

Visit of the Swiss Minister to the College of the Swiss Mercantile Society on Friday, 16th June, 1950

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VISIT OF THE SWISS MINISTER TO THE COLLEGE OF THE SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY ON FRIDAY, 16th JUNE, 1950.

On Friday morning, 16th June, the College of the S.M.S. had the honour of a visit by the Swiss Minister, Monsieur Henry de Torrenté, who was accompanied by Dr. Bircher and Monsieur Clottu.

The party was met by Mr. Meier, President of the S.M.S., Mrs. Meier, Mr. W. Burren, Chairman of the Education Committee, Mr. E. Huber, the Vice-Chairman, Mr. F. Burri and Mr. A. Jaccard of the Education Committee and Mr. Slade, the Principal of the College.

The visit began with a tour of inspection of the Classes, which gave the visitors an idea of the tuition which the students receive at the College. It was impossible in the limited time available to see all the Classes, but lessons in Translation, Dictation and Composition with students at different standards were visited. Refreshments were served in the Canteen where the members of the Teaching Staff were introduced to the Minister, and then the party went into the front lecture room to meet the students.

Mr. Slade opened his part of the proceedings by introducing Mr. W. Meier, the President. Mr. Meier welcomed the Minister in these words:—

“On behalf of the Swiss Mercantile Society I should like to extend a warm welcome to you Monsieur le Ministre, and to Dr. Bircher and to Monsieur Clottu. We are greatly honoured by your visit and we welcome this opportunity of showing you our College. We take just a little pride in receiving distinguished personalities at Swiss House and I would recall the visit of Monsieur le Conseiller Fédéral Giuseppe Motta more than twenty years ago, or more recently, the Swiss Parliamentary Delegation, led by the Nationalratspräsident, Herr Joseph Escher, and which included Ständerat Professor F. Wahlen, who were here in May last year.

The Swiss Mercantile Society is, of course, much older than its College. It was founded by a handful of young men as a section of the Schweizerische Kaufmännische Verein in 1888. In those days young people from Switzerland who wished to perfect their knowledge of English and gain some business experience in this country could come here without passports and accept work without permission or restriction. This changed completely after the first World War, when the British authorities, owing to widespread unemployment, made it compulsory for any foreigners coming here to obtain a permit from the Home Office before allowing them to take up work. In practice this permission was not frequently granted.

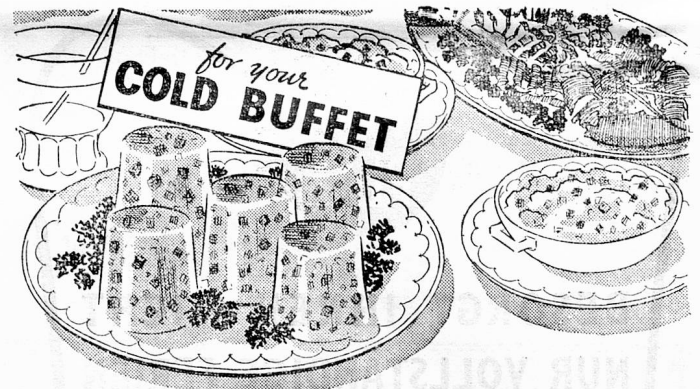
Fortunately, there were at that time men in the Swiss Mercantile Society who realized that something had to be done if young Swiss were to continue to come to London in order to study English and get acquainted with British life and institutions, and they conceived the idea of this school. It was the members of the Swiss Mercantile Society who, in the first place, contributed individually to a special fund for this purpose and who guaranteed further donations for a period of years, for you cannot rent buildings, purchase furniture — however modest its kind — and engage teachers without capital. Later an appeal was launched with the assistance of the Swiss Minister, Monsieur Charles

Paravicini, which was addressed to many hundreds of Swiss business houses, banks and insurance companies and individuals, both here and in Switzerland, and enough money was given to the Educational Fund to enable these hard-working members of the Swiss Mercantile Society to open this school.

The chief architect of this work, Mr. G. E. De Brunner, died only two months ago, but a few who co-operated with him are present here to-day, Mr. J. J. Boos, and Mr. A. Stauffer, who are both former Presidents of the Society.

