

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

Is life in Switzerland better than life in Britain?

Having moved back to Switzerland some 6½ years ago, after 38 years of a busy life in London, I think I am qualified to judge whether one can easily fit into the pattern of life in Switzerland again, which one has left so many years ago. Of course, I have been back in Switzerland for holidays in between my London years, but holidaying in a pleasant resort and good hotel and settling down in the country are two quite different things. To live in either country has, of course, its attractions and its advantages and disadvantages and it would be very difficult to say which of the former outweigh the latter or vice-versa. London was always a fascinating kind of monster for me. It provided many unforgettable and inimitable amenities like museums, theatres, parks and an incredibly rich concert life in the Royal Festival Hall — to mention but a few of the things which contributed to making life pleasant in the British capital city. But life in London also had its drawbacks, especially during the last few years of my stay there: the postal, electricity, refuse collection and other strikes and the eternal unpreparedness for cold and snowy winter weather, amongst others. On the other hand one had the feeling that one lived amongst a naturally disciplined population which was used to queueing tidily and in an orderly manner, which furthermore deeply respected pedestrian crossings on the road and which generally acted according to the slogan "Live and let live". One's home was one's castle and as long as one did nothing unlawful one was left in peace.

In Switzerland I have not, as yet, had to feel the effect of any strikes and if winter comes, one is prepared for it. The windows have double glazing, for one's cars one has special winter tyres and I have never yet heard of any frozen pipes. The machinery and the efficiency of the snow-clearing teams — even in small villages — have to be seen to be believed. Everything looks and is very tidy and there certainly is no litter about. But one can well ask oneself whether things are not, perhaps, a little too tidy and too well ordered. But in spite of the fact that a list of the federal laws (not counting the cantonal and borough regulations) fills 14,000 (fourteen thousand!) printed pages and that the police carry fire arms, the Swiss are not as naturally disciplined as the British are. They certainly don't drive as well or as carefully as the British do and they have a dangerous

habit of not respecting pedestrian crossings in traffic. If one wants to board a tram, or a train or a lake boat, one gets jostled and hustled about and the same can happen in shops and stores. Perhaps, I am not sure, this is a kind of unconscious psychological reaction against too much state interference? (I should add, incidentally, that the figure of 14,000 printed pages of federal laws has been compiled by a University Professor of Law and printed in a handbook on Switzerland issued by MIGROS in 1975.)

Looking at Britain from Switzerland, if one has never been across the Channel, would be like looking at a strange object through the wrong end of a telescope. And the same would apply to looking at Switzerland from Britain, for both countries have to be lived in to reveal their true character and their strengths and weaknesses. There are, need I stress it, ten thousand ways in which the two countries differ — but this has,

By Gottfried Keller

fortunately, never stood in the way of friendly feelings both ways.

When I travelled to Britain for the first time many years ago, I crossed over from Dieppe to Newhaven. An acquaintance on the boat who had already been in England several times, made — somewhere in mid-Channel — a remark which I have not forgotten to this day. "While travelling forward during three hours", he said, "we are actually travelling backwards through three centuries". This statement puzzled me, but I began to understand what he had meant when for the first time I had to pay a visit to an English dentist's surgery. But this is anticipating: because one day I have the intention to put on record my first impressions of the country I stayed in for so long and which I came to love so dearly, in spite of its plumbing and cuisine...

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