

# New Year's Resolutions, Welfare Problems and the swiss benevolent Society

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## NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS, WELFARE PROBLEMS AND THE SWISS BENEVOLENT SOCIETY.

You, like me, I suppose were fully determined last summer to get your Christmas shopping done early, to post all the mail in good time and never again to have a last minute rush. Christmas arrived, and you, like me, were jolly hard put to get it all done in time. Everything which could possibly wait had to be left for the New Year.

The New Year is here. Many were the resolutions and I dare say many have already been broken. There is a good chance, however, of keeping at least some of them. At the moment we all have a little time to sit back and relax before the invigorating spring air rushes us onto and possibly off our feet again. Let us consider one or two problems which confront the Swiss Colony and let us see how we can help.

For the past few years thousands of young girls have come to England. Some can afford school fees, a few obtain permission to work in commerce, but to most of them only domestic employment is possible. We have all heard of how disappointed some have been in their jobs. We have heard of exploitation, but also of bad behaviour on the girls' part, severe illness and babies. But few of us realize what a vast problem this has become, a problem which was getting much too big for the Swiss Benevolent Society and the Churches. The need for a special body dealing with this became so great that all concerned immediately welcomed the idea of a Welfare Office.

On 15th December, 1949, the Welfare Office for Swiss Girls in Great Britain was opened at 31, Conway Street, W.1, as a result of co-operation between the Swiss Benevolent Society in London, the "Verein der Freundinnen junger Mädchen" and the "Katholischer Mädchenschutzverein" (both in Switzerland), and with the support of the Swiss Legation. The three societies share the expenses, and the committee looking after the Welfare office consist of their representatives, a delegate from the Legation, the three clergymen and the Welfare Officer. She is Miss M. Wolfer, a doctor's daughter from Zurich. She runs the office efficiently and is fully capable to tackle the important task. For three years she attended an agricultural college in England and then did one year's work on the land in Switzerland as well as her military service. She then

worked for three years at the central office for "Bäuerinnenhilfe" in Berne. After attending the "Soziale Frauenschule" in Zurich for two years she took their diploma in 1948. Then followed eighteen months' practical experience with refugees in Zurich. Thus she was fully qualified to take up her duties as welfare worker in London.

They are not easy. They cover a variety of spheres. Girls still in Switzerland or their parents may want information about prospective employers or schools. Anxious parents of girls already here want to know how their daughter is getting on, often because the girls do not write or exaggerate about conditions and thus alarm their family. Authorities and welfare organisations in Switzerland want to keep in touch with young girls with whom they had dealings earlier. In many cases young girls have to be sent home and the Welfare Office has to organise their return journey. In severe cases of nervous breakdowns or mental illness the Officer herself has to accompany the girls back to Switzerland. Sometimes there are difficulties with girls under 18 who work here illegally. Often the Welfare Secretary has to look after girls who have undesirable friendships frequently with members of other races. In hundreds of cases accommodation has to be found, often only for one night, often for longer. At present the Swiss Benevolent Society have put two rooms at the disposal of Miss Wolfer. This brings me to the first point to which I should like to draw your special attention. If you have any spare sheets, pillow slips or bath linen they would be most welcome. The

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Welfare Secretary is often in difficulties when the small supply of linen is not yet back from the laundry and a new arrival for one of the rooms is expected.

One of the most serious problems which faces the Office, and indeed also the clergymen, is that of unmarried mothers. Sometimes a pregnant girl can be persuaded to go back to Switzerland. Occasionally the father of the child is willing to marry her. But mostly the girls have to face the birth alone and have to resume work immediately afterwards in order to keep themselves and the baby.

Many people have no pity with these unmarried mothers. They say they got what they deserved. Of course, they did wrong by starting intimate relations. But how many young girls do the same thing and simply get away with it? It is not up to us to judge, but to help the unfortunate young people. One of the greatest difficulties is to find somewhere for the young mother to go when she comes out of hospital. If you have a spare room, and could take a girl and her baby on her release from hospital you would not only be helping the Welfare Office and the Swiss Benevolent Society, but your good deed would ensure that the new baby gets the right start. If the mother is forced to work after ten days or a fortnight her health suffers, the milk supply so vital to the child stops and both mother and baby never catch up again. But if she can recuperate properly it is better for both of them, and it often helps her to make a fresh start. During the war I took in several girls and babies — each for about two or three weeks; the babies have grown up into strong youngsters, the mothers are happily married and, with one exception, they all learnt their lessons. The problem was great during the war, but it is greater still to-day. So please let Miss Wolfer know that you are willing to help. But there is more we can do. We must make sure that no young girl *we* know comes to a job in this country unless she knows of the conditions here and is willing to keep her side of the bargain. Somebody who has already come to grief in a job in Switzerland is best kept at home; she cannot be expected to make a success of it here. We must tell the girls here about the churches, about the young people's clubs, about the Swiss Societies and look after them when we find they are bored or homesick. We should also warn them about the dangers of a metropolis like London.

Miss Wolfer's report and some of the problems in it were discussed at the meeting of the Swiss Benevolent Society on 19th November, 1951. Col A. Bon was

in the Chair once more before his return to Switzerland. An interesting fact brought out at the meeting was that amongst the 28 people repatriated during the first nine months of 1951 several were young men who had come to this country with plenty of impudence and little cash. Young men should be discouraged from coming here without money or the permit to work. Yet, though it is easy for girls to get the permission for domestic work, they nevertheless present a much bigger problem.

So this is where our New Year's resolutions come in. We want to make a special effort to keep at least those which will help some of our less fortunate compatriots.

Let us send our donation to the Swiss Benevolent Society promptly.

Let us, if at all possible, sign a seven years' covenant by which the Society can claim back the income tax paid by us on the amount donated. It means no more expense to us but to the S.B.S. it means nearly double the amount of any subscription.

Let us send bed and bathroom linen for use of the Welfare Office.

Let those of us who have a vacant room take in an unmarried mother and her baby for a few weeks.

And above all let us do everything possible to prevent more young girls from getting into trouble.

So while the year is still young let us tackle these resolutions and make sure that at least some of them are successfully carried out.

MARIANN.

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