

Letter from Switzerland

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Die Schweiz = Suisse = Svizzera = Switzerland : offizielle Reisezeitschrift der Schweiz. Verkehrszentrale, der Schweizerischen Bundesbahnen, Privatbahnen ... [et al.]**

Band (Jahr): **39 (1966)**

Heft 10

PDF erstellt am: **07.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-778334>

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

Every so often, we devote this space to questions asked by our readers. It is our hope, in this way, to encourage greater understanding of Switzerland's unusual situation in the world of today, and to contribute whatever we can to the international exchange of incongruous information. The following letters represent a small selection of those received. They were chosen primarily because the topics discussed were considered to be of greatest interest to our general readership.

Sir: My friends and I here in Wampum, Washington, are deeply fascinated by the saga of William Tell and the apple this famous Swiss hero shot off his son's cranium. Since Wampum is the apple-growing capital of America, we would appreciate some additional details on this historic event as it might apply to the apple-growing industry. We would especially like to know what variety of apple Mr. Tell used for his experiment, and whether it was red, green or yellow.

W. T., WAMPUM, WASH.

Apples have always been popular in Switzerland, even before William Tell chose to immortalize the health-giving fruit. The Romans were extremely partial to apples as far back as 44 B.C., when they founded Augusta Raurica near today's Basle. Tell's apple, a fruit of the rosaceous tree, *Malus pumila*, was selected for its perfect shape, its white meat and its worm-free exterior. Many years were to pass, however, before this particular apple was given the name *Tellus typus*, which is still in common use.

When the arrow from Tell's crossbow smashed through the *Tellus typus*, seeds from this prolific variety were scattered in every direction. Today, there are 7,454,000 apple trees in Switzerland, nearly all of which can trace their roots back to William Tell's fortunate shot. This is also where the expression "family tree" originated, for had it not been for an apple tree, William Tell's family, and perhaps the whole country, could not have existed. A grateful Switzerland has commemorated its national hero in many ways, particularly in its world-famous hotels and its telephone system. In reply to the second part of your question, Tell's apple was bright red, a fact which should not be overlooked, for it undoubtedly helped him to aim in the right direction.

Sir: I am a housewife in Waukietaukie, Wyoming, and am also editor of the Waukietaukie Women's World. The topic at next month's meeting of our social club is "Switzerland, Tiny Democracy in the Heartland of Europe". As I am expected to moderate this meeting, I wonder if you can tell me everything about lovely Switzerland.

R. W., WAUKIETAUKIE, WY.

Certainly. Switzerland covers an area of 41,287.9 square kilometers, and is 220.1 kilometers wide at its longest north-south point, 348.58 kilometers long at its widest west-east point. Its highest point is the top of the Dufourspitze (4634 m), its lowest, the surface of Lago Maggiore (193 m). The country's largest city is Zurich. Its smallest community is Illens, Canton of Fribourg, which has eleven inhabitants. (Zurich is considerably larger.) The

Canton of Ticino entered the Swiss Confederation in 1805, while Valais, Neuchâtel and Geneva did not join until 1815. Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden formed the Confederation in 1291. There were only 400 donkeys living in Switzerland in 1961, as opposed to 1600 in 1911, but, at the same time, there are now 75,000 ducks and geese. Duck figures are not available for the year 1911, since the first duck census did not take place until 1936. Ducks very much like Switzerland, mainly because of the many fresh-water lakes, which are considered especially ducky. In 1936, somebody counted 1484 natural lakes in Switzerland, which then made it relatively easy to count the ducks swimming in them.

Sir: The question of language in Switzerland has always interested me. Here at home we speak only one language and we still have difficulty making ourselves understood and getting things done. How is it possible that Switzerland, with four official languages, has learned to live with this problem?

P. R., LONDON, ENG.

In countries with a single national language, it can be insulting to assert that you do not understand what is being asked of you. In Switzerland, on the other hand, it is considered polite to say you do not understand, whether you do or not. To simplify this point, in Switzerland one need only understand what one chooses to understand. This is the same situation that exists in your country, only more diplomatic, and it is one aspect of the character which has made the Swiss so renowned for their diplomatic proclivities. It is also why Switzerland is so often the arbiter of international problems. In any case, if you really want to be understood in Switzerland, speak English. Everybody either speaks it or would like to speak it, and they will pretend to understand you, whether they do or not. I hope this is clear.

Sir: Some months ago, I read your article on the great American poet and novelist, James Blaisdell Wetherby, and I was impressed with his writings on Switzerland. Could you please tell me what you consider Wetherby's finest work?

M. E., MISKIWAWA JUNCTION, N. Y.

James Blaisdell Wetherby was one of the towering literary geniuses of his time: an American who not only lived in a foreign country, but also a person who was able to capture in words the feeling and heartbeat of that country. He chose Switzerland, and generations of students of the alpine country will be forever grateful for that fact. It is virtually impossible to single out his best work, for he was a productive writer of the highest literary quality. One essay found on the back of an old envelope three years ago, is perhaps most typical of what Wetherby was trying to say. It is entitled *The Apple*, and it includes the memorable lines:

"Apples have always been popular in Switzerland, even before William Tell chose to immortalize the health-giving fruit... Tell's apple, a fruit of the rosaceous tree, *Malus pumila*, was selected for its perfect shape, its white meat and its worm-free exterior."