The College soon grew in size and importance and it filled this building as well as the adjoining one of the same capacity, and before the war broke out in September, 1939, over 8,000 students had gone through it. Mr. Slade and Mr. Lockyer, who were then already on our staff will well remember those days. Early in the war the College had to be closed and the Swiss Mercantile Society had much anxiety, because Swiss House was repeatedly and heavily damaged by bombs. The windows were shattered, the doors had been blown off their hinges, the ceilings had collapsed and the back of the building was unsafe, and for reasons of economy the lease of the adjoining building, No. 34, had to be surrendered.

But already during the war the members of the Swiss Mercantile Society made plans for the re-opening of their school. With the help of funds generously given by the Schweizerische Kaufmännische Verein and a number of donors the most urgent repairs were carried out and in May, 1949, the College was reopened.



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Only these two rooms could be used, the others were not yet fit to be occupied, and only fifty students could be accepted from many hundreds wishing to be admitted.

To-day Swiss House is again full to capacity (or should I say breaking point?) and we have already taken a lease of the building next door. We shall be able to take it over in 1953 and we shall then be able to accommodate more students more comfortably than to-day. Hard work is done here not only by the students and their masters but also by the Education Committee which supervises and directs operations. Its members come here frequently for their meetings after they have done a full day's work in the business houses and banks in which they are engaged. Mr. W. Burren, incidentally a former student of the College, is Chairman of the Committee and Mr. E. Huber, its Vice-Chairman is also here, and so are Mr. F. Burri, also a former student, and Mr. A. Jaccard. They and their colleagues are resolved to carry on the tradition of service to the College, and so long as there are members in the Swiss Mercantile Society who will continue this work the future of the College is assured."

The Minister then arose and in his speech thanked the Committee and all those present for their friendly reception. He said that he was happy to have the opportunity of paying the College a visit, but stressed that it was not to be regarded as an inspection, but merely as a friendly visit. The Minister mentioned that he had already seen the Swiss School in Paris. He was aware of the difficulties experienced over the accommodation, and that the Teaching Staff were to be

congratulated on their efforts in overcoming these difficulties and also for the way in which they were working. The Minister remarked on the good reputation which the College enjoys, and the numerous enquiries regarding the College showed the confidence which people were putting in this institution.

The Minister next offered his congratulation to the students on being able to benefit from the teaching at the College, and he stated that they, the students, were in London not only for the study of the language, but also to study the country, the people and the customs, and in this connection a knowledge of the language by itself was not sufficient unless one had the added knowledge of the people. The Minister wished the students success in their examinations and in their future careers. Once more he thanked the President and the Committee for their reception and offered his best wishes to the College for its future prosperity. He ended by saying that the S.M.S. might rest assured of the Swiss authorities' and his personal support.

Mr. Slade then called on Mr. Burren to propose the words of thanks which Mr. Burren did in the following speech:—

"On behalf of the Education Committee, I wish to thank the Swiss Minister for having honoured our College with a visit and for the address he has just delivered, from which I gather that what he has seen and heard this morning has impressed him favourably.

Ever since the opening of our College in 1922, we have maintained close and cordial relations with the Swiss Legation and our Minister, as well as his predecessors, have always evinced a keen interest in our educational activities.

As you are aware, we receive an annual subsidy from the Swiss Government, and thereby are officially recognised as an educational establishment of national importance.

Many thousands of students have attended the courses of the S.M.S. College and some are to-day in leading positions in Commerce and Industry, in Banking and other professions. To many, their stay in London has proved a stepping stone to places all over the world, where they are rendering useful service to our country's import and export trades.

With the exception of a limited number of student employees, few of our young compatriots are nowadays able to work here. We, therefore, endeavour to replace practical experience as far as is feasible and, within the short time at our disposal, to give as many students as accommodation permits, not only a thorough knowledge of the English language, but also an insight into British Commerce, institutions and ways of life.

There is hardly any need for me to stress the ever growing importance of the English language in international trade and affairs and I feel sure that you, Ladies and Gentlemen, are trying to profit as much as possible from your stay here. Although there have from time to time been various interpretations of the letters S.M.S., let yours be the one so aptly contained in the title page of the College Magazine — "Study Means Success."

May I conclude by asking you all to show your appreciation of our Minister's visit in the customary manner."

The assembly showed their appreciation of the honour done by the College by the visit of the Minister with loud applause. This concluded the proceedings on this memorable day in the history of the College.

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