

Letter from Switzerland : A 'donkey' s bridge' to help a writer

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

IF ONE writes regularly for a newspaper it is sometimes very difficult to find the right level at which to aim.

During my many London years as correspondent for the now defunct "Basler Nachrichten," I often wondered whom I was addressing: the Basle University Professor of History Edgar Bonjour – who I know was a faithful reader of my despatches – or a simple shop assistant who also belonged to the paper's readers.

In other words in writing, for example, about a change from a Labour Government in Britain to a Conservative one (or vice-versa) how much knowledge about constitutional and statecraft matters in Britain could I suppose my readers had?

There was no means of ascertaining this and therefore no possibility of knowing. Nor could I know how many of the 36,000 certified readers of the "Basler Nachrichten" were sufficiently interested in things British to read my London despatches.

I consequently often had the

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feeling that I was writing "out of the window," as it were. This feeling of uncertainty soon led me to developing my own kind of exit from the impasse. My technique consisted in building up what in Switzerland is called a "donkey's bridge."

Thus when writing about a somewhat complex situation I would first try to explain the background in a few sentences, prefacing such explanations with the words "As the reader, of course, well knows . . ."

This formula was bound to flatter everybody. It flattered those who had really known and it flattered even more those who had had no idea. At any rate nobody could have taken umbrage at being told that, of

course, he was supposed to know every detail about politics and statecraft in Britain. It was a trick of the trade which served me well during the years.

And what about writing for the "Swiss Observer"? Here the situation is different. To begin with the paper's circulation is considerably smaller. Next I have known the Swiss Colony in Britain and have been part of it for so many years that I have come to know very many of its members. And many of the elder generation do, I know, remember me, especially from those wartime years when I gave a monthly talk in the NSH, which I called "Views on the News."

Over and above this there is

still a fairly regular contact between some of the Swiss Observer's readers and myself. Some of them come fairly regularly to Switzerland and some of them know that my doors are always wide open for old friends.

I have also received a fair number of letters from "Swiss Observer" readers. With one single exception they have all been of a pleasing nature, while the exception (which did not come from Britain, but from Switzerland) was abusive and was confined straight to the wastepaper basket.

The one difficulty about writing for the "Swiss Observer" is not one about finding the right level, but rather one of not knowing which subjects might particularly interest the readers.

If any subscriber wishes to give me advice on this, my address can be had from the paper's Managing Editor, Mr Derek Meakin. He is, I should like to add, making an excellent job of instilling new life into the old publication.

Gottfried Keller

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