

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

By Gottfried Keller

This contribution should, ideally, have been published on 3rd September, for it was on that day, 40 years ago, that Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced, with his voice at breaking point, that Great Britain was at war with Germany. The radio announcement was made at 11 in the morning, and about ten minutes later, one heard, for the first time, the air raid siren one was to hear so many times in the following five and a half years.

It was one or two days after that that the Swiss Legation — it was only raised to the status of Embassy in 1958 — became a beehive of activity. Several hundred Swiss residents in the UK who were of military age had to be registered for re-patriation under the general mobilisation order in Switzerland. The arrangements inside the Legation were handled, in an atmosphere of tension and nervousity, and in some cases in rough and tactless manner, by the then Councillor of Legation Charles de Jenner and the then Consul Hilfiker. As an accredited press correspondent I was exempt from this call-up, because it had been agreed between my Editor-in-Chief National Councillor Oeri and the Head of the Swiss Military Department, Federal Councillor Minger, that it was more interesting to have a man on the information front in one of the belligerent countries than one more corporal (which was my rank) at home in the army. The call-up of the Swiss abroad and their collective repatriation proved, in the outcome, to be an enormous mistake. Few, if any, of those who had for any length of time resided abroad still had a uniform at home which fitted. Few, if any, still knew how to handle a machine gun or a rifle and in many cases they quickly became the lame ducks in their former units. Many of their superior officers did not really know what to do with them. But the case of many of them was quite tragic: they had left wives, families and homes behind in Britain and practically all of them also lost their positions. And when, after three or four weeks unhappy stay in the army, they were told that they could now go back where they had come from, few of them managed to get through to Britain again. And many of those who succeeded found it difficult to find new jobs and sources of income. Thus the over-hasty

call-up of the Swiss of military age abroad turned out to be a gigantic exercise in futility with, in many cases, truly tragic consequences.

For myself as a press correspondent, the war began in earnest when the operator on the International Telephone Exchange in London told me that no more connections to countries abroad were permitted. Simultaneously an informative leaflet of the Foreign Press Association told me that all foreign correspondents still in the country — most Germans had left hurriedly and some who had not were interned on the Isle of Man — should attend, at a given time, a conference in the Senate House of the London University in Bloomsbury, at which the working of the quickly enforced censorship regulations would be explained. Senate House thus had become, and was to remain for the duration of the whole war, the Ministry of Information.

In the early stages of the war, three Ministers of Information succeeded one another in quick succession. The first was an eminently honourable Scottish judge called Lord Macmillan, the second was Sir John Reith of BBC fame (called "That Wuthering Height" by Churchill) and the third was the conservative politician Alfred Duff Cooper, later to become, in stages, First Lord of the Admiralty, Minister Resident in Algiers, Ambassador in Paris, and finally, as Lord Norwich, a peer of the realm. It was only with the advent of Brendan Bracken in July 1941 that the M.o.I. became really effective. Bracken was, as proprietor of the *Financial Times*, of *The Banker* and other publications, himself a man of the press. He was a tall, red-headed, rather eccentric man who lived at No. 10 Downing Street throughout the war and was sometimes called "Churchill's Court Jester". He and the Chief Censor, Rear Admiral George Thomson, succeeded in rescuing the Ministry from general contempt and in finally turning an initial failure into an undoubted success. Both Brendan Bracken as Minister and Admiral Thomson as Chief Censor were of the opinion that security considerations only could rightly be the cause for suppression of news through censorship and they both fought a long — and in the end successful — battle against the Foreign Office which

wanted to censor (and suppress) opinion as well. By 1943 the staff of the M.o.I. inside the UK — there was also a considerable staff abroad — numbered nearly 3,000. Some of them, frankly, were people in search of an easy war. British morale was, throughout the war, even during its darkest periods, such that it hardly needed sustaining. It was at any rate such that defeat was never considered a serious possibility.

However, this is not the place to start writing the history of the Ministry of Information or of World War Two. But, of course, whenever the date of 3rd September comes up again one cannot help remembering what happened on that day in Britain nearly half a century ago.

Editor's Note

Over the next few months I intend to start a fashion column in the *Swiss Observer* which would appear on an occasional basis.

I know that there are a lot of talented people in the colony, but there is perhaps someone who has had experience of producing fashion sketches who might be willing to help in providing illustrations for the planned column?

mhm

IN MEMORIAM

We learned with great regret of the death of *Mrs. Alice Chappuis*, on 14th September in Salisbury, Wilts., in her 81st year and of *Dr. E. Bircher*, Bissone/TI, on 10th October, shortly before his 84th birthday.

We extend our most sincere condolences to the families of *Mrs. Chappuis* and *Dr. Bircher*.

DENSITY OF THE SWISS BANKING NETWORK

Of all industrialised countries, Switzerland has the densest banking network. The 550 banking establishments in the country have a total of 4,787 branches, i.e. one for every 1,316 inhabitants. West Germany comes second, with one branch for every 1,626 inhabitants, followed by Sweden (2,085), the Netherlands (2,392), Great Britain (2,737), Belgium (2,815), France (2,843), Canada (3,084), Austria (3,332), Italy (4,829), the United States (6,568) and Japan (6,906).