

Letter from Switzerland

Autor(en): **Epstein, Eugene V.**

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

Someday, I shall seriously try to lead an unhealthy life in Switzerland. Not that I have anything against being healthy. As a matter of fact, before I came to this country, I had considered myself a fair specimen of American manhood. But I had much to learn.

I learned that living in Switzerland would restore my health to what it was before it began to falter. There were few noticeable symptoms, and I even felt quite well. I was occasionally tired, especially after having stayed up late the night before. And my appetite, once of legendary repute, was but a shadow of its former self, particularly after I had finished eating. What, then, was really wrong with me?

Whatever it was, said one of my new Swiss friends, I would have to undergo a "cure". This innocent word frightened me, and it conjured up visions of shock treatments and being strapped to a table. When my complexion had returned to its natural pallid color, my acquaintances explained that the cure they had in mind entailed no more than swimming in a thermal pool, of which there were many in Switzerland. I was grateful for their helpful advice. I was also relieved that my condition could be so easily diagnosed and so pleasantly treated.

"Tell me", I asked Walti, the ringleader of my health-cure friends, "when should I begin my cure and where do I go? Lastbutnotleast (I was proud of this Swiss expression), please give me all the other details I ought to know."

Walti looked puzzled. He turned to his wife, Ruthli, and then he looked back at me. Ruthli joined in the conversation by suggesting that I take the waters at Loèche-les-Bains, a spa in the Valais. "There", said Ruthli, "he will have the benefit of water that comes out of the earth at 124° Fahrenheit. Furthermore, Loèche-les-Bains has hyperthermal gypsum springs with calcium and magnesium sulfate waters and strontium and fluorine waters—exactly what he needs!"

Walti seemed to agree. Then, raising his head and observing me more closely, he pointed out that my eyes had a very strange appearance, and that what I needed was sulfur—good, old-fashioned sulfur—to recondition the blood and to re-instill some old-fashioned sparkle in my tired, bloodshot eyes.

"Loèche-les-Bains is fine", he went on, "but if you really want sulfur, you must go to Schinznach Bad. Balneologically speaking, the sulfur spring at Schinznach produces water at 95° Fahrenheit, hydrocarbonate waters with high hydrogen sulphide content, even slightly radioactive—very good for you—with low bromine and boric acid content and some extremely active ions, too. Excellent for bringing back the appetite!"

I was already beginning to get hungry, and all the talk about water was making me thirsty. "I feel a little better now", I had to admit. "May I invite you fine people to join me in my favorite local inn?" We agreed to visit the nearby Gasthaus zum Kartoffelstock, which looks out towards the mountain of the same name.

There I immediately ordered a large, cold glass of beer and two of those wonderful Swiss sausages—schüblig— which are almost as long as a full-grown dachshund. "Wait!" said Walti and Ruthli in chorus. "Your health, remember."

"I'm hungry. I'm very, very hungry", I said almost tearfully, "and I want my schüblig and my beer."

"Have them if you wish", offered Walti. "But if I were you, I'd order a camomile tea at 94° centigrade and a birchermüesli."

My appetite suddenly and inexplicably disappeared. "I want a cold drink", I wailed, thinking that this might diminish the perspiration on my flushed forehead. "Anyway, what is a birchermüesli?" I asked with bated breath.

Before the answer came, the waitress brought me a huge glass of brilliantly foaming beer—and the two schübligs. I drank, lovingly and tenderly, savoring the robust flavor of this fine Swiss brew.

"Wait!" a voice shouted from across the room. I looked through the undulating layers of cigar smoke and saw an elderly gentleman, motioning for me to put the glass down. He then made his way over to me, holding his own glass of beer. "My", I thought, "aren't these the friendliest people in the world. Why, he just wants to drink to my health because I'm a stranger in these parts."

I raised my glass to him, and, in my very best German—learned on a two-day visit to Heidelberg—said "Ex!", which means "down the hatch".

"No, no, you do not understand", he protested. "I only wanted to tell you not to drink that beer so cold—it's bad for the stomach—and I know that you Americans are always drinking ice-cold beverages."

Well, he was right—no argument there. And then he motioned to the waitress to bring me what he called a "bierwärmer", which is just about what it sounds like. The waitress returned with what looked like a divining rod, and she plunked it into my beautiful beer. After four minutes, I was told to remove the "bierwärmer" and given permission to drink further. I removed it, burning both my thumb and index finger in the process. The beer was now, as my friends exclaimed, at room temperature, and I need fear nothing more. I drank it.

Meanwhile, Ruthli and Walti were eating my schübligs, which I had forgotten in the confusion. "Too fattening for you", said Walti, "bad for the heart and the cholesterol count. We've ordered you a birchermüesli with strawberries instead." When it arrived, I ate it—and it was quite good. But it wasn't a schüblig.

Then I remembered something I had observed many times in restaurants all over Europe. "Fräulein", I addressed the waitress, "could you please bring me a little something for my dog... he hasn't had enough to eat today."

"You have a doggie?" Walti asked. "What kind of doggie?"

"Oh, er, I have a... a dachshund, a very long, lovely dachshund", I replied. "Fräulein", I continued, "please bring me two uncooked schübligs for my dachshund, and put them on the bill." Walti insisted on paying for everything, and, after I received the dog package from the waitress, we all left. As he got into his car, Walti reminded me to make a cup of camomile tea when I got home. I assured him that I would.

When I arrived at our apartment, I put a pot of water on the stove, took out the schübligs and gently dropped them into the water. As they were slowly heating, I opened the icebox and viewed with joy the gleaming array of comestibles staring back at me. I grabbed the relish and the Dijon mustard, the olives, the pickles, the mayonnaise, the cocktail onions, the horseradish and the piccalilli. Impatiently, my mouth watering, I waited for the schübligs to reach a temperature of 94° centigrade.