

The hotel run by the guests

Ten days later, on 18th July, Frank Buchman and his team of friends arrive from Britain. In the Swiss village of Vallorbe, on the frontier with France, 150 sit down to breakfast with the mayor. One of the party recalls: ‘We were wakened early as the train came to a shuddering halt at the border...There was a station café on the platform, and any initial annoyance at being wakened by officialdom turned to bliss when Swiss breakfast arrived. The sun shone bright and warm, and the crisp rolls and croissants melted in the mouth; there were beautiful swirls of real butter, black cherry jam and absolutely delicious real coffee. The contrast between this and the kind of food available in post-war England was all too vivid.’¹

Buchman hurries on to Caux by car, while the rest of the party come on by coach. It is raining as he arrives. He notes at the front door that he was in Caux before any of the others there present – he’d visited the Caux Palace Hotel for tea in its days of glory as a Palace Hotel in 1903, during a European tour. Wieselgren recalls, ‘We all met on the open space outside the big dining room.’ It was the first time that many of them had seen Buchman or heard him speak. By now the sun is shining, and it is very hot, ‘there were only narrow shadows behind the tree trunks, and I tried to stand in the shade’. In the evening, there’s a friendly gathering, almost a party of all those in the house. The work team leaders are introduced to Buchman, but he insists on meeting *all* those who have been doing the work, and thanking them. In Nussbaum’s words, ‘He wanted to meet all those who by their work and their time, but also their love invested in the restoration work allowed them to offer him a Mountain House that was welcoming as a family home.’

It is worth recalling that Buchman was already 68 years old, handicapped by a major stroke that had nearly killed him in 1942. He was perhaps a charismatic leader, but of a strangely self-effacing type. He never wrote a play or book, but he inspired others to do so. He wasn’t the chief executive of a large international organisation, but rather the inspirer, encourager, corrector, of a fast-growing informal fellowship.

Those who were present recall the shock of Buchman’s challenging words on arrival: ‘Where are the Germans? You will never rebuild Europe without the Germans.’ Men and women who had suffered in the war were to be faced again and again in Caux with the painful confrontation with their former enemies. But in fact, there were a handful of Germans present in Caux, and a few Germans had already joined their European friends at the Interlaken conference over Easter. It had always been very clear to the Swiss founders that the healing of Europe that was an important part of their vision would have to include the Germans. David Hind, then recently demobilised from the British army, recalled, ‘There was some concern and reactions, as many had suffered in the war. But for myself, a young army officer, I suddenly realised what Buchman was about – nothing less than the re-creating Europe and the world.’²

Wieselgren remembers, ‘My main memories are of the kitchen. I have never worked so hard. For instance grating cheese by hand for three or four hours without stopping, or stirring a mayonnaise that would not blend. But there were no long faces. Frank (Buchman) believed in inspiring people through the right meals and

¹ *Never to lose my vision*, by Clara JAEGER, Grosvenor Books, London, 1995, p. 86.

² *Letter to the author, dated 13th November 1995.*

The Hotel run by the Guests

that it was most important what you served and how you did it. Care should be visible in the food. That was something I learned there.’ Later in August, Nussbaum notes a main morning meeting where Buchman talks about food. ‘He talks about it at length, quietly. Rather naïvely, like a gourmet, he compares the food that you could expect in a good hotel, and the food that he’s served here, where we all eat the same quality of food.’ ‘And now, I don’t want to hear any more about food!’ Buchman concludes.

Buchman was an American of Swiss-German extraction, and spent a formative period in his childhood in a small railway hotel in Pennsylvania, his biographer, Garth Lean, notes. There ‘he saw his parents acting as hosts to a wide assortment of travellers, taking meticulous care in preparing rooms and serving meals which was to be a practice with him all his life’.¹ This helps us to understand the importance still given today in Caux to the meals and the opportunities that they give for informal exchanges.

In early August, the stage scenery of *The Forgotten Factor*, a play depicting some of the problems of industry through the life of two families, an industrialist’s and a trade unionist’s, arrives by rail, 4 wagons. The wagons are shunted along the front of the house on the branch line of which I recall seeing traces in the tarmac. There is even some silent film footage of them unloading the sets into the theatre workshop, with a young English giant, well over two metres, called Neville Brazier on one side, and a midget-seeming Swiss customs man on the other. 560 people are now taking part in the conference, with 534 sleeping in the house.

