

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 9 (1943-1944)
Heft: 11

Artikel: British war prisoners in Switzerland
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-942704>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

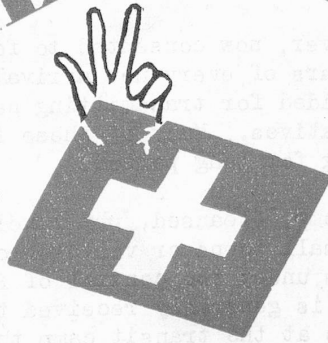
The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 14.03.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

HELVETIA

Monthly Publication of the



SWISS BENEVOLENT SOCIETY
in New Zealand

Group New Zealand of the N.H.G.

WELLINGTON.
AUGUST, 1944.

Vol. 11, 9th Year.

BRITISH WAR PRISONERS IN SWITZERLAND.

(An excellent article in refer to above from the pen of its Zurich correspondent appeared in the "Daily Telegraph" February 24th; though in some instances the lot of the prisoner may appear harsh or pleasurable it is, of course, self-evident that his living status is in some degree affected by the British Government which pays for his upkeep.)

Turbenthal, which Baedeker has the grace to mention yet the discrimination to refrain from dwelling upon, is a village of some 1,350 inhabitants in the valley of the Toess. The road leading to it from Winterthur runs through hilly and wooded country. Church spires silhouetted against grey winter sky proclaim the presence of other distant villages to right and left. The scenery is typical of the eastern Swiss lowlands, where several thousand British and Empire troops are now billeted.

On a day last week when, as it seemed, I broke in upon its aloofness, Turbenthal lay covered with snow.

The Swiss children swished dexterously along on skis. It was a strange yet not incongruous spectacle to come upon soldiers in battle dress brushing the snow, still powdery and white, from paths and doorways. There are now some 20 of these Swiss centres in which khaki-clad figures become a familiar sight.

Nearly all these troops have taken part in the campaigns of Africa and Greece. They hail from various parts of the British Isles, from Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and even Cyprus and Malta. They spent perilous and adventurous weeks and months making their way to Switzerland.

The men have adapted themselves to circumstances, and on the whole fit well into their surroundings. Many of them, both officers and other ranks, are welcome guests in Swiss homes.

There are two distinct categories of Allied soldiers now in Swiss territory. In the British case the most numerous are so-called evades who escaped from enemy prison camps. Their status is regulated by Article XIII of that section of the Hague Convention relating to the rights and duties of neutral Powers. This article is brief and explicit. It states: "The neutral Power which receives escaped prisoners of war will leave them at liberty. If it permits them to sojourn in its territory a place of residence may be assigned to them."

After presenting himself to the Swiss frontier guards the evade is passed on to the transit camp. There he remains for a quarantine period of approximately three weeks. During that time he may have no communication with any British diplomatic or military authorities. Moreover, these authorities have not been accorded any opportunity of inspecting the transit camps, of which the largest is at Olten.

The Swiss Government has, however, now consented to forward to the British Legation the name and particulars of every new arrival as soon as possible. Early opportunity is thus provided for transmitting news of the evades's whereabouts to his wife or relatives. Many of these former prisoners of war have been registered as missing for long periods.

On emerging from the transit camp, cleansed, physicked and redeemed, the soldier is transferred to one of the small towns or villages constituting the "place of residence assigned". He comes under the control of British officers and is fitted out with uniform, which is generally received through the agency of the Red Cross. When the men arrive at the transit camp they are dressed in a wide variety of attire, which more often than not has been given them by friendly disposed persons in Italy.

Non-commissioned officers and privates are accommodated in factories, gymnasiums, schools and other buildings. Conditions, according to British ideas, are somewhat primitive.

