

New home for the League

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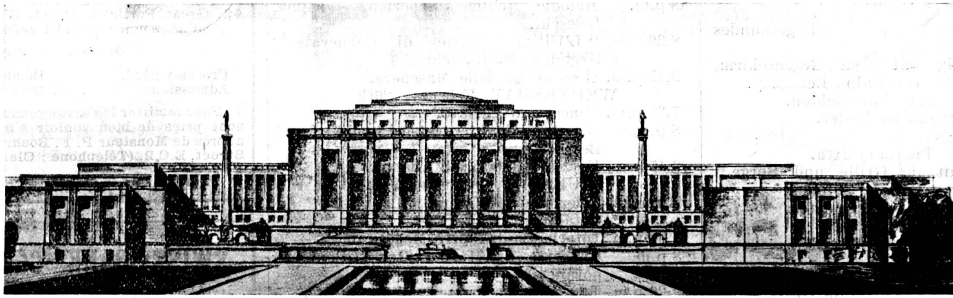
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New Home for the League.



After 15 years in temporary quarters at the Quai Wilson, the Secretariat of the League of Nations now moves to the Palais des Nations, the vast block of buildings that has been erected for it in Ariana Park, on the heights above Prégny. With this move the initial stage in its inauguration may be said to have come to a close and a new era to begin.

Since 1920 the Secretariat of the League has occupied the buildings of the old Hotel National, bought for it from the Geneva Government for 6,500,000 Swiss francs. After a brief period for the organization of its staff in London the Secretariat entered into occupation on October 1st, 1920. The arrangement was convenient for the moment, but the building was from the first unsuited to offices and inadequate in size. The services of the League soon overflowed into the neighbouring blocks of flats and into adjacent villas. The Council Hall was the conservatory lounge of the old hotel, and there was no adequate building for the Assembly, for which the League was obliged to borrow the building of the Conseil Général on the other side of the town. The whole was reminiscent of the temporary offices of mushroom Ministries in War-time. Yet six years elapsed before the Council decided to build a permanent home for the League worthy of its importance and suitable for its work. Even then the project passed through a number of strange vicissitudes before it took practicable shape.

At a meeting of the Assembly in March, 1926, it was decided to promote a competition among architects, with prizes, for plans for a League building on the shores of the lake, a little beyond the site of the Hotel National. This was in place of earlier proposals which had contemplated building an extra floor on to the hotel and adding "annexes" on the surrounding gardens. Fortunately it was decided not to proceed with this sorry makeshift. A jury of experts was appointed to judge the thousands of designs sent in by the 377 architects of all nations competing, on which Great Britain was represented by Sir John Burnet. But it was found that the architects had taken insufficient account of the practical requirements, and none of the plans was accepted.

The original site chosen was on the shores of the lake, beyond the public garden of Mon Repos, where two parks had been acquired and coveted eyes had been cast upon a certain villa. Into the controversy that raged round this proposal it is not now necessary to enter; the project of placing so large a building on the shore of the lake and permanently preventing the town of Geneva from extending its lakeside promenades was much criticized by the Genevois people, while the question of an act of expropriation proved almost too delicate to be handled. The matter was settled by the discovery that the terrain would be inadequate, and other land had to be sought. The town then offered an exchange; it acquired the lakeside property of the League and surrendered a large part of the park of Ariana, situated on the other side of the railway line to Lausanne, with an area of about 255,000 square yard. This was effected in September, 1928.

Meanwhile the plan which had ultimately found acceptance — that of MM. Nénot and Fleggenheimer — had to be greatly modified. After much expert and other discussion it was amended in consultation with the Secretariat, and the foundation-stone was laid on one of the lawns of the Ariana park on September 7, 1929. Even this arrangement was much criticized. The lake site would at least have been easily accessible, while Ariana lies at some distance from the town on the fringe of the country and is altogether far less conveniently situated, especially in a town like Geneva, where the transport problem is in its infancy. But in some respects the exchange served both the League and the town. Geneva was able to re-plan its parks and promenades, and render them the thing of beauty they now are, and the League was able to modify its

plans to include the magnificent library for which Mr. Rockefeller had just given a donation of \$2,000,000.

