

DON RICARDO'S REPORT FORM THE HIGH RHINE... AUGUST 2013 A HANDBAG BROUHAHA AND THE PASSING OF JACK CLEMENT

Edith alerted me to an intriguing news item coming out of neighboring Canton Zürich last Thursday—one that I promptly forgot in the wake of news of the death of Cowboy Jack Clement. It wasn't until the next morning when she related me a follow up to her story of the night before that I began to take interest. It has all the right ingredients, touching on things both dicey and irresistible; things like race, class, money, and celebrity.

A middle-aged black-American woman in town for a wedding walks into a luxury fashion boutique and asks to see a purse on display. Not merely well known to American television viewers, she is iconic, if not ubiquitous. As she tells the story, the saleslady demurs, saying, "Let me show you some others you might like." She shows the American woman some other purses. "These are nice," she says. "But I really have my eye on that one." Again the saleslady says, "I'm sorry, but I am afraid that one is really too expensive for you."

"Well, I guess you're right," the American woman says and walks out of the store. Back in the States a week later, she relates the story in an interview on American TV. Now there's probably no place in America where this woman could walk around like an ordinary citizen without being mobbed. Her face has graced the supermarket tabloid pages for decades, but no one in Zürich knew who she was. She might have enjoyed an unaccustomed feeling of anonymity, but it worked both ways. Famous and wealthy beyond all normal calculations, she is Oprah Winfrey, in town to attend Tina Turner's wedding.

Edith kept me informed with updates me on the story through the morning. She said it was generating a lot of comment here in Switzerland. Apparently Oprah had appeared in more than one American TV interview to share her experience, implying that she had been the victim of a racial incident.

The owner of the boutique apologized when the story came out. In the late afternoon she went on the air to give her own interview. She said that it had all been a misunderstanding and denied that racism was involved. She said her clientele comes from all over the globe and defended the saleslady, saying she is one of her best employees. She added that the woman—who is Italian, not Swiss—normally works selling to clients in St. Moritz, famous playground for the uber-wealthy. This brings up a detail Oprah failed to mention: the price of the purse. Made from some kind of reptile skin, it was priced at 35,000 Swiss Francs, or 40,000 US Dollars. One reaction posted on the Internet questioned why Oprah, an animal rights advocate, would be interested in purchasing an article made from skins.

My take on all this is it *was* a misunderstanding, and had nothing to do with racism. I suspect the saleslady's fault, if any, lay in her failure to recognize and do obeisance to celebrity. Oprah's fault was her failure to realize that being famous and wealthy beyond normal calculation is merely business as usual in a neighborhood frequented by royalty, oligarchs, tycoons and other assorted billionaires. And she was probably unaware that the owner of the boutique was also one of the invited nuptial guests.

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Tina Turner's wedding to her longtime partner Erwin Bach, a German record executive, was the social event of the summer down on the *Zürichsee* in Küsnacht. Petals from seventy-

thousand roses showered down on the guests from a helicopter. The water police on the lake kept the curious away a distance of a few hundred meters. At the front side of the house a line of fans and curiosity seekers stood roped off across the street. Guests arrived by taxi and limo, the women dressed in white for the Buddhist ceremony. Bryan Adams was there. I don't know if David Bowie came. Of course Edith and I were not among the invitees. I have to say I feel some affection and affinity for Tina, living on the lake about forty minutes away from here. By all accounts, she is down-to-earth and friendly, and the people don't bother her when she goes shopping or out for a walk.

To my knowledge there are not many expatriate American musicians living in Switzerland. Surely Tina Turner is the most famous. Shania Twain was for awhile living in the French speaking part of the country. Songwriter Tom Russell, who is married with a Swiss woman, lives here from time to time. There's a bass player named Stephen Ferron, and my old friend David Waddell who lives just across the border in Konstanz. There's a songwriter named Mat Callahan from San Francisco in Bern, and I'm sure there are others I don't know about. And there's yours truly.

I once had the privilege of seeing Tina Turner live at a downtown auditorium show in Nashville, where she was opening for Lionel Richie. She blew the place apart. I would not have wanted to be in Richie's shoes that evening.

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In a way I'm thankful for this brouhaha over a handbag, providing a diversion and letting the news about Jack Clement soak in. I'll leave it to others more qualified to tell the story of this great man. Engineer at the historic Sun Records sessions at the dawn of rock-and-roll, hero and mentor to untold musicians, Clement was the acclaimed genius, prankster, the anti-Nashville cat. I made a record at his home studio, the Cowboy Arms back in the 1980s, and he was always very gracious when I went by in later years to visit. It won't be the same town with him gone.

I was thinking there had to be a link between these two apparently disparate stories, and there was: one that's fairly well known but worth mentioning, touching on race and perceptions of racism. In 1965 Jack Clement produced a record on a new artist and took it around to Nashville record executives. The record caused a stir of interest and the people wanted to know more about the artist. It was plain there was an interest in signing him. Clement hadn't provided them a photo. Country music was traditionally white man's music, and Nashville was a segregated town. Clement waited until he had their attention and then let it be known the artist was a black man. Signed to RCA Records by Chet Atkins, the company did not release his photo until they were sure they had a hit. His name was Charley Pride.

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