Nussbaum gives a revealing little dialogue, based perhaps on a real conversation; one of the secrets of these busy weeks, so full of people and work, but also of fun and depth:

- ‘Ah yes, these note books everyone has. Are they compulsory? Is it a rule? Look over there at those people, grouped round in a circle, leaning over their note books with pens or pencils in hand. Is one of them whispering to the others some orders of the day? No? They’re having a time of quiet? Can’t be. You mean that in the middle of all this too and fro, this bustle, they’re having a time of quiet? Oh, I stop for a moment of quiet sometimes, but alone, and in the silence of my office. But you can listen for God’s leading no matter where or when? Listen to God?’

- ‘Yes, the time of quiet is nothing other than seeking an inner stillness so that we can find the leading of God.’

Later that August, Switzerland’s leading newspaper, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*¹ runs a first major article on ‘Caux – a new world centre’. Under a sub-heading ‘The hotel is run by the guests’, the journalist remarks on one of the characteristics of Caux that will be much commented on and sometimes ridiculed over the years to come. ‘Before having worked in one of the working teams it is difficult to understand how such an unusual system of running things can work satisfactorily. On Sunday morning it happened that while I was peeling potatoes I found myself sitting between a Swedish bishop on my right and an English Lord on my left who had already had three weeks in Caux and had gained a certain skill in the preparation of vegetables. Also in the team were two English miners, a Finnish farmer, a Swedish industrialist, a Swiss girl from the Rheintal, a woman from Milan, a German girl and some others...

¹ ‘Frank Buchman - a life’, by Garth LEAN, Constable, London, 1985, pp.5-6.

‘The wash-up team with which I worked another day was run with skill by a Norwegian pianist. With him was a Scottish doctor, an English shipyard worker, two miners, two students, an engineer and two journalists... The work is done speedily, as I saw for myself, without any irritation or tension. It began always with a moment of silence, during which everyone thinks of the work as a whole and his own part in it. This seems to be an efficient way of producing a sense of inner relaxation combined with concentration, which gives a very pleasant atmosphere to the whole house.’ A few years later, a photograph of Italian Members of Parliament of different parties collaborating at the Caux wash-up provoked laughter and ridicule from one end of Italy to the other. Given the current lack of respect for politicians today, not least in Italy, a public relations consultant could do worse than present such an image of service. It might bring to mind the blunt motto of Sandhurst, the British academy for training army officers, where my father spent most of his professional life: ‘Serve to lead’.

If problems come up during the work, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* writer notes, there may be another ‘moment of silence’. ‘It is interesting to notice what a liberating effect this has in furthering teamwork and a team spirit,’ he remarks. There’s another team that arranges flowers: ‘their bouquets are real works of art’. ‘These spontaneously created teams, each with its part in serving the whole, are an important element in the family life at Caux.’

Only then does he go on to talk about the meetings: ‘It would be impossible to imagine a more universal, varied and honest exchange.’ He continues, ‘One heard Indians and South Africans, Irish and British, French and Germans, owners, managers, workers, generals, priests, speaking on these occasions from the same platform about their experience of Moral Re-Armament. After that, one cannot help, even from a purely objective point of view, noting a phenomenon which cannot be understood by the intellect alone. This phenomenon can be demonstrated but it cannot be fully grasped. It is the fact that God can change man’s heart, and in doing so can change man’s previous habits and opinions. Whoever attended these meetings, even in a sceptical spirit, must have been impressed by the wealth of testimony to the often quite remarkable results in all the different areas of life, produced by courageous application of the basic principles of honesty, purity, unselfishness and love. Here was revealed the practical possibility of a moral and spiritual renaissance without which the world in its present state of technical advance is lost. Without such a renaissance, order will never be brought out of our present material chaos and spiritual confusion.’

