

News from the Legation

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HOME AFFAIRS.

by PIERRE BÉGUIN.

For the last ten years, M. Petitpierre, the Head of the Federal Political Department has been occupying himself with the question of the war damages suffered by Swiss citizens residing in the countries which took part in the Second World War. His efforts on this subject have met with a refusal on the part of the former belligerents to place Swiss citizens on an equal footing with their own nationals. Generally speaking, the laws on reparations, in force in the belligerent countries, are not at all favourable to foreigners and, more especially, to the nationals of neutral States. One can only recognize the truth of this fact: there is nothing one can do about it.

Moreover, no legal provisions oblige Switzerland to indemnify those of her citizens who have incurred damages in respect of their possessions or their situation, as a result of the war. She cannot be held responsible for damages in which she has not taken any part.

Nevertheless, there remains the moral duty that Switzerland should not fail to interest herself in the fate of these victims of the war. They are not perhaps the most needy, but, in spite of this, they deserve to be helped by their native country. In an era when the State is called upon to ensure an increasingly perfect security for its children, to safeguard them from natural risks, such as old age, sickness and accidents, it would seem quite incomprehensible if the State should consider itself to be absolved from all obligation, even a moral one, when certain persons under its jurisdiction are the innocent victims of a great catastrophe.

The Confederation, the Cantons and Communes have already made appropriations of important sums of money for the purpose of coming to the aid of our fellow-countrymen abroad who have lost everything, who are in financial distress and who find it very difficult to start a new life, elsewhere. Already, more than 165 million francs have been spent for this purpose.

It had been intended, however, to go still further.

Plans had been made to employ for this scheme of Confederate solidarity a sum of 125 million francs, proceeding from the payments which are being made by degrees, by West Germany, as compensation for the deficit in the Germano-Swiss Commercial Clearing Agreement, belonging to the Hitler period. The two questions have been bound together. This was, no doubt, a great mistake, for, in doing so a great many appetites were aroused, that cannot be satisfied. There are people who imagined that the reparations would be complete. This was, of course, out of the question: in order to do this it would have been necessary to have more than six thousand million francs at one's disposal, that is to say, practically the present amount of the Confederation's Public Debt.

Nevertheless, 125 million francs are available. But, how to distribute them? Certain groups of citizens have made themselves the champions of a solution which would consist in the repartition of this sum among all those who have suffered from the effects of the war, in proportion to the damages which they have incurred. In this way, everyone would receive between two and three per cent of such damages. The owner of a small house destroyed during the course of the war, would receive just a few hundred francs, even if, since then, he has fallen into great distress. The proprietor of a big plant demolished during the hostilities, would receive several tens of thousands of francs, even if he has, otherwise, remained very prosperous and possesses a large fortune. Such a solution would be an insult to good, common sense.

Our Authorities have striven to establish their plan of repartition, bearing in mind the human factor. They have decided, right from the beginning, that only the present situation of the victims would be taken into consideration, and not the importance of the damages incurred. To those persons who were very old, a pension would be paid. To those who are sick, the means would be furnished, enabling them to have proper treatment for their illness. To those who could not longer continue to practice their trade or profession, an opportunity would be provided to learn another trade, or else funds would be furnished enabling them to start in a new job or profession. Here we have, not a repartition of the money, but social aid. It is not a question of justice but of distributing help in accordance with the need of these war victims.

The Draft Bill of a Law embodying these considerations has been rejected by the Swiss people, as the result of a campaign in which demagogy played a considerable part. Our Authorities have started afresh, to draw up another plan, which is inspired by similar principles. Already, however, from a certain side of the political horizon, categorical opposition is manifesting itself. Let us hope that it will not prove victorious. Eleven years have passed since the end of the war and its victims are not, as yet, benefitting from aid, on a sufficient scale. It would be quite intolerable, if this delay were to be prolonged still further.

NEWS FROM THE LEGATION.

The Swiss Minister, and Madame Daeniker have left for Switzerland. They will be away until the beginning of October.

During the Minister's absence, Dr. E. Bernath, will act as Chargé d'Affaires.

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