

Switzerland revisited

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SWITZERLAND REVISITED.

By ARNOLD LUNN

The Queen, 28.11.45.

I said goodbye to the Alps on the terrace at Berne on May 13th, 1940. The Germans were thundering through the ill-fated gap at Sedan, and I wondered whether the Swastika would be flying from the roofs of Berne, if, and when I returned. Five years later, July 8th of this year, I saw the Alps again from the terrace at Berne. There they stood in the unshrinking splendour, bearing witness to beauty which man cannot mar, and which time cannot corrupt. In all my experiences of travel I have known nothing like crossing the frontier which divides poor distracted, war-torn France from the calm peace of Switzerland.

Switzerland, of course, has felt the war. It is not a land flowing with milk and honey. The rations of a private family are rather lower than our rations, but the food in the hotels is distinctly better, and there are far more goods in the shop windows. It is, however, irrational to resent this, for it is unreasonable to expect not only the glory which is the reward of heroic endeavour, but also the comforts of neutrality. We should not grudge Switzerland her slightly better situation, the inevitable consequence of a neutrality which has been of immeasurable value to war-tormented Europe.

The Swiss are better at advertising their mountains than their charity, and few people in this country realise the immense amount they have done for the victims of war. To cite merely one example, I was shown statistics at their Foreign Office which proved that the food and clothing which they have given to the victims of war would fill a train with carriages stretching from London to Birmingham.

Boom in Swiss Travel.

During the first world war the Swiss did not travel in their own country; they stayed at home feeling that it would be best to postpone their holidays until normal times returned. In this war there has been a boom in Swiss travel. Nobody has any particular confidence that normal times will ever return, and everybody feels that they had better spend their money before it loses its purchasing power through inflation, or before it is removed by taxation. Consequently, the Swiss hotels have been filled during the high seasons; but these seasons are pitifully short, and most hotels have been running at a loss. Of course, the fact that the Swiss themselves could not leave Switzerland has, to some extent, compensated for the fact that foreigners could not get to Switzerland.

The Winter Sports centres have been busy building new ski lifts, such as the lift at the Scheidegg, and the new ski lifts at Zermatt and Davos. The necessity to train thousands of Swiss from the Lowlands in mountaineering and in skiing has added immense numbers to those who already climb and ski, with the result that standard courses are overcrowded during the week-end. Skiers who enjoyed real cross-country skiing will find that the standard courses merely serve to canalise the traffic of the speedmongers.

"Thank God for railways," said Hilaire Belloc. "They are the trenches which drain our modern civilisation — avoid them by as little as a mile and you will have as much peace as would fill a nosebag."

There has also been a definite revival of genuine cross-country skiing and ski mountaineering; and a certain reaction against the standard course vogue has set in.

Whether the standard of real skiing has improved is open to doubt. The times of the champions in the big races are certainly shorter, and the number of those who can rattle down the beaten snow on a standard course at high speed has also increased, but I doubt if the standard of cross-country skiing, as we knew it in the old days, has been improved. I doubt also that the number of skiers who ski fast and safely on all types of snow, and who have a good eye for a line in travelling over unknown country is any greater now than before the war.

Before the war British competitive skiers put up a fantastically fine performance against the Swiss. We only had a handful of skiers who could spend sufficient time on the snow, to compete against thousands and thousands of Continental skiers, who could ski for five or six months every year. None the less, in the last of the pre-war winters, the British Universities beat both the Swiss Universities and the Italian Universities. Robert Redhead won the Duke of Kent's Cup, which is in effect a world championship for skiers who are domiciled some distance from the mountains. Swiss who live in Berne can compete, but not the Swiss who live in Grindelwald or Zermatt. A London team only just missed winning the Town Team races, and succeeded in beating most of the Swiss towns. A British lady, Miss Steadman, won the blue ribbon, Alberg Kandahar.

Competitions Dull Without Us.

What hope have we of repeating these triumphs in the near future? Very little, I fear, for the "young entry" who should have been visiting the Alps during these last years have been training for a more exacting game.

We have been badly missed at the International Skiing Competitions, which, to put it bluntly, have been confoundedly dull without us. The British brought to these competitions something far more important than victories. Let me quote a tribute from Hermann Gurtner, one of the Founders of the Swiss University Ski Club. He is writing of the early days.

"Naturally in those days we skied better than the English, for it was a new sport so far as they were concerned, but they had some advantages over us. Their conception of sport was much more developed than our own, clarified through an age-long tradition. While they analysed our skiing technique, we also profited greatly from our mutual relationships. We learned to add a balance of spirit to a balance on skis; we learned the meaning of a good loser, of the man who loses with a smile. We learned the meaning of fair play — almost a novelty for us for which we have no synonym in our own mother language, and we had a jolly good time with our friends."

