

## Dropped from 'ell into 'eaven: interned POWS in Switzerland 1916-1918

Susan Barton

Tourism became a major part of the Swiss rural economy in several mountain villages by the beginning of the Twentieth century. In the years immediately preceding the First World War there was a hotel building boom in anticipation of record numbers of guests. The season 1913 to 1914 had been a bumper year for tourism, the best so far with over 30,000 visitors in Davos alone. Many hotels were heavily mortgaged to raise the funds for improvements and enlargements.

The unexpected outbreak of war suddenly curtailed the 1914 summer season and put an end to growth in the Swiss tourism industry for nearly a decade. The visitor and local resort press expected the war to be over quickly and the negative impacts on tourism to be just a temporary setback. Even in July 1914 the foreign papers said the threat was not so great that anyone need worry. It was a big shock when war actually broke out. All the foreigners left and the busy hotels were suddenly empty.<sup>1</sup> The foreign language press now adjusted its tone and parted with its readers with these words: 'We must painfully take leave for this season early, hearts full of worry and sorrow but also full of displeasure and shame over the collapse of the peaceful civilisation of old Europe'. It bid readers Auf Wiedersehen until the winter 1914/15, obviously expecting little long term disruption.<sup>2</sup> At

the time they believed it would be over in a few months. At the start of the winter season the *Engadin Express and Alpine Post* offered pathetic words of hope that Switzerland would become the world's sanatorium, a storm enveloped island of peace. The big hotels continued to advertise to their old customers.

Even before the declaration of war, the Swiss Army was mobilised to protect the borders and defend the country's neutrality. War left many tourism businesses in debt. As well as the damage to tourism there were acute labour shortages as women were left to carry on the jobs men had done alone. Agriculture suffered particularly from labour shortages, especially at hay making and harvest.

The resorts tried to carry on as best they could, delivering a much reduced programme of sports and activities for the winter and summer seasons. They attempted to diversify their market by attracting more local sportsmen and visitors from elsewhere in Switzerland.

From 1916 a different kind of visitor began to arrive in the resorts in the form of internees. These were prisoners of war exchanged between the belligerent nations, men who were ill or injured but likely to recover. As a neutral country Switzerland would ensure that when they recovered from their wounds they would remain in internment and not return to their homelands where they could rejoin the army or contribute to the war effort. Of course, being in a neutral

country the men could no longer be called POWs but internees. The internment of sick internees was done under the supervision of the Swiss army. Their care and accommodation was managed in the same way as for Swiss military patients with the costs met by each state for its own. Their own countries agreed to return anyone who ran away and no further internees would have the choice of interment in Switzerland.

The first of these, German prisoners, arrived in Davos in January 1916 when the local paper reported that Switzerland's humanitarian work for sick officers and soldiers from France and Germany in prison camps was taking shape. Hotels and pensions for a thousand prisoners were made available through the mediation of the Swiss Bundesrat with the governments of both countries. German internees came to Davos under the leadership of Herr Oberlieutenant Nieuhaus and French to Leysin and Montana.

Later in 1916 British internees were added to the French and German ones. The main centres of British internment were in Chateaux d'Oex and in Mürren in the Bernese Oberland with smaller centres and training facilities at Maieringen, Vevey, Diablerets and Lucerne. The small remaining British colony of regular visitors in Davos had a collection and sent them a telegram of welcome and a cheque. Other nationalities gave to the collection for the British Red Cross in Berne to help interned prisoners in Switzerland.<sup>3</sup> In May 1916 around 350

wounded men were transferred to neutral Switzerland from German prison camps.

Our men were astounded at the welcome, many were crying like children, a few fainted with emotion. As one private said to Grant Duff, the British minister responsible, "God bless you sir, it's like dropping right into 'eaven from 'ell".<sup>4</sup>

In Leysin allied soldiers, including British, were cared for who had contracted TB while imprisoned in Germany. Several clinics were transformed into military establishments where several thousand soldiers stayed until they returned to their homelands following the armistice. Over a three year period 6,000 French, English and Belgium soldiers received care in Leysin.<sup>5</sup> Sanatoria became military clinics and officers were lodged in the Grand Hotel. Most internees returned home but 117 soldiers died at Leysin (88 French, 18 English, 11 Belgian). In 1921 a memorial was erected in the Leysin cemetery.

At Mürren, a camp that opened in August 1916, in the Bernese Oberland there were, in 1917, 400 British soldiers including twenty officers. These included men from Australia, Canada and even Americans who had enlisted in Canada. There was a shop where watches were repaired, a carpenter, a printing office that produced a monthly camp newspaper, a tailor shop, dentist and a chauffeur school, all employing internees. There was a YMCA hall for entertainment and

football, cricket and hockey games organised. The streets of Mürren had been rechristened with London names: Picadilly, Fleet Street, Strand, Edgware Road and Regent Street. The plainer end of the village was known as Whitechapel.

