

# Letter from Switzerland

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## LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

There are all kinds of winds in the world. Whirlwinds and tempests, hurricanes and typhoons, mistrals, siroccos and simooms. But there is no wind more insidious, more completely unpredictable, than the *Föhn* in Switzerland.

The odd thing about the *Föhn* is that few people know anything about it, except that it blows from the south, that it is a warm wind and that it encourages people to do strange things. And there is nothing stranger than doing strange things in Switzerland. Why a simple, old-fashioned sort of wind should have such great powers over a country as immovable as the Rock of Gibraltar is of some importance to the serious student of Switzerland.

I have personally spent more than a decade studying the odd meanderings of this wily wind. I have examined the *Föhn* as closely as anyone can investigate a wind. I have read of the *Föhn* in the works of authors who visited Switzerland and wrote of their experiences with the wind. I have collected horrible tales of devastation caused by the *Föhn* and stories of its hypnotic effect in countless legends and fables. Now, in the interests of greater scientific understanding, I am finally prepared to divulge the results of my research. The following information has been extracted from my study, which originally appeared under the title *The Föhn—A Mystery in Meteorological Metaphysics*.

What makes the *Föhn* so difficult for the average foreigner to understand is the fact that the word itself is so difficult to pronounce. If you say it correctly, it should come out sounding like the wind: a low, moaning groan beginning in the southern part of the esophagus and gushing forth out of the upper reaches of the lower palate. This is truly the *Föhn*. For people who don't know what an *Umlaut* is, the word can be written "Foehn", but the missing two dots make no difference in the pronunciation. The best way to pronounce it is with a slightly affected British accent and have it rhyme with "burn" or "turn". Drop the "r" and it should be quite easy.

Pronouncing "Föhn" is only the beginning, but nevertheless an important part of learning to live in Switzerland. The reason for this is that the *Föhn* is not only a wind, it is a magnificent excuse for not doing—or not being able to do—something. For example, your mother-in-law who lives in Bisendingen near Winterthur wants to visit you on Thursday evening for just an hour or two. You quickly look out at the mountains—and herein lies an important aspect of the *Föhn*'s powers. The mountains appear to be terribly close, and they seem to be moving closer and closer as one watches them.

"Aha!" says our anonymous friend with the mother-in-law. "The *Föhn* is blowing up a storm in the mountains and will no doubt continue to do so through Thursday. I shall tell mama-in-law that I can't see her because of the *Föhn*."

When I first heard stories of this kind, I thought the whole place was falling apart at the seams. What could a blasted wind have to do with one's parents-in-law? This was actually the beginning of my study of the *Föhn*.

The *Föhn* makes everyone a meteorologist. With the *Föhn* around there is no need for thermometers, barometers, hygrometers and anemometers. The good old bones of the human frame supply all the information that these instruments can, and in a much shorter

span of time. For when the *Föhn* blows, everyone feels just lousy. It is said that no one *wants* to feel good when the *Föhn* blows. For without it, there is no justifiable reason for doing poor work, for not being able to think and for generally taking life a bit easier than when there is no *Föhn*.

When I first began looking into the *Föhn*, I was convinced that it did not blow very often. I learned that the *Föhn* was not simply a southern wind, but one created by pressure differences on the northern and southern sides of the Alps. When the pressure drops on the northern side—or perhaps it's the other side, I'm not quite sure—a vacuum or something similar is created. And then the *Föhn*, which has been lying around dormant somewhere above Lugano, enjoying the quiet life of Southern Switzerland, is bodily pulled up the face of the Alps. When our placid wind reaches the peak of the Gotthard Pass it smashes at high speed into, or out of, the vacuum I mentioned earlier. Unable to turn back on itself, it rolls into the valleys of Northern Switzerland, swooshing down the peaceful flanks of the Alps like a roller-coaster in an amusement park. The *Föhn* draws with it the generally nicer weather of the south as well, causing thrillingly beautiful sunsets. But such sunsets often go unappreciated, for no one feels poetically inclined when he's got a headache.

The reason for the headaches is that people normally have headaches—not every day, of course, but every once in a while. The Swiss maintain that the *Föhn* makes aching bones feel aching, and I think we should let them continue to think so. If you laugh at the *Föhn* there is no doubt that you are a foreigner. It takes three years and five months, according to my survey, to become completely assimilated and to begin believing fervently in the powers of the *Föhn*. After two years or so, you give up fighting the *Föhn* protagonists, for there is little purpose in displaying one's ignorance in this country of weather experts.

When you first learn to speak German and someone asks you how you're feeling, you reply "gut, danke". Later, when you have been initiated to the cult of the *Föhn* and someone asks how you are, you do the following: you shift your weight uneasily from one foot to the other and you gaze through glazed eyes at the floor. Slowly raising your head, you reply, "Der *Föhn*". That's all there is to it. Learn to believe in the *Föhn* and your language improves instantly. Whatever is asked of you can be refused. As a matter of fact, I remember walking through an office recently in search of someone from whom I could ask some information. Every time I approached an employee, I got the same answer: "It's *Föhn* today."

Actually, I don't believe in the *Föhn* anymore. The scientific information I turned up in the course of my ten-year study has proved, once and for all, that a simple wind could not possibly have so strong an effect on the human organism. It is also completely fallacious to believe that the *Föhn* blows as frequently as it is reputed to. People often claim to have *Föhn* headaches when the *Bise*—a cold northern wind—is blowing. Not I. I always have a *Bise* headache when the *Föhn* is blowing ... and my writing ... is always just as clear ... and concise ... as the *Föhn* the *Föhn* the *Föhn*—you beautiful gust of wind—will allow.

ROAM THE CONTINENT—REST IN SWITZERLAND