

# Letter from Switzerland

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# LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

In the earliest stages of my journalistic career in London my only income, apart from the steady support I received from my father in Switzerland, was what I earned as correspondent of the Swiss News Agency. I was, in other words, not as yet very well heeled and was, consequently, delighted when a Hungarian colleague, who was going on holiday for a month, asked me to look after a newspaper he served in Riga, in the then independent Latvian Republic.

He offered me the then fabulous fee of £50 for this work and told me that the Editors of *Jaunakas Zinias* – this was the paper's name – would ring me every morning at 6.30, when I would have to dictate a daily article. It goes without saying that I worked deep into the night to have a script ready for 6.30 and when the call came through for the first time I was surprised about the excellent quality of the telephonic connection.

In view of the fact that my Hungarian colleague, Laszlo Raskoy, had given me no instructions whatever, I naturally took it for granted that the *Jaunakas Zinias* wanted messages about the political and economic developments in Britain and in what was then the Empire.

On the third day an Editor came through *in lieu* of the stenographer.

by **Gottfried Keller**

"You are giving us", he complained "academic politics, but this is not at all what we want. What we want is 'blutigä Sensationän' – bloody sensations – don't you understand? Have you no imagination? If nothing of this kind happens, why don't you invent a train accident with 40 or 50 corpses?" And on my telling him that this was not serious journalism, he told me bluntly that nobody was coming over from Riga to London to check whether any story was true and anyway, the readers of *Jaunakas Zinias* were not interested in politics or economics.

Naturally I told him that this then was the parting of our ways. Equally naturally when Raskoy came back from leave, he asked me how I had got on and on my telling him the truth, he looked at me with a sad expression and said: "Poor Keller – with your attitude you will never become a successful journalist! Never."

And before we parted company, he looked at me reproachfully and

said: "Couldn't you at least have invented a hairdresser-barber who one sunny morning cut three clients throats and heaped the corpses in a backroom of the shop? Or a Warder at the zoo who got swallowed up by a huge Boa Constrictor? What you are lacking is imagination. Let me, as an old hand at this game, give you some friendly advice: Get yourself a different job."

Soon after this I was offered the London Correspondent's position of the *Basler Nachrichten* and there was no more need to invent mad hairdressers or man-eating boas. Nevertheless, we remained in loose touch, Raskoy and I, and later on when the Nazis stood in Calais and an invasion of Britain seemed imminent, Raskoy rang me up to say goodbye, as he was leaving Britain for the United States.

When I told him that I was not thinking of quitting Britain, he once more said "Poor Keller". And he added: "You remind me of a man who has been sentenced to death, but on the day fixed for the execution is told that the event has been postponed for a day." Poor Raskoy – he left Britain on the *Arandora Star*, which was sunk by German U-boats in mid-Atlantic without any survivors rescued!