A stringent daily routine is enforced. Reveille is at 6.30, breakfast at 7.15, dinner at midday and supper at six p.m. Lights must be out by ten. But the slumber which it is insisted on should be thus peremptorily wooed proves often in present circumstances elusive. Soldiers well acquainted with the hardships of the desert campaigns, soldiers who lived through that bleak chapter in our history which will ever be associated with the name of Dunkirk, and men who fought bravely in the mountains of Greece do not ask for luxury. Yet a bunk, however hard, or a palliasse on which to lie would not seem an outlandish or unreasonable ambition in them. Swiss soldiers, it seems, habitually sleep on raised wooden floors covered with a layer of loose straw as our evades are now required to do.

Efforts are being made to improve this state of affairs, but results must naturally depend on considerations of finance. The cost of providing bed accommodation conforming to British military standards would amount to about 15 francs per man.

I found our officers in Switzerland reluctant to talk about their essential wants. By dint of much interlocutory delving, however, three main desiderata were discoverable.

First, the amount of pay which officers may draw while in Switzerland is small. All officers fully appreciate the reasons enforcing restrictions in this respect, but there is a very natural feeling that when the limitations imposed prevent them from returning hospitality it is bound to react unfavourably on British prestige, especially if comparisons are drawn with other nationalities. Moreover, the cost of living in Switzerland is immensely high. The purchase of most necessary articles is often beyond them. It does not seem too much to hope that some form of financial arrangement which is less radical in its effects will be found. The happy medium is all that is desired. Amounts which the officers at present are allowed to draw are below the sums which they would receive if still prisoners of war. This seems illogical.

Secondly, officers and men who have fought on various fronts resent the feeling that they are being regarded as "a legion lost". They would like to take full advantage of a seemingly golden opportunity of becoming mentally and physically fit in order to be in good condition to face and master whatever may lie ahead.

Greater possibilities of receiving vocational training would be welcomed. The morale of the troops is high, but inactivity is bound to react unfavourably in the long run. All sorts of excellent schemes have been devised for indulging in interesting and health-giving activities, but funds are required to carry them out.

Many evades have been prisoners of war for long periods. Unless they can now be provided with adequate mental and physical stimulus apathy may be their lot.

Thirdly, there is a sincere desire among all ranks to establish and maintain a good understanding with the Swiss authorities, with whom they are in daily contact. Luckily, despite months, sometimes years, spent in Italian or other prison camps, most British officers have retained a sense of humour. This has done much to smooth over some of the difficulties and misunderstandings which inevitably arose during the first months of their stay in Switzerland.

It would not be correct to suggest that the evade or interneer is denied all opportunity for intellectual activity or recreation. From its centre at Muenchenbuchsee, near Berne, the Y.M.C.A. organised a circulating library, a technical library of over 500 books, from which volumes may be borrowed, while gifts of books are made to various detachments.

This organisation has also distributed footballs, boxing gloves, musical instruments, games, playing cards and other welcome acquisitions received from the British Red Cross. There are also some facilities for the study of modern languages, shorthand, engineering, wireless, mathematics and other subjects.

In the recreation room of one centre I saw an internal combustion engine, which is used for demonstration purposes. An Australian captain is in charge of educational work, and he is in constant touch with the Y.M.C.A., which, among its manifold activities, supplies detachments with exercise books, blackboards, chalk, pencils and other necessary articles.

The British community in Switzerland has enthusiastically launched welfare work and seeks by every means within its power to render life more agreeable to the troops. In this respect a debt of gratitude is owed to the initiative of Mrs. Norton, wife of the British Minister, whose able personal supervision and practical help has aroused general praise.

The private soldier has 12 francs a week at his disposal. He is lucky in that beer and cigarettes are not only plentiful but cheap - much cheaper than in England at present. These two commodities are, indeed, about the sole exceptions in the universally high cost of living.

The soldier has advantages in cheap canteen prices when he wants, for example, a cup of tea or coffee. Here again the Y.M.C.A. has been instrumental in working out a system of milk rationing which, while, of course, conforming to all Swiss regulations, reacts to the benefit of the soldier consumer. The troops are quite well supplied with radio sets, with full opportunities for listening to B.B.C. programmes or any others they may select. Many excellent wireless sets have been received with gratitude from Swiss donors.

