

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Band: - (1961)
Heft: 1390

Artikel: Switzerland helps Tibetan children
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690547>

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Switzerland helps Tibetan Children

Tibet has long ceased to be an isolated, mysterious country, but it has lost none of its interest for us. On the contrary. Situated between Sinkiang in the north, and Nepal, Burma, India and Pakistan in the south, politically an autonomous region of the Chinese People's Republic since the conclusion, in 1951, of an agreement between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese Government, which the Tibetan Government, however, denounced in 1959 — because, as it stated in a declaration made by the Dalai Lama, contrary to the provisions of the agreement, "After its occupation by the Chinese armies Tibet did not enjoy any measure of autonomy, even in internal matters" — this country has become associated more than ever before with the West in the struggle for freedom.

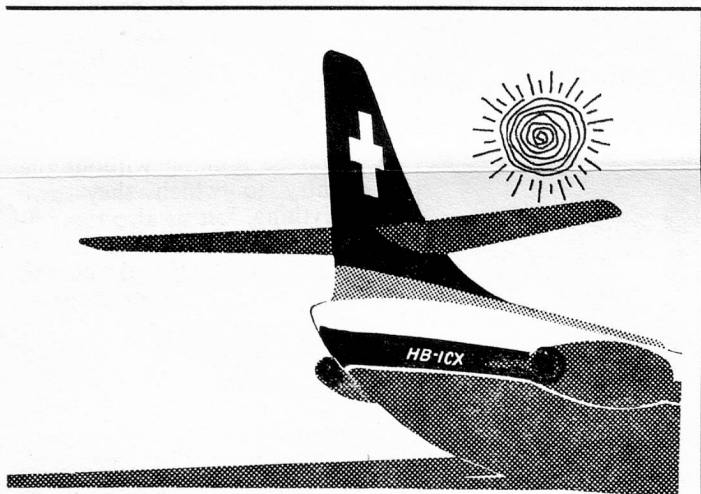
The denunciation of the 1951 agreement by the Tibetan Government followed the outbreak and rapid spread of a revolt among the Tibetan people against the arbitrary rule of the Communist Chinese; since that time, arbitrariness has deteriorated into a reign of terror which the United Nations in a resolution passed in October, 1959, deplored as a series of violations of the fundamental rights of the Tibetan people. More than 60,000 Tibetans,

including about 4,000 children, have fled to India and the Himalaya countries. Some 300 children have been settled at a camp in Dharamsala in India, while most of the others are scattered, frequently living in most unhappy conditions.

A Swiss welfare organization created for this particular purpose is at present carrying on a large-scale campaign in Switzerland to solicit financial contributions to aid Tibetan refugees wherever they can be reached. Another effort in the same direction was the construction of a special building in the "Pestalozzi Children's Village" at Trogen in the Canton of Appenzel to shelter and educate twenty Tibetan children. The Children's Village was founded in 1946 to receive war orphans from various European countries; later it received other children as well who for some reason or other were found stranded in post-war Europe. The twenty Tibetan children are the first non-Europeans so far at the Village. On the occasion of the formal opening of their house, named Yambhu Lagang — after an ancient place in Chongey Province and place of origin of the first Buddhist scriptures of Tibet — the Dalai Lama from his exile in Mussoorie, India, sent a message saying, among other things: "The generous offer of the Pestalozzi Village Foundation to build a house for twenty Tibetan refugee children was most gratefully received by me and my people. Just like the Swiss and other mountain peoples, we Tibetans love peace and freedom. I have every confidence that here in this Village the Tibetan refugees will learn not only Western manners of thinking and living, but those principles of friendship among nations that will help them solve the problems that await them upon their return." While the Dalai Lama is the supreme patron of Yambhu Lagang in Switzerland, the twenty children at the Village are looked after by a former high-ranking Lama and his wife, themselves parents of a small child. The children seem to take well to the alpine climate, which in many ways reminds them of home. They are taught German and English, arithmetic (something they do not learn in Tibet), dancing, singing and painting.

When we were children we devoured Sven Hedin's books about his daring explorations in Tibet, and it seemed to us that we were reading about life on another planet; some twenty years later we must admit having thrilled to James Hilton's "Lost Horizon", the fanciful tale spun against the background of a monastery of Lamaist monks in the remote Tibetan mountains — from which President Roosevelt borrowed the name of Shangri-La for his retreat in the Maryland hills — and we still thought Tibet a very far-away place. Now we find it an hour's train ride from our office in the faces of these children full of the sensitive strength of a people fighting for "self-determination", that much-worn phrase, which in their case means fighting for the survival of a civilization unsurpassed in its spiritual aspiration. Yambhu Lagang, alas, is only a gesture; but it is that. M.S.

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