

**Zeitschrift:** The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

**Herausgeber:** Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

**Band:** - (1984)

**Heft:** 1817

  

**Artikel:** The angel of the air...

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689637>

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‘The pilot knows his way,  
But what is that to me?  
The stewardess’s hands so fair  
Nought fairer can there be’

## The angel of the air...

FIFTY years ago this year Switzerland set the rest of Europe an example. The Swiss Air Transport Company Ltd – better known now as Swissair – appointed the continent’s first air hostess.

Her name was Nelly Diener and, wrote the press in 1934, “she is a blonde, curly-haired young lady with long eyelashes whose job it is to assist and comfort passengers on board the 15-seat Condor between Zurich and Berlin, ministering to their greater and lesser needs. This angel of the air wears a fabulously cute blue trouser-skirt and an extremely natty student’s cap...”

Although considered ultra-modern at the time, the American-built Curtiss Condor of 1934 was positively spartan compared with the airliners of today.

Nelly Diener served her 15 passengers out of a wicker basket containing not only drinks and sandwiches but also a first-aid kit. Passengers had to pay for their food and drinks – and were often generous with tips.

Tragically, Nelly Diener died in an accident only a few months later.

But the experiment had proved a resounding success. Four more stewardesses joined Swissair the following year, and there was never any shortage of applicants.

Now the company employs more than 2,000 “flight attendants”, the official designation of air hostesses and stewards. About two-thirds of them are female.

In the early days the job was considered adventurous – even hazardous. In the 1940s a DC-6 flight to New York could take up to 24 hours, enough time to get to know passengers well. Sometimes a grateful passenger would invite the whole crew out for a meal or to his home to celebrate his safe arrival.

Recalls Johanna Bigler-Voegeli, Swissair hostess from 1935 to 1938: “Flights to London were particularly lucrative – a tip of one hundred francs was quite on the cards. And we often received chocolates, flowers – even clothes”.

She also recalls being given a hero’s welcome after becoming the first woman to



Nelly Diener – Europe’s first air hostess

cross the English Channel by air. And every girl had her own log book in which admiring passengers recorded their praise – including poems like the one at the beginning of this article.

“Now and again”, one former stewardess remembers, “the heating system on board would stop working. And at altitudes of several thousand feet it could get uncomfortably cold.

“So we would wrap our passengers in blankets, and massage the legs of shivering ladies. To keep everyone happy we distributed free alcohol. We wanted to make sure people would go on flying with Swissair”.

On one occasion an aircraft door flew open and the basket containing the cutlery landed on the runway. The passengers had to use their fingers.

Aircraft with kitchens made it possible for

# ...reporting from Berne

the first time to serve hot meals. In the tourist class, the so-called lunch-box containing a sandwich, a hard-boiled egg, an apple and a piece of cake could be bought for Sfr 3.80 until, in the 1950s, food was included in the price of the ticket.

One story concerns the Indian Prime Minister Pandit Nehru, who was flying with his entourage from London to Berne. The special box containing their meals was labelled "not to be opened before serving".

The hostess followed the instructions – but then when she tried to serve the meal discovered the entire box was frozen solid. Despite the very fine, sunny weather, the heating had to be turned full on so that the food could be thawed out.

Each piece of chicken was wrapped in a serviette and placed under a seat where the air current was warmest. The meal was hastily served at the last minute and, although not completely thawed, it was at least edible.

Swissair is still getting praise from its passengers. Recently, one elderly couple – old age pensioners in their seventies – made their first ever flight when they flew the 150 miles from Zurich to Geneva.

As they left the airliner, they gave the stewardess an envelope containing a Sfr 5 piece (about £1.50) with the instructions: "That's for the captain ..."

★ ★ ★

*THE Camerata Berne* – Switzerland's leading chamber ensemble – is making a six-concert tour of England next month. The tour covers the North, South-West and the Midlands, culminating at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London on October 17.

The Camerata Berne was founded in 1962 by a group of eager young musicians studying at Berne Conservatory under British violinist Max Rostal. The ensemble has since grown from 11 to 15 musicians (string players and a harpsichordist) and the original members have been succeeded by a new generation of up-and-coming performers.

The Camerata has no conductor, and is frequently described as "an orchestra of soloists". Concertmaster since 1979 has been Thomas Füre (violin), under whose inspiring and lively leadership the Camerata has won increasing international acclaim.

Its performances of Elgar, for example –



*The Camerata Berne* – "they look far too young"

one of the most distinctively English composers – have been praised even by British critics as "truly exquisite" and notable for their "fabulous control".

The *Times* of London has praised the group's "finesse". And when the Camerata toured the United States and Canada last year, critics wrote: "A first-rate ensemble ... a great concert by a great group ... one of the finest chamber orchestras in Europe, if not the world".

Yet the average age of the Camerata is only 30. One of its violinists is Britain's Karen Turpie, who has lived in Switzerland for the past 10 years and was asked to join the ensemble in 1979.

Karen, who was born in Glasgow, studied in Scotland, Moscow and Berne and at the Yehudi Menuhin School in Surrey. Before joining the Camerata she performed with the Scottish National Orchestra and the Zurich

Chamber Orchestra.

Within the past year alone, the ensemble has toured the United States, Canada and the Netherlands and has also performed in Vienna and West Germany. Tours of North America and Australia are planned for next year.

Many audiences, says Karen, are surprised at the youthfulness of the Camerata. It's not unusual for older generation music lovers to exclaim as they see members of the ensemble arrive with their instruments for a concert: "That can't be them, my dear. They look far too young ..."

#### **Camerata concerts in September**

- 9 Harrogate
- 10 Newcastle upon Tyne
- 12 Liverpool
- 13 Sherborne, Dorset
- 16 Peterborough
- 17 London (Queen Elizabeth Hall)