

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

As everyone knows, Switzerland simply hums with activity. Nothing, for example, quite matches the Swiss proclivity for road-building and other forms of long-range construction. It is also quite interesting for the layman to observe at numerous construction sites throughout the country how the Swiss build for the ages and how carefully everything is done, lest it—during the next five hundred years—come undone again.

There is a basic recipe for building anything in Switzerland. First of all, one needs a shovel, a foreign laborer, a bag of cement and somewhere to dig. This latter requirement may seem to be elementary, but it is in reality the most difficult. For wherever one looks, there are holes in the hallowed Swiss earth—holes filled with concrete, holes inside other holes and holes designed for future use in case they are ever needed again.

With all due respect to other countries, there is nothing quite like a freshly dug hole in Switzerland. Each one represents an unusual combination of beauty, perfection and Swiss quality workmanship. This is why building firms are constantly competing with each other in the fine art of hole-digging.

The trouble with all this construction business is that there is virtually no ground left in which to dig decent holes, and the situation is obviously not going to improve in the near future, especially with rising land prices.

As it is, Switzerland seems to resemble a lunar landscape, with crater upon crater signifying that something dynamic is about to happen. During the day, there is a great deal of dust and noise signifying that things are *indeed* happening. Holes are dug, concrete is poured, rocks are blasted, all to the hypnotic accompaniment of diesel engines and expletives in assorted foreign-sounding languages. In order to dig and pour and blast more efficiently, it is often necessary to re-direct traffic. The constant flow of traffic can seriously slow down work on an important construction project, and the point of all the noise and dust and roar is to finish whatever is being built as quickly as possible. Because—whatever it is—it is undoubtedly needed for whatever purpose the male voters of a particular community thought it was needed.

The trouble is that no one really understands how complicated and time-consuming building can be. With traffic out of the way, construction foremen and laborers can proceed with the basic problem of pure building. But there are still other problems facing these selfless servants of the community. For example, the man who was supposed to deliver mixed concrete in a special truck was held up in traffic and his concrete—as well as his truck—hardened along the way. Closer investigation uncovered some interesting facts. The truck was held up in traffic being detoured around a construction project which itself was delayed because another concrete-truck man couldn't get to where he was trying to get in the first place.

On another occasion, an entire community was cut off from the outside world when construction engineers severed the only road above and below the village. When asked why they cut off both ends of town at the same time, they answered that the voters had approved both projects but apparently hadn't thought of the con-

sequences. What eventually happened was that a helicopter service was proposed to keep the village from starving to death. The disadvantage of the plan was that there was no place to land in the entire area. "Come, come," said the mayor. "There must be a field or meadow or flat plot of ground somewhere—I mean one that isn't private property." And he went into consultation with the other members of the town council.

"What about Plot 1215?" asked one of the councillors as they all studied the official village map. "Plot 1215 is currently under construction," answered the mayor. "That was last year!" said the councillor.

"Wasn't that the plot where we were going to build a sewage disposal plant?" asked another councillor. "No," said the mayor, "as far as I can remember, we were reserving that piece of land for a new school."

"New school?" said the chairman of the school authority. "We finished our school last year, don't you remember, Mr. Mayor?" But the mayor was obviously confused.

"Oh, now I remember," said he. "The school we completed last year was the one we started planning in 1923, and I'm afraid it was obsolete the day I personally dedicated it. So I gave orders to have it torn down the following Tuesday, because we needed the land for our sewage disposal plant, which, as you know, the voters have already approved."

"Approved or not approved," replied the school chairman, "the fact remains that we have neither school nor sewage disposal plant nor helicopter landing strip. We're surely going to starve if we don't watch out, not to mention what will happen if we don't get something acceptable to drink pretty soon!"

When they finally located some flat ground for the heliport, further difficulties were encountered because the land was soft and swampy, and everyone was afraid the helicopters might sink rather than fly, thus depriving them of all hope—forever. The representative of the building authority—who also happened to own one of the local construction firms—suggested that a project be approved to drain the swamp.

"How can we possibly drain that land if we're cut off from civilization at both ends?" asked the mayor. "Easy," replied the builder. "I have two Italian workers left up here. I'm sure we can find some shovels and some cement, and we'll have that field drained before you can say 'Swiss Family Robinson'."

So they began to dig seven large holes to drain the water. The local surveyor visited the site every forty-five minutes to assure that all was going according to plan and schedule. When the holes were finished, the sides were shored up with concrete, and grass and flowers were planted to hide the ugly scars which large-scale construction always leaves. The field was now dry and seemed excellently suited to support the first helicopter landing.

Only one thing had been forgotten. The seven new holes had indeed drained the field, but it was now impossible to land there, because the holes themselves were in the way. "Well," said the mayor, "we tried, we really did. Perhaps it's better this way—being cut off from the world. No more noise, no roaring and pouring, no traffic, no expletives, and, above all, no more hole-digging!"