Obviously being interned cannot and should not be compared with a holiday although the men were quartered in hotels, boarding houses and sanatoria as well as camps. The Swiss Hotel Keepers Association had investigated and requested that special consideration be given to hotels in distress because of the war as long as they met the required conditions.<sup>6</sup> It was also seen as important that the hotels chosen were not frequented by foreigners so as to avoid mixing between foreigners and interned men.

Accommodation was allocated according to rank, officers had more funds for food and stayed in high class hotels separate from NCOs, corporals and soldiers. Officers and men were lodged in the Hotel des Alpes and other hotels, the officers in the front, Tommies at the back. The walls of their rooms were adorned with photographs of family back home. Forty men were housed in the Hotel Eiger, including two Canadians, one of whom wrote to his mother describing life in Mürren. His room was well furnished and steam heated. He had “a view that was quite poetic – already I have been climbing up among the hills- soon I hope to skate, ski etc”, he wrote home. Civilians were also interned. Those who could not afford to pay for their own accommodation were treated as soldiers. Proprietors of the accommodation were paid 6

Francs for officers and 4 Francs for soldiers with extra food for TB patients, up to 8 francs and 5 francs.<sup>7</sup> There was a feeding plan, or list of food for internees that would not have given the hoteliers much profit, what with rationing and inflation. Records of food purchases and complaints about meals were kept. There was also free education and those who were well enough were expected to work. Many helped on farms, often forming work parties to do seasonal work. This helped out many Swiss women left alone to manage farms who struggled with some of the tasks and workload especially at haymaking and harvest. Other men went to work in other towns and villages in a variety of roles. There were also training schools to teach the internees new skills so they could find work when they returned home. In Vevey and Meiringen there were training centres where internees could learn to drive, become mechanics, accountants, carpenters or learn a foreign language. Training was also offered in Mürren and Chateau d'Oex. Teachers were sent out from Britain or recruited from among the internees. Activities were co-ordinated by staff sent out from Britain. In Mürren ski-pioneer Arnold Lunn and his wife Mabel organised entertainment and activities for the men interned there. The YMCA also set up huts and activities to keep the men occupied.

Of course there were breaches of discipline, mainly caused by “alcohol and sexual immorality”.<sup>8</sup> Frequenting inns became restricted and alternative amusements introduced.

Alcohol was prohibited during the day except with the midday meal, two decilitres of wine or half a bottle of beer, with the authorisation of the physician.<sup>9</sup> In Leysin the local authorities did not wish to take any steps to keep interned men out of cafes as it was a good source of income to small businesses. It was always the same story said one monthly report from Central Switzerland, “wine, women and song, and song is the least harmful”.<sup>10</sup>

British soldiers interned in Mürren allegedly had too much money to spend, 8,000 francs poured in to the camp in just two days on 20 and 21 September 1916. As a consequence there were 65 punishments for alcohol related incidents compared with only six between 12 and 31 August despite the ban on liquor drinking and closure of cafes. In Diablerets 270 men received 23,000 Francs in two months and there were many disorders there too. An interned soldier, Arthur March, writing home to Canada in December 1917 told his family “It seems that it is difficult to get money here, a great many of the old soldiers had a weakness for “booze” and a poor sense of responsibility. They failed to remember that they were guests of one of the greatest little countries on the earth, so the British government, ashamed of their conduct, not only punished them but took steps that would prevent them having too much money”.<sup>11</sup>

In Chateau d’Oex, Katherine Furse worked hard to get a YMCA type leisure hut for the men interned there, offering

food, whist and social activities. After two months of the Grey Hut opening crime was down 90 per cent and drunkenness was almost nil.

Alcoholics were confined to special, segregated camps and heavily restricted. Banned from cafes they were often sold drink by local people though, bought with money sent to friends and passed to them.

In Murren from July 1916, internees produced their own magazine, *BIM*, British Interned Murren. Reading *BIM* gives an insight into the preoccupations of daily life as an internee. Sport played an important role in the life of internees. Football, between teams from different hotels, was a big thing. There were regular matches and a league competition. As the war progressed there were tournaments between internees in different villages and towns. Swiss teams joined in too. Young Boys football team came from Berne to Murren to play against the internee teams. It wasn't just football but cricket and individual sports like tennis were important preoccupations. In winter there was ice hockey, especially popular where there Canadian soldiers were interned.