What are the prospects of us returning to the Alps next summer and next winter? We are undoubtedly very short of Foreign Exchange. If the Swiss insist on being paid in pounds on a gold basis, they will have to wait some considerable time for British tourist traffic to revive. At the time of writing (October 15th), negotiations are in progress which may be completed before this article appears, for a loan by the Swiss

Government for Swiss hotels, the security for which would be a blocked sterling account in London. An Englishman will pay in pounds, and these pounds would ultimately be used by the Swiss to buy goods in England. Our first task, of course, is to supply the Home Market and those of our Allies with such goods as they urgently need. Under this scheme the Swiss Government would have to accept the risk that pounds would depreciate in purchasing value before they could be used for the purchase of goods.

In conclusion, I should like to insist that the British have been missed for better reasons than the purely economic. No foreign guests are more welcome than us. There is a natural affinity between the British and the Swiss, and there were no competitive skiers with whom our relations were friendlier than the Swiss — particularly the Swiss University Ski Club.

"Something has gone out of the life of Switzerland since the English left," a Swiss said to me.

"There is a lack of colour and vitality about our popular resorts."

I remember on my return to Grindelwald, visiting a retired railway guard, who was living on his pension, and had no financial interest in the return of the English; but no Swiss could have had a greater affection for our country. The first sight of a returning Englishman proved too much for him. He took my hand in his, squeezed it affectionately, and could not speak for emotion. The tears ran down his cheek.

General Guisan, who commanded the Swiss army during the war, is the national hero in Switzerland. In 1940 there were defeatists even in the Swiss army who urged that it would be futile to resist in the event of a German invasion, for after the collapse of France, Switzerland was entirely surrounded by the Axis. The General summoned his staff officers to meet him at Rütli, the historic home of Swiss liberties, and pointed out that there was no reason why the Swiss should lose not only their freedom but also their self-respect.

"The war is not won by Germany until England falls, and even if England falls, we must fight, that our children and our children's children may still be proud to be Swiss."

The Swiss have three heroes to-day: General Guisan, Mr. Churchill and Field-Marshal Montgomery. The Field-Marshal used to ski at Lenk in the Bernese Oberland and his skiing boots with his name on the label are one of the show pieces of the hotel where he stayed.

A small boy in Lenk was asked by a Swiss:

"Do you know the name of our General?" and was expected to reply "General Guisan." Instead he replied:

"Of course I do. His name is General Montgomery."

I received, when I was in Switzerland, a very moving letter from a Swiss in which he paid a noble tribute to the British who fought not only for their own freedom, but also for ours. England's traditional policy of "balance of power" was a protection for us, for Swiss freedom is endangered the moment that one power on the Continent assumes a dominating position. The much-abused "balance of power" policy merely means that it is not in England's interests that any big bully should make things unpleasant for the little nations; and for this reason "the balance of

power" is a doctrine which commends itself to none more than to the little countries like Switzerland.

All Switzerland waited in suspense for Mr. Bevin's first speech as Foreign Minister, and all Switzerland rejoiced when they heard in that speech the authentic voice, not of party, but of England.

"It is easy," a great ambassador once remarked to me, "to pick holes in our foreign policy, and even easier to talk nonsense about 'Power Politics'; but, however much Continental nations may enjoy criticising us, there is one question they always ask when they are in a jam. 'Is England on our side?'"

The prestige of our own country was never higher in Switzerland than it is to-day. Unfortunately we are doing very little to take advantage of the prestige. The Americans are sweeping aside all war-time controls which are likely to hinder their export trade, and are making a great and successful bid to capture the Swiss market. As our hopes of skiing next winter in Switzerland depend very largely on our getting our share of that market, our failure to do so is bad news for British skiers.

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THE SWISS IN LONDON

Ambitious, filled with youthful hope,
He heard the call for wider scope
Across the narrow ocean
And, purposeful, with willing hands,
Set out to seek in distant lands
His fortune and promotion.

And so among us he appears,
In banking, shipping, trading spheres,
Dependable, efficient.
In Science, Industry and Art
Of ev'ry kind he plays his part,
In all of them proficient.

He serves in yet another guise:—
In all those caravanserais
For cheer and comfort noted,
He is conspicuous, at his post
As an attendant or as host,
To our welfare devoted.

He's shrewd, endowed with common sense,
Abhors all shams and false pretence,
Preferring facts to fiction,
And holds that man's equality
With discipline and loyalty
Stands not in contradiction.

He has his faults, is not a saint,
In speech and manner somewhat quaint,
By no means an ascetic.
He may be slow, but is no fool,
Can be as stubborn as a mule
And in his views emphatic.

But faithful service is his goal
And he performs a useful role
In this great far-flung city.
However humble he may be,
To him, with love and sympathy,
I dedicate this ditty.

J.J.F.S.