proportion with the facts. Nevertheless, it was decided that, under proper control, German literature should be allowed to return to the world arena, and its messengers to be re-integrated in the writers' world organisation.

To effect this, a Committee of six will be appointed, of which at least three members will be from countries formerly occupied by Germany; it was felt that this would ensure the necessary measure of control. As to the Austrians and Italians, there was no difficulty. In fact, they were already officially represented in Zürich, the former through their émigré London Centre and through several men and a woman from Vienna; the latter — by guests of honour, delegates and members from Italy. There was no one from Japan and, to my knowledge, the question of their re-admission was not discussed at Zürich. Other important matters were dealt with: an International President was elected, in the person of the famous and venerable Belgian author Maurice Maeterlinck; and a Vice-President, namely Denis Saurat, a native of France, now resident in London, a great servant of the P.E.N., for a good many years. Questions of collaboration with UNESCO were also debated and excellent results achieved; resolutions, submitted to the Congress from the various Centres, were discussed and, subject to certain amendments, were generally approved and accepted. Most of the interpreting during the sessions of the Congress was carried out personally by Professor Antoine Velleman, Head of the School of Interpreters of the University of Geneva. He translated speeches into French, English and German with remarkable accuracy and ease. It was obvious that we were assisted by a master-linguist.

On the conclusion of the work of the Congress, it was obvious that important and constructive work had been done. It is a well-known dictum that writers are the conscience of mankind. It was gladdening to observe that the collective conscience of civilised humanity had good reasons to feel better than for many years past. A tyrant and his minor counterparts in other countries were lying in the dust; those who were guilty of putting them in power were now given the chance of re-habilitation in the moral sense, in so far as their writers will now be able to join their colleagues of the United Nations under the aegis of the P.E.N., if they wish to. Not a mean achievement nowadays, when the clouds still loom so low and the rumbling of the storm is dying away so slowly that it looks at times as if it is not going to die at all.

Now about the amenities. The Swiss hosts really surpassed themselves. Not only was the organisation excellent, but the social and entertainment sides were marvellously well catered for. Authors are not easy people to please, usually because they see too much. But here was a case of everyone being apparently very satisfied.

There was a big dinner in one of the Kongressaele. ("Zwei Mahlzeiten — Coupons, Bitte!"), after which we were greeted by the President of the Swiss Confederation, M. Etter. Most members of the Congress received invitations to lunch for the following day from private families in Zürich and in the surrounding district, and were very hospitably received by persons whom they had never met before.

An excursion by steamer was arranged to the Au

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peninsula. The members of the Congress were met there by Alp horn music. An excellent *al fresco* (or nearly *al fresco*) supper was served, and the whole atmosphere was very informal. A member of the French contingent, who had sampled too many Kirsch's, shouted to me, grabbing me by the shoulder: "Toi, tu est anglais! Je le vois, à cause de ta gabardine." So he shrewdly used the style of my raincoat, . . . in order to place me. Let anyone say that writers are not observant! And yet, he might have been wrong.

On the next morning the scene of the Congress was shifted to Bâle. A special train was prepared for us, and we found, on arrival in Bâle, several tramcars which took us to the new University compound. A magnificent group of buildings, as spacious and well designed as any of the best Universities I have seen in the Old and in the New World. The chair was taken by Ignazio Silone, the President of the new Italian P.E.N. in Rome, an ardent opponent of Mussolini and an exile from Italy during the Duce's period in power. He had some very stern and disturbing things to tell us. He referred to the last war as to an international civil war, transcending all political frontiers, and maintained that it was far from over . . . A more cheerful note was sounded when one of our Bâle hosts, the President of the Bâle Centre, Mr. E. Stichelberger, after addressing us impeccably in six languages, declared that he was not a polyglot. He did not intend the audience to burst into hilarity at this point, but it was spontaneous. To people speaking one, two languages at most, the apology for speaking *only* six, must have appeared strange, although, no doubt, it was perfectly genuine. The speaker apparently

regretted not being able to greet every member of the Congress in his or her particular language.

The session was followed by a very well organised Lunch at the "Casino," where 460 sat down to the meal. From there we went to visit the beautiful Minster, and were impressed by the memorial plaque dedicated to Erasmus of Rotterdam, the illustrious precursor of the Reformation, and the humanist, by the grace of God. We were given a very handsome brochure by E. Stichelberger "Basels Humanisten Zeit," in German, which gave us a vivid picture of the part played by the City of Bâle in the re-birth of learning and of the arts, at the end of the XVth and in the XVIth century.

We were also taken to the Bâle Art Gallery where, after an inspection of the remarkable pictures housed there, we were treated to a sumptuous tea in the Aula of the Museum ("Zwei Mahlzeiten — Coupons, bitte!"). Late in the afternoon we took another special train back to Zürich.

The following day was to witness the conclusion of the official business of the Congress. It was crowned by a gala-dinner and dance in the main Hall of the Congress Building. It was a Lucullian meal, albeit without meat (Friday!) and wines were served "à discretion" and . . . without any coupons! A throng of young and pretty girls from Zürich, all clad in Swiss National Costumes, helped to entertain us and gave us sundry little mementoes of the Congress, discreetly asking for our autographs, as a souvenir for themselves. A similar bevy had greeted us in Bâle the day before. . .

We were addressed by various Swiss personalities, and one of the speakers to respond was Prince Wilhelm of Sweden, himself a littérateur and last year's host in Stockholm. After the dinner the one and only dance of the Congress took place. I wondered how the ripe exponents of literature would deport themselves; but I can assure you that those who risked stepping on the parquet floor did very well indeed. They partnered their ladies in such a way that one would have thought that they always danced after dinner.

The official programme over, several semi-private excursions were undertaken during the week-end.

The French railway strike inconvenienced a number of us, especially the Belgian, French and British members, but we got moving, in some way or other. I had to resort to night-flying, but it was very interesting.

Whilst gliding away from Switzerland, I realised that, in common with all other guests, I was carrying back with me a feeling of warm gratitude for the wonderful reception the proud little country had given to us, visitors from other lands. Seldom has a P.E.N. Congress been held in more attractive surroundings and in an atmosphere of such general goodwill, to which our Swiss hosts have contributed so much.

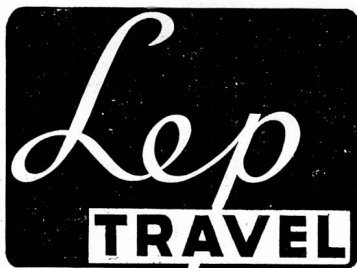
NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE. Childrens' Outing.

Owing to the clashing of dates of this outing with end of term school sports, which most children are attending, we have decided to cancel the outing planned for July 19th.

We hope to resume these activities at some future date.

Nouvelle Société Helvétique.

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