

Letter from Switzerland

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LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

Some years ago, when I first came to Switzerland, the first thing I wanted to do was learn the local language. It hardly fitted into my scheme of things when I discovered that any number of languages and their respective dialects are spoken in this small country. All right, I thought, I shall have to start where I am. I'll have to learn German, for, after all, I was living in Zurich.

One day at breakfast in the small pension where I was living, I expressed this wish to the others at the table.

"German?" asked the student engineer whose favorite food was strawberry jam. "Why German? I mean, it is a related tongue—no doubt—but you should really learn *Swiss-German*, which is much older than German and more expressive, too."

"Good," I replied, "I shall be pleased to learn your Swiss-German, if you recommend it."

Frau Boeschli, our landlady, who was just bringing a fresh pot of strawberry jam for the engineer, interrupted. "No one can *learn* Swiss," she said. "You must be born here to speak it correctly!"

"I'm frightfully sorry about the omission," I countered, warming up to the repartee, "but I've already been born—some years ago, on Long Island, State of New York."

Strawberries flew through the air as my student friend coughed out his last bite of roll with jam. Frau Boeschli looked at her tablecloth—which had already been changed that week—and glared at me, as if I were responsible for the red stains she would have to wash out. At the last moment she must have realized that I was a foreign visitor to her country, and she tried to be helpful.

"I honestly think you should start with the German language—just to build up a background, and then you can slowly acquire a genuine Swiss accent and all the rest. Anyway, you don't know if you're going to stay in our country *that* long. To start with, why don't you go to the cinema every night—they show fine American and British films in Zurich—and read the subtitles? When somebody says something, you quickly read it underneath. Soon you'll be speaking like a native!" The others seemed to agree with her.

I took Frau Boeschli's advice and went downtown that same evening. The film I chose to see was called "Prairie Dust", a classic known in German as "Der Schmutz der Prärie". I was learning already, and the film hadn't even started. When it did, I realized that Frau Boeschli's suggestion had been a good one.

"I'll shoot ya dead, wise guy," said the hero at the beginning of the first reel. My eyes focussed on the subtitle: "Ich schiesse Sie tot, Mensch."

Wonderful, I thought, what a way to learn a language! Just then two little boys appeared on the screen, playing cowboy and indian. "Bang! Bang!" they said in unison. "Peng! Peng!" said the subtitle.

Then Daisy Mae, everybody's little darling of the Prairie Saloon, appeared. She waddled as gracefully as she could through the swinging doors and sat down at a table. "Gimme a whiskey, Sam," said Daisy Mae. My eyes dropped to the subtitles floating seductively over her ankles: "Gib mir einen Schuss Whiskey, Sam."

Two wicked-looking men in black entered. "Drop that gun, partner," one of them shouted to Sam the Bartender. ("Lass deinen Revolver fallen, Partner.") "O.K. ("Jawohl") ... but please ("aber bitte") ... don't shoot ("nicht schiessen")," implored Sam.

That was the extent of what I learned that night, for everything else was in English anyway. I mean cowboy was cowboy, gun was

revolver, prairie was *prärie*, whiskey was *whiskey*. The only real difference I discerned was that bang was "peng"—and that made the evening worth-while.

When I reported my findings to the breakfast-table assemblage the next morning, everyone was impressed. "You've learned your first lesson well," said Mr. Strawberry Jam (I never learned his real name). "But why spend all your money on the movies? Just listen to the radio. It may sound like gibberish at first, but pretty soon you'll begin picking out words, then phrases, then whole sentences. It can't fail!" I was a good student and a polite visitor to Switzerland, and I took his advice. That night I listened to what must have been a very important football match (we say "soccer" in America), while the student engineer recorded the whole thing on tape so that I could check the words later. "Who's playing?" I asked.

"The Grasshoppers are playing the All-Stars," he replied. And I listened to the announcer describe the game, which sounded something like this:

"Die Teams are both gut, aber der Manager von der Grasshoppers ist besser. Die All-Stars are ein very fair Team wenn they are not handicapiert. Ach, dere ist ein offside Goal, aber no Score, nur ein Penály. Himmel, what ein Match today!"

Maskentreiben in Urnäsch am 13. Januar, dem Silvestertag nach dem alten Julianischen Kalender. Photo Wolgensinger

Quelques-uns des masques qui s'ébatront dans les rues d'Urnäsch, le 13 janvier, la St-Sylvestre de l'ancien calendrier julien.

Maschere a Urnäsch (Appenzello) il 13 gennaio, giorno di S. Silvestro secondo l'antico calendario giuliano.

Mumming in Urnäsch on January 13, the New Year according to the old Julian Calendar.

So I learned, when the evening was over, that match is match, team is team, and manager is manager. I absorbed new words like *penály* and *handicapiert*, increased my vocabulary with *Grasshoppers* and *Fussball*.

The following morning I astounded everyone at the table with my first words of genuine high German. Goethe would have been proud of me. As Frau Boeschli entered with the *Milchkaffee*, I bowed in her direction and said, "Guten Morgen, honey, was ist der Score today?"

"Have a roll and some jam," whispered the engineer, "and keep your mouth shut!"

"I would much rather a whiskey have," said I, pleased with my first inverted sentence. "But that comes first later, when I into the city shall go."

"Stop him, he's mad!" shouted Frau Boeschli.

"It must be the weather," said the strawberry engineer. "What can we do with him?"

"Let your revolvers fall before I fall you all, you hear?" I noticed how the power of my German vocabulary had hypnotized everyone. They were startled, electrified and, of course, a little jealous too.

I got up from the table, proud of having acquired so much knowledge in so short a time. "Peng! Peng!" I snapped as I strode out of the room.