The result is the League Palace as it stands to-day. Its ground plan covers about the same area as the Château de Versailles, both being roughly five acres. Some 400 offices were needed for the Secretariat, halls and rooms for the Council, for the Assembly, and for Committees, lobbies, rooms for the Press, restaurants, a post office with telephone equipment on a large scale, a bank, and so forth. Though in appearance the long range of white stone classical buildings seems a continuous whole it is really composed of three separate buildings, a long irregular court for the Secretariat, one wing of which is to house the Council, the Assembly building, which forms the back of the Court of Honour, facing the lake, and the library building, which constitutes the far side of this court. From the great portico of the Assembly building the land falls away in a series of steps and terraces, with a clear view across the foothills to the snow-clad Alps of Savoy. On the side towards Geneva the Secretariat wing is entered from a broad piazza, the Place des Nations, through an imposing gateway, which leads into a quiet and dignified courtyard, where the massive proportions of the rest of the buildings can be truly appreciated. Seen from across the lake one gets the impression of a long white flat-topped classical range that has not yet melted into the dark Jura landscape.

The Assembly hall is one of the largest of its kind in the world. It will accommodate some 2,000 persons, and some of its nine committee rooms are large enough for meetings of 500 persons. The acoustic properties are said to be satisfactory. They were not left to the sport of chance. The British Department of Scientific and Industrial Research was placed at the service of the architects, and the Architectural Acoustics Department tested the hearing properties of the hall. A system of telephonic diffusion has also been installed. The League Council is provided with a well-equipped hall with ample committee rooms and lobbies. The library, which has now about 200,000 volumes, and increases at the rate of 20,000 volumes a year, is designed to take 2,000,000.

Although the building was begun in March, 1931, it is still far from completion and only the offices of the Secretariat are far enough advanced for occupation. The halls for the Assembly and Council are still encumbered with scaffolding and the marble incrustation lies on the floors waiting to be placed in position. The galleries and porticoes are without flooring and the walls are bare cement. Though from 300 to 500 men have been continuously employed since the beginning, another two years' work lies ahead.

All the countries members of the League have contributed some piece of national craftsmanship or manufacture for its embellishment. It is particularly proud of its system of pneumatic transport for the conveyance of documents from one part of the vast building to another. It has ample need of this, for a journey from the Secretariat to the library and back takes a good quarter of an hour.

Owing to long preparation and staff work the move from the Quai Wilson to the new building is proving a simpler matter than might have been expected. It was placed under one official with full powers. A fortnight in advance all documents not in immediate use were sent to the Registry, and all books returned to the Library. An association had been formed by the removal companies of Geneva and Lausanne. At a certain date labels which had been supplied were placed on all furniture for transport. The move is being made by sections, which pack under the supervision of the responsible section chief and are present to unpack on the arrival of their

effects so that the empty boxes might be at once available for others. One day was allowed for preparation and the packing of lesser material; one or two for the actual move; and one for settling in the new offices. It was laid down that there should not be more than four days' interruption. Exact times were specified for the move of the restaurant, the post office, the newspaper service, the bank, and so forth.

It has been estimated that in its new home the services of the League will cost an additional 650,000 Swiss francs a year. But as its efficiency will be greatly increased by the modern facilities with which the new building is equipped the increase will not be in proportion to the cost of running the League in the old inconvenient building. The weak spot in the move is the question of transport. The new building lies remote from the hotels of Geneva. Though two new roads have been constructed for the convenience of those who possess cars, hardly anything has been done for those who must rely upon the public services, beyond the promised increase of tramway services in the direction of the railway station, but only then on condition that the direct service to the town is reduced.

The old building is to be bought back by the Swiss Government for 4,000,000 Swiss francs. Its future has not yet been decided upon. It is hoped that it may serve as a centre for the many international associations that have made their headquarters at Geneva. The annexe built in 1932 to house the Disarmament Conference will be retained for the present to be kept for emergency use.

Observer.

BATTISTA ALBERTOLLI †.

We deeply regret to announce the passing away of Mr. Battista Albertolli, proprietor of the Swiss Café, 8, Edinburgh Road, Portsmouth, at the age of 71.

Mr. Albertolli came to Portsmouth 43 years ago and set up in business in Commercial Road; with the aid of his family he flourished and moved into Edinburgh Road, where he was carrying on a restaurant business up to the time of his death.

The deceased was a member of the Unione Ticinese for a number of years, and he was often seen, together with some members of his family, at the social functions of the Society.

Although Mr. Albertolli spent the greater part of his life in this country, he remained at heart a good Swiss and he will be greatly missed by his large circle of friends.

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