

YOUR FATHER MEETS THE MOUNTAINS

for I.S. on her 55th birthday!

The first time I saw the Swiss Alps was when I got off the train that had brought me from Darmstadt in Germany to the train station in Basle in Switzerland, one wall of which bore a huge painting of the mountains I would live among for the coming year. A dramatic sight. The next train took me to Luzern, where I then boarded a cog-rail train built to handle steep inclines. And the climb from Luzern (1,385 ft.) to the Brünig Pass (3,307 ft.) was indeed steep, rising with a clack above small farms, barns, fields, cattle, and haystacks. The next stage of the journey was by the big yellow Swiss post bus, the boss of the road, with its Wagnerian four-tone horn to warn drivers on the narrow winding road to watch out and back off.

I got off the bus at the post office station in the village of Goldern (3,550 ft.), the site of the Ecole d'Humanité, where I was to teach or whatever -- a thousand meters above the valley and the town of Meiringen, with the snow-covered (in July) peaks of the Wetterhorn range (11,453 ft.) on the far side of the valley.



A few weeks passed before I found myself one of the adults leading a group of young summer guests of the Ecole on a hike up to Planplatten (7,365 ft.). Two of the hikers were vacationing teachers from the Odenwaldschule, whose founders (Paulus and Edith Cassirer Geheeb) had

been forced to leave Germany when the Nazis took over the school in the 1930s, returning after the war. (Marianne's mother had been a kindergarten teacher at the school in 1926.)

It took about an hour and a half to climb up through the flowering pastures to the steeper approach to a ridge – perhaps fifteen inches wide and about fifty feet long, with a long sheer drop on either side -- that led to a wider viewing point, high above the Brünig pass, offering a view of other mountains and the channeled Aare river, the Brienz Lake, and the town of Interlaken. I helped the children across this ridge, holding their hands and handing them on to the next adult, until we all stood on the viewing point. The height hadn't bothered me. (Decades later, taking the same trek with Claude Saucy, I froze after my first step onto the ridge and had to work my way back and down. Marianne will remember my reaction when, years later, she drove over a high pass on our way from southern Switzerland – Ticino -- to the Ecole. I couldn't bear to look down. Anna will recall my freaking out on the Nepali bus rattling along on a mountainside road with a long drop in view just outside the window. With age, heights scared me.)

That first summer I joined a group of Ecole students, including Juerg Papritz, Thomas Stocker, and Lilo von Papen (some names drift back) -- and at least one teacher – Heidi Schraner -- on a trek down to the valley and then up to the valley out of which flows the river that plunges in the form of the 820-foot Reichenbach Falls. That's where Sherlock Holmes had a "final" encounter with his nemesis, Doctor Moriarty, the two of them wrestling above the Falls, then supposedly tumbling to their doom. (There is a recreation of Holmes's living quarters in a little museum in Meiringen, and a statue of the pipe-smoking detective. A short walk from the museum stands the St. Michael church, beneath which lies the excavated site of a Roman-era altar.)

Once you've hiked up to the valley above the Falls you're facing, close-up, the Wetterhorn range, with the wide-lapped Rosenloui Glacier more or less in the center, flanked by other mountains. So up we went, through the jumble of glacial moraine and above the underground rivers of melting ice, which we could hear flowing and sometimes see. Then the ascent became serious – up we walked in single file atop the narrow spine of one of the mountains of the Wetterhorn range with—as you might expect -- a sharp drop to a distant bottom on either side and nothing to grab hold of if you fell. As I recall, Juerg, a Swiss, wore sandals.

The fording of a fast-flowing glacial river brought us, at last, to the Engelhorn Alpine Club hut above the clouds. No sign of the peaks, only the rumpled, gray cloudscape and the neighborly moon above it all. (Check out for photos, *on line*: "Where to see Alps Glaciers," including this bit: "Where glaciers go to die... at the terminus of the Rosenloui Glacier in Switzerland's Berner Oberland, above Meiringen.")

At the Ecole, the tradition was that so-called family groups would leave the school for ten days in the fall to go on a hike, taking backpacks and spending nights in hostels or barns, etc. In the fall of my first year at the school, I set out, together with an American teacher, Natalie

Peterson (later Natalie Luethi), from the school, arriving in the afternoon of the second day of hiking at a hostel at the top of the Grimsel Pass (7,100 ft.). The Grimsel Pass crosses the continental divide, with rivers on one side flowing to the North Sea and, on the other, to the Mediterranean. (The steep road is often used as part of the Tour de Suisse bicycle race, as Izette might want to know.)

The next morning we headed down into the valley – from Canton Bern into Canton Valais -- and that afternoon or the next Natalie and I decided that she would proceed with the group to a known youth hostel while I would check out the possibility of an overnight camp high above the valley, near the largest glacier in the Alps: the Aletsch. After about a two-hour climb, I realized I would never make it to the top and back before dark, so, seeing in the distance the pylons and cables of a lift soaring up from somewhere on the mountainside, I walked into a small village in which the men or boys were, with few exceptions, feeble-minded. I walked on until I found the man who was running the lift – a simple three-sided, wooden box, built (I thought) for carrying a sheep or two or a few bags of whatever up to the glacier. The pylons were very tall and there were a lot of them, rising in succession above.