Finally, after noting the quality of the musical presentations and the plays, the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* article closes, ‘Caux has every chance of becoming a world centre of a very outstanding kind. The remarkable yet normal thing about it is that the whole undertaking has sprung from private initiative.’ The journalist from the *Tribune de Genève*,¹ is similarly struck by the way that the work of the house is organised, and the way that all the participants help: ‘Here, “neighbour” is no empty word. It is a living and ever-present reality.’

The correspondent from the *Journal de Montreux* also enthuses about the different plays and the music, ‘so different from the platitudes or foolishness that are so often offered to the public, with the aim of amusing them, and which disgust, exasperate or demoralise’. *The Forgotten Factor* is ‘remarkable, gripping, fascinating, overwhelming, offering answers to the anguished questions that all of humanity asks itself’.

¹ *NZZ, Saturday 28th September 1946, anonymous translation from the Caux archives.*

The *Gazette de Lausanne* talks of the old Palace hotel being like ‘a dispossessed king’, with no riches other than the view and memories of a vanished past, dying to be re-born again. ‘The old man with the heart of stone had to be cleaned and transformed from top to bottom.’ All the money has been raised in Switzerland, the writer reports, ‘for this European building site where the stones themselves speak’. ‘A right and unselfish idea whose time has come can sometimes work miracles.’ It’s true that one meets a good many British and Americans in Caux, ‘and we Europeans tend to judge them harshly, but they bring us a breath of fresh air, a spirit of sacrifice, on the attack’.

The people of Moral Re-Armament brought to this work much of the language of war. Professor Theophil Spoerri, who had worked with Buchman since the 1930s, talks of ‘a world-wide offensive’ and notes that ‘Many of Buchman’s younger comrades-in-arms had by now come back from war service. They had experienced inhuman suffering and foresaw worse to come unless a saner world could be built before it was too late. They were ready for any sacrifice.’² An MRA report of the period headlines: ‘The war of arms is finished but the war of ideas goes on’. It quotes General Henri Guisan, the head of the Swiss army through the war years of armed neutrality, on a visit to the Caux centre: ‘I have been most touched by the way you welcomed me here and deeply impressed by what I have heard of Moral Re-Armament.’ Under the headline, ‘Caux – heart of a new Europe’ the report describes the aim of this first summer’s conference: ‘Their object was to forge a philosophy and train a force adequate to set freedom on the march across Europe and the world, and to give democracy an inspired ideology as the answer to totalitarianism of any kind.’ ‘Fighting men of many nations came as delegates to Caux. Many of them having been released from service in the war of arms, offered their lifetime service in the new enlistment to fight for freedom and a remade world.’³

The report also quotes a group of British Labour Members of Parliament: ‘We have seen here the force and philosophy which can give Labour a new spiritual dynamic and bring unity where there is the danger of discord.’ It goes on: ‘Coal played a key part in the Assembly. From nation after nation came the story of the battle for coal...for coal remains the heart of industrial power.’ From the mining areas of Britain – from Scotland, South Wales, Durham, Yorkshire, Staffordshire and Lancashire – ‘came strong delegations with news of an answer’. ‘My heart has moved from Moscow to Caux,’ says one miner. ‘In the past I fought for Communism. Now I see something bigger.’ Another Welsh trade union man is quoted, ‘For 28 years I took a major part in the class struggle to exterminate capitalists.’ He now realises that management ‘are all human beings’. A Scots employer, who with his wife, in the years of the Depression before the war, had sold their large home and moved into a simple workers cottage to keep their employees in work, says, ‘Before I altered my attitude I had created many extreme Communists on account of my methods. A great deal of the present trouble in industry is due to the kind of way management has behaved during the last 150 years.’

Closer to Caux, a group of 7 involved in a dispute at the Oerlikon factory in Zürich, have found a new spirit together here. One of them, Jacob Braem, says: ‘We have got to know one another here better than we ever thought possible. In four days we have gone further to solve our problems than in the past four years.’ Mr.

¹ *Tribune de Genève*, 28th October 1946

² *Dynamic out of Silence*, by Theophil SPOERRI, Grosvenor Books, London, 1976, p.161.

³ *New World News* vol.2 no.9, September 1946.