As soon as news of the first arrivals of exchanged prisoners reached home, some officers' wives made their way to Switzerland and soon other women, mothers and fiancées as well as wives, went out when they heard their husbands were in Switzerland. According to Lieutenant Colonel Picot of the Berne Legation, it struck him "as eminently desirable that

NCOs and men should also, if feasible, have the opportunity to see their wives or members of their families".<sup>12</sup> Picot contacted the War Office about it. Lord Northcliffe, the owner of *The Times* newspaper, had seen the Mürren camp and thought it a good idea. By means of *The Times*, Northcliffe collected funds and helped make arrangements for the care of the women in transit and in Switzerland. The Red Cross received £12,187 in donations for relatives' visits in 1917 and £15,000 was expected in 1918. The average cost per visit was £25 and around 600 women were able to travel.<sup>13</sup>

The Red Cross organised visits for mothers, wives and children who came out to visit internees and stay for two weeks in the resorts. The Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland Prisoner of War Committee sent out the wives and mothers of ten of them.<sup>14</sup> Some of the women who went out to spend time with their loved ones in Switzerland had much longer journeys than those from England. One wife travelled from Toronto in Canada to visit her husband, Sgt George Cameron of the 48<sup>th</sup> Highlanders of Toronto who was taken prisoner at the second Battle of Ypres. Mrs Cameron came to the Mürren Camp in September 1916.<sup>15</sup>

Women travelled under the care of chaperones for a fortnight's visit to the camps. The YWCA leased a house in Bedford Square in London as a hostel where the women could assemble and stay before departure.<sup>16</sup> The first group

went out to Switzerland in September 1916. When the first group of eighteen women arrived in Mürren all the men turned out to greet them.<sup>17</sup> An excited crowd of soldiers, armed with every conceivable instrument of noise, including borrowed cow bells, met the women at the railway station, and escorted them by the light of torches to their hotels, the visit must have passed like a dream, for Mürren remained en fête for the whole fortnight and the men had the time of their life.<sup>18</sup> The women's visits were interesting enough to be reported in the *BIM* magazine and in local newspapers back home in Britain. One officer, injured at Loos, a former stockbroker who enlisted in August 1914 rented a nice cottage on the mountain where his family had joined him. Max Amstutz, later a collaborator with Arnold Lunn in the promotion of downhill skiing, took souvenir "walker" type photos of the couples as if it were a normal holiday.<sup>19</sup>

A heart-warming story appeared in the *Northampton Independent* newspaper in February 1917. Mrs H. Stock of Kettering was full of joy and gratitude in being able to visit her son, a private in the 6<sup>th</sup> Northamptonshire Regiment, in Mürren. Mrs Stock had been grieving for her son, who she thought had been killed over a year earlier when he went missing in action. He was actually wounded, losing an eye and suffering a shattered hand, and a prisoner of war in Germany. Private Harry Stock was in good spirits and full of gratitude for his freedom from the horrors of imprisonment in Germany where his chief joy was receiving parcels from

the "*Independent*" newspaper's fund towards which the people of Kettering had subscribed generously. Mrs Stock was sixty and it was a memorable journey for her. She'd never even been to London before. Among her thrilling experiences was a day in Paris and a railway climb up a mountain through snow and ice, 8,000 feet up. Private Stock wrote to the woman organising the fund thanking her for the kindness shown to him in sending the mittens, socks and gloves and for the kindness shown to his mother by sending her to come and see him. He wrote he had a pass to go to Interlaken to meet her. During the visit the pair had acted like any other tourists. The rest of his letter is like a holiday postcard.

I have seen all the sights. I got her to go down on a toboggan but could not get her to come down a second time. They built a new railway which goes straight up another 3,000 feet higher and there starts another toboggan run about two and a half miles long. I took her up on the railway but she would not come down on the run, so I met her at the bottom.<sup>20</sup>

The railway referred to is the Allmendhubel funicular opened in 1912 which still operates.

A total of 1,600 couples enjoyed the free hospitality of the Red Cross.

The first group of women taken to Chateau d'Oex was led by Katherine Furse, daughter of John Addington Symonds, a winter sports pioneer and enthusiast.

Some women who could afford to do so stayed on in Switzerland and news of weddings, births and christening among the community as a result of these visits were enthusiastically communicated. One English man, Edward Varley, married a Mürren girl, Anna Huggler, and the couple ran a shop in the village. He remained behind after the war ended. Their son, Ted, was a member of the Kandahar Ski Club and joined in many races of the Club with the rival Swiss Academic Ski-Club organised by Arnold Lunn and Walter Amstutz. Grandchildren of the couple, Chloe and Royston Varley, were both skiers for Great Britain at international level.

