

Letter from Switzerland

Objektyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1979)**

Heft 1757

PDF erstellt am: **17.07.2024**

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

By Gottfried Keller

Is any telephone tapping going on in Switzerland? Undoubtedly YES, because it had to be admitted in Parliament when, some time ago, some pressing questions about this problem were asked. However, when the respective questions were being answered, the usual official Bla Bla about exceptional cases and strict safeguards was, of course added and the need for protecting state security against espionage and terrorism was duly stressed.

This interlude in Parliament reminded me of a luscious luncheon to which I was once invited at the London Embassy of Yugoslavia in Kensington Gore. It took place about two years after World War II and was attended by some 20 people, about half of them diplomats and the other half press representatives. Why the then Yugoslav Ambassador, Mr. Obrad Cicmil, did me the honour of seating me next to him on his left, I don't pretend to know — possibly

because I was then the holder of the office of President of the Foreign Press Association. During the meal, which in those days of still enforced strict food rationing, was very copious and was washed down with Ljutomer Riesling and Cabernets. Ambassador Cicmil asked me whether I had ever been in Yugoslavia. I admitted that I had not and when he asked me why, I first asked him whether he wanted a really frank reply or not. To which, of course, he had to say yes, after which I told him that I disliked the idea of being watched, of having my mail tampered with and having my phone calls tapped. Nor, did I add, was I in sympathy with the methods of Communist states. Mr. Cicmil's reaction was interesting. At first he roared with laughter. Then he added that only about 2 per cent of the Yugoslav population were Communists and finally he looked me firmly in the eye and said: "You dislike having your telephone tapped? But

believe me, nobody in the world is as good and efficient at this as your own Swiss authorities." He had, he added, absolute proof that his conversations with his Yugoslav counterpart in the Berne Embassy were regularly tapped and listened into. This, of course, silenced me and the conversation thereafter turned to other subjects — to Mr. Ales Bebler for example, who was at that time Deputy Foreign Minister of Yugoslavia and whose ancestors had hailed from the Grisons: Bebler thus being a kind of Swiss contribution to world history. That my relations with the Yugoslav Embassy remained unimpaired by my frankness was proved when I got home from that luncheon. Because I found there a case of Ljutomer Riesling and six bottles of Cherry Brandy from Zadar and when, some time later, Marshal Tito paid an official visit to Britain, my wife and I were invited to an enormous reception to shake the great man's hand.

SWISS NEWS ON BBC

British viewers had a first opportunity to see Swiss television news on a late night programme on BBC-2 on Monday 25th June. A charming young lady, who was beautifully bilingual, introduced the "Tageschau" which had been broadcast the same day to Swiss viewers at 8 p.m. It was interesting to compare the sample of news offered that evening to Swiss and British viewers.

The former were given news on an attempt on General Haig's life, the meeting of OPEC leaders in Geveva, the launching of a national appeal in favour of refugees, the problem of drug addiction in Switzerland, a new exhibition of Hodler self-portraits in Basle and an item on environmental protection in Switzerland.

On BBC-1, the 9 o'clock news also told of an attempted assassination on the NATO Commander and of the OPEC meeting. But it had a special report on the war in Nicaragua, on the Vietnamese boat people, on President Carter's visit to Japan. As for the home news, it had a somewhat more gossipy and

human character than what had been offered to Swiss viewers. The main items touched on Mrs. Thatcher's first meeting with TUC leaders and on millionaire Jack Hayward demanding an enquiry into how his donations to the Liberal party had been spent.

It was interesting to compare the style of presentation of the two news broadcasts. As could be expected, BBC News have more live coverage and less views of the reader, and one assumes they have greater financial means than the Swiss Broadcasting Organisation. The BBC was also more lively both in its news content and, especially, in its presentation of events. People like Kenneth Kendall, Angela Rippon, etc have a gentleness and urbanity in their approach to viewers which is refreshing compared to the staid correctness of the Swiss reader. Mind you, he was good, too, and "decent". However, in true Swiss style, he conveyed pure information whereas his British counterparts also tended to show information as "life". Quite clearly, the Swiss way

of presenting news lacked a bit of the pulse seen on our screens here — and this might well be a reflection of the difference of two life styles. In general, Swiss newspapers appear a little "flat" compared to the Press in Britain and this is not only a question of finance or journalistic talent.

One was also surprised to find that most of the reports were in the purest German and this leads one to assume that Swiss television relies on reports from German television. If that example was anything to go by, the main criticism that can be levelled at Swiss news would be against its tendency to produce something of a "serious documentary" and to forget that news is also entertainment.

But it was superior to Austrian News which that evening, concentrated on the attempt on General Haig's life and the rather uninspiring subjects of Austria's summer tourism and the protests of Austrian farmers against the low cost of pig meat.

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