The thought of looking down into the valley spooked me, so I sat in the box facing uphill. No, I was told. That wouldn't do. So I turned and, having paid the price, waited until the man pulled the switch and the box started moving. And, yikes! here we go. How tiny already the village in the valley below looked! And it kept getting smaller. The voyage up – so high above the ground and above the tall trees, with the box swinging slightly -- was nerve-wracking in itself, but each time the cable passed over a pylon, the wheels seemed to catch and whirl until, at last, the box moved on, swinging, toward the next pylon, as the village below shrank to doll-house size.

So it went until the lift halted, abruptly, next to a plain wooden platform. I had one leg on the platform and was about to swing the other aboard when, yikes again! the box started its journey downhill. I felt lucky. I also realized that I had better start down to the valley on foot if I wanted to catch up with the group before nightfall. As for the huge glacier, where was it? Somewhere up there. Just out of sight. On the far side of....

The skiing – I had never skied before -- on the slopes above the school was wonderful. On sunny snow days, classes would be suspended and everyone went skiing, with plum tarts and hot cocoa for lunch. Anna skied those slopes, and once Marianne and I watched as she skied down the slope, holding a torch, one of a long line of students and helpers.

It was up there above the school that, one day, skiing alone, I met a man who turned out to be an engineer with one of Switzerland's leading energy companies (Brown Boveri) and had been part of a consortium invited by the king of Nepal to help bring electricity to the country – building pylons, dynamos, etc. The man's name was Alf de Spindler and he had a chalet nearby and invited me to come in for a cup of tea and I remember being struck by the long, panoramic photo on the wall showing the entire Himalaya range.

Years later, Marianne and I rented de Spindler's chalet, and it was during our stay there that one of my former Ecole students – Rudi Lauterburg – came by for a visit. He was a wonderful and wild young man, who taught skiing to army officers as an assignment during his yearly stint of military service (and taught Marianne how to fine-slice an onion). We picked up skis in the shed at the Ecole and headed up to the new lift station, at Twing or Hohfluh, which took us up the mountain. When we got off the lift and strapped on our skis, Rudi saw that one of the straps didn't buckle. This didn't seem to bother him. He proceeded to ski down the steep and winding trail on one ski – the left one – catching up with the loose ski from time to time and keeping it alongside. Quite a feat. Never seen anything like it!

I'll leave it to your mother to tell the story about Rudi and his Danish wife, but here – briefly – is another. Your mother and I, and Claudia and Izette, staying in Edith Geheeb's vacation house in Ticino, with Rudi visiting, looked out the window one evening and saw a fire blazing on the hillside across the valley. It looked huge. Rudi said that, being a Swiss of military age, it was his duty to help put out the fire.

So we picked up a shovel and a rake and I drove down into the valley and then up the other side and onto a narrow cart path that led alongside a stone wall near where the fire was burning. I parked. We got out and climbed over a wall, ready to help to put out the fire and were surprised to find a whole village of people, old and young, sitting on the short stone walls on either side of a vineyard, calmly smoking and chatting. Rudi asked one of the men what was going on. The vineyard, the man explained, belonged to a German executive at Mercedes-Benz they hated. They were just making sure that the fire didn't spread into their vineyards.

PS. Eva Cassirer was the aunt of my Oberlin friend Brigitte – sister of Peter Somers – and it was she who suggested that I visit her aunt, Eva Cassirer, if I found myself in the neighborhood of the Odenwaldschule. After graduating from Oberlin, I spent a year engaged in various Quaker projects – working as an attendant in a criminally negligent mental hospital in Iowa, where my sanity was saved by my Black roommate, Edd Lee; delivering five-gallon jugs of water in Philadelphia and skipping jawboning sessions about whatever; and directing a production of Shaw's *Androcles and the Lion* in a newly opened Friends meeting house in a Philadelphia suburb.

When I boarded the Dutch freighter, *de Groote Beer*, in New York, in June, I had no idea what I would do once I disembarked in Antwerp. I just wanted to get out of the country. I had saved about \$300. I had a sleeping bag and a suitcase. When I arrived at a train station near the Odenwaldschule, I called the number Brig had given me, mentioning that I had a sleeping bag and would be glad to sleep in the woods. No such luck. I was urged to come up – and then to stay, and to get to know the school. And I was the Cassirers' guest at the school for a month, during which Kurt plotted with his sister in Switzerland, Edith Cassirer Geheeb, arranging for me to teach at the Ecole – well, for no salary, but that was beside the point. So that was that.

And I boarded a train, stepped down in Basle, where I saw the mountains on the wall...and then just across the valley.