The dismal routine in the evade centres is occasionally relieved by rotation visits to Adelboden. These last about one month. During that time hotel amenities are enjoyed and skiing facilities are available. Excellent Swiss instructors are already converting tyros into quite proficient performers. Ski tests such as the second and third class ski tests in Great Britain, the Swiss gold and silver tests, have been passed by 23 officers and 32 other ranks. There is also a small detachment of officers and men at Arosa, where first-class skiing and gymnastics instruction has been organised.

With regard to the important matter of sustenance, the British soldier in general has an ampler ration scale than soldiers of Continental armies. Accordingly, he sometimes finds the food ration small in size, but, in fairness, it must be said that the quality everywhere is admitted to be excellent.

There was much gratification when the International Red Cross authorities managed to divert to Switzerland parcels from home addressed to prisoner-of-war camps in Italy. Soldiers were also able to receive quantities of back mail.

A second and much smaller class of British and Empire troops now in Switzerland is that of the interneers. They may have baled out of aircraft or be members of crews whose machines were obliged to make emergency landings here. Or, again, as infantrymen they may have retreated to the Swiss border and crossed it in the chase that followed the fall of France. Soldiers such as these, in accordance with international usage, are debarred from leaving Switzerland until the close

of hostilities, and must, theoretically at least, be kept under constant military guard.

The Swiss Government, however, has so far desisted from placing the internees in camps and much latitude is accorded them, for which the internees are duly grateful.

The evades are free to leave this neutral country as soon as the frontier opens.

.

THE SWISS SPOTLIGHT
(by Pierre Beguin).

One could hardly deny the fact that under the pressure of circumstances the individual rights guaranteed to Swiss citizens by the Constitution have been somewhat encroached upon.

Freedom of the press has been limited by the exercise of a control. Not a control over home policy but on journalistic activity that might compromise our neutrality. It is also forbidden to start publishing new papers or reviews without the permission of the government; this in order to forestall any attempt by foreign propaganda to mingle with the Swiss press.

Moving picture films must pass censorship, so that foreign propaganda shall not be able to falsify public opinion which must be formed from purely objective sources of information.

Furthermore, certain extremist parties which were a danger to the security of the State were placed under a ban, while public meetings of a political character were to be watched by police forces especially prepared for their work. And though this has been the case, we must admit that the freedom of the press, the freedom of association and assembly must be somewhat restricted, while in normal times these freedoms are without any limitations whatsoever in Switzerland.

For some time now numerous voices have been lifted in different parts of the country asking that these fundamental constitutional liberties be restored again without delay. This movement of opinion has grown to such dimensions that the Federal Council discussed it in one of its recent meetings. The Federal Council decided in fact that the matter shall be referred to the Parliament's Full Power Commission, who is to meet soon, and that the government will make a statement before the Federal Chambers on the subject at the time of the next session opening on Monday, June 5th. It seems, however, that the government does not intend to modify its present policy, as the circumstances which made present restrictions necessary, still exist. We still live in a beleaguered fortress in which public order must be kept at all cost as long as all danger from outside has not subsided. It must be admitted that these restrictive measures have given a great deal of trouble lately. The parties placed under ban have reformed under other names. As for the censorship it is much more indulgent than formerly.

In short, the limitations placed upon certain aspects of public life are not nearly so obnoxious as heretofore. But despite all this, it is a happy sign that public opinion should demand from time to time the full restoration of the citizen's rights as set forth in the Constitution. This proves that we do not become accustomed to their even temporary suppression, and that we remain firmly attached to those bindings which are the foundation of our public institutions. It provides a chance that these rights will be restored to their full order without delay, just as soon as circumstances permit.

.

SUNDRY NEWS FROM SWITZERLAND.

The Papal Nuncio in Berne, Archbishop Bernardini, led the Diplomatic Corps at the funeral of 37 people who were killed in the accidental bombing of Schaffhausen, during the recent raid. More than 20,000 people witnessed the Requiem Mass at St. John's Church and the subsequent burial.