In Murren, Arnold Lunn took groups out skiing and helped further develop the sport in the Bernese Oberland. A small group led by Lunn made a crossing of the Bernese Oberland on skis in June 1916.

At Murren as well as skiing with Arnold Lunn, curling, skating and ice hockey, enjoyed particularly by Canadians, there was the Total Abstinence Rambling Club with seventy members, an orchestra and wood carving classes.<sup>21</sup> There was also football, tennis and boxing.<sup>22</sup> There were football, cricket and hockey leagues between the different hotels. Private John

Halligan was interned in the Palace Hotel in Mürren and seems to have enjoyed the

“opportunity for winter sports, which in some cases caused additional problems: We would like very much, if you would send some warm under clothing, the weather is very cold, we had a heavy fall of snow some days back and the boys had some good sport, but unfortunately there were some accidents in the bob sleighing and several of the men got bad hurts, they are confined to bed for a time”.<sup>23</sup>

Even with all these activities, internees got bored. “There is nowhere in the world a finer scenic beauty than at and from Murren but one mustn’t speak of it to the soldiers. They’re fed up on the scenery” said the *New York Times*.<sup>24</sup>

The hope of going home kept up the morale of many internees. Medical examinations to select the more serious cases to be repatriated were a source of anticipation and anxiety. When a group were selected the waiting time to actually leave seemed to drag. It dampened the spirits of those who had to stay behind and some of them questioned whether their sporting activities had made them appear fit and healthy and not suitable for repatriation. Soon after a party left for home another group took their place.

Switzerland was badly affected by the influenza epidemic that killed thousands of people across Europe from 1917. The internment camps and resorts were vulnerable as they

created the perfect conditions for disease to spread: people weakened by injury, poor food and exhaustion living in close confinement. Spanish flu, or the Grippe, meant meetings and social events were banned. Newspapers gave advice on healthy living and avoiding infection. Keep your distance; no kissing; no shaking hands; ventilation and hygiene were important. Dances, choirs, gymnastics and worship were cancelled. New arrivals in a community were in quarantine for three days. Altogether in Switzerland around 25,000 people died of the disease.<sup>25</sup>

The magazine *BIM* came to an abrupt halt when peace was declared which may have come as a surprise as news of the war was kept from the internees. When the internees were brought home they were welcomed as heroes with parades and civic ceremonies in their home towns.

---

<sup>1</sup> Silvio Margadent und Marcella Maier, *St Moritz Streiflichter auf eine aussergewöhnliche Entwicklung*, Verlag Walter Cammeter, St Moritz, 1993, p. 182

<sup>2</sup> Margadent and Maier, p. 182-185

<sup>3</sup> *Davoser Blätter*, 3 June 1916

<sup>4</sup> Camps in Switzerland website

<sup>5</sup> Maurice André, *Leysin Station Medicale*, p. 29

<sup>6</sup> *Bulletin of Social Legislation on the Henry Bergh Foundation for the Promotion of Humane Education*, No. 5, p.22

<sup>7</sup> P. 23

<sup>8</sup> P. 29

<sup>9</sup> P. 30

<sup>10</sup> P. 31

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Cyril March, South Shore Genealogical Society, Letters Home from the Front, 30 December 1917.

<sup>12</sup> *The British Interned in Switzerland* by Lieutenant-Colonel H. P. Picot CBE, Officier de la Legion d'Honneur, late military attaché HM's Legation Berne and British Officer of the Interned in Switzerland, Edward Arnold, London, 1919, p.183

<sup>13</sup> Picot, p. 185

<sup>14</sup> Ben Beazley, *Leicester During the Great War*, p. 128

<sup>15</sup> Toronto Star, 17 February 1917, transcribed in Canadian Great War Project, letters from the front.

<http://www.canadian>

<sup>16</sup> Picot, p. 184

<sup>17</sup> Picot, p.184

<sup>18</sup> Picot, p. 185

---

<sup>19</sup> Prisoners of War 1914-1918, Camp magazines and exchanged PoWs: Section 4, p. 5,  
<http://www.prisonersofwar1914-18document.com/downloads-section4.php>

<sup>20</sup> *Northampton Independent*, February 1917

<sup>21</sup> *Bulletin of Social Legislation*, p.43; Picot, p. 186

<sup>22</sup> Picot, p. 186

<sup>23</sup> *Connaught Telegraph*, 30 December 1916

<sup>24</sup> *New York Times*, 31 August 1917

<sup>25</sup> Susanna Ruf, p. 66