Ruiker, a Member of the Executive of the All-India Trades Union Congress and Member of the Legislative Assembly of the Central Provinces reports that he saw Mahatma Gandhi before coming to Caux, and that the Mahatma 'asked me to tell him about it when I go back'. Another Indian, Abid Ali, says: 'This conference has given us a completely new picture of the British.'¹

In August, the weary Nussbaum notes that people from 25 countries have passed through Caux since that modest start in June. The Swiss MRA Foundation's first report notes that in all, 2,300 participants have taken part. There's no way of knowing how many tens of thousands have passed through Mountain House since then – short of counting all the yellow police forms that each guest has to fill in when they arrive, which are doubtless filed somewhere in Montreux, taking care to remove from the count all the many who have come back again and again.

At the close of this first hectic conference season, the Swiss Foundation for Moral Re-Armament is set up. The statutes are signed on 30th November, 1946, by Philippe Mottu, Konrad von Orelli, Robert Hahnloser, Erich Peyer and Jules Rochat, in Lausanne. In accord with article 6 of the statutes, Dr. Frank N.D. Buchman is named as a member of the Council, along with Kenaston Twitchell and John Caulfeild (experienced young American and British members of Buchman's team).² The local authorities' minutes record that they have informed M. Mottu that they are ready to support his application to set up the Foundation.³ Given the scale of the work that they have started, already in autumn of 1946 they feel the need to buy more property in the village of Caux and a contract to buy the Villa Maria is signed on 24th September 1946 for 225,000 Swiss Francs. Negotiations are under way to buy the shares of the Regina Company, and so take possession of the Grand Hotel. The report notes CHF2,010,139 received in gifts, and speaks of approaches to the Canton of Vaud that have led to the granting of tax-free status on gifts from individuals.

'Everything was totally new to us, and everything was improvised in ways remote from the highly thought-out ways of doing it we find today,' comments one of the British who spent the best part of five years in Switzerland at this time.⁴ An anarchist is reputed to have said in Caux that here for the first time he saw his ideas being lived out. It is not easy to grasp the extent to which this is true for the work of IofC/MRA (the movement changed its name to 'Initiatives of Change' in 2001) as a whole. The Caux centre is no world headquarters. Between conferences, you'll only find a handful of people here today dealing with administrative and maintenance tasks. There is an IofC International Association, with a Council and a President, but only since the change of name in 2001. The initiatives that have marked these seventy years all grew and developed out of individuals' sense of 'leading'. 'Networking' is the modern word to describe how it all works; informal consultations, teamwork. The visible part of the ice-berg is the inter-weaving of individuals who feel led to take initiatives, to accept a responsibility for the society in which they live.

Of course, there are limits to the anarchy! The members of the Swiss CAUX-Initiatives of Change Foundation have a legal responsibility, yearly accounts are presented to the tax authorities; budgets are prepared,

¹ *Notes from 'Caux World Assembly - Moral Re-Armament' 1946 report from Caux archives.*

² *Report of the Fondation, 1st January 1946 - 31st March 1947.*

³ *Minutes of the Commune des Planches, p.322, 25th November 1946. Montreux Archives.*

⁴ *Letter from Ken BELDEN, 14th May 1994.*

The Hotel run by the Guests

money has to be raised. But the continuing of the conferences and the centre depends partly on informal groups of friends who over the years have taken on different sectors of the work, who meet and plan ahead, for the menus, the buying in of the supplies and the cooking of the meals, for example. The needs here haven't changed much. There is a series of memos dating from 1948-50 that stress the need for enough 'responsible leaders' for the efficient running of Caux (they suggest 100). In 1950, the needs are listed as 20 trained cooks, 4 men for carving the meat, and six girls wearing national costumes to help serve the tea. With a centre this size, the needs will always be endless. Then they listed the needs for furniture, carpets, 2,000 sheets, 1,000 blankets, more translation equipment. There is an appeal in 1949 for a 'water boiling machine': 'The English have been horrified by reports that tea has sometimes been made with water slightly off the boil. This revelation compels the Swiss team to invest in a new machine for providing boiling water in unlimited quantities'. Today, there are fresh needs for repairing the terrace, renovating bathrooms, replacing the electrical wiring, now a real danger after so many years...

Andrew Stallybrass, Asia Plateau, 31.1.2016