

Switzerland's concern with Biafra, Vietnam and other tragedies

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SWITZERLAND'S CONCERN WITH BIAFRA, VIETNAM AND OTHER TRAGEDIES

In Switzerland like elsewhere the terrible plight of the Biafra population causes concern. Demonstrations are taking place with more or less support. The ordinary kind of mass meeting and parade is less well supported than collections made to help the victims of the war. Zurich school boys and girls sent petitions to the British and Russian Governments, and members of the Young Church wrote to London and Moscow to stop sending arms to Nigeria. Some youngsters in Zurich went on a hunger strike "against the indifference regarding Biafra".

Early in July, a movement in favour of Biafra's recognition was launched by three Zurich students. Its aims are a petition to the Federal Council to recognise Biafra, to support the humanitarian aid given by the International Red Cross Committee by a substantial donation from the Confederation and to let the Swiss public know their reaction to the petition as soon as possible. Signatures are being collected in the whole of Switzerland; the movement is supported by a number of well-known personalities, university professors, politicians, writers, lawyers and clergymen, amongst them the dramatist Friedrich Duerrenmatt. The petition closed on 1st August, but no results were known on going to press.

Cantonal Governments and municipal authorities have donated sums of money to support "Pro Biafra" with whom the Swiss R.C. "Caritas" organisation, "Heks" (*Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen der Schweiz*) and the Swiss *Arbeiterhilfswerk* co-operate. "Pro Biafra" has arranged several money-making events, school concerts, films, theatre performances, exhibitions, etc. "Caritas" have already sent food and medical supplies for about 1.8 million francs, in conjunction with the international organisation of the same name. The Swiss share in this was 72,800 dollars. "Heks" have sent several hundred-thousand francs for the same purpose, and money is paid in daily by the Swiss population, also to the Red Cross which has not only suggested a neutral corridor to get food and medical supplies through to Biafra, but has also donated large sums of money. The Federal Council has granted 70,000 francs for the victims of the war (via Swiss Red Cross). One of many contributions was 22,530 francs by a village in the Untertoggenburg, Flawil, where teachers and pupils organised a collection. Children of Reinach (Baselland) arranged a most successful white elephant sale (known as "Mini-Flohmarkt").

An invalid in Berne offered the oldest and most valuable stamp from his collection, a "Strubeli Helvetia". This was announced over the radio, followed by a gesture by the Berne stamp exchange which gave a "Black Penny" 1840. Both stamps were auctioned in aid of Biafra.

One of the most original campaigns was the "Turmbau für Biafra" organised by students and *Mittelschüler* from Berne, Zurich, Winterthur and St. Gall and supported by several eminent personalities. During various demonstration meetings, "bricks" were sold to build "this tower for Biafra", and large sums of money were collected, 100,000 francs in one evening alone.

Former Federal Councillor Wahlen in London

The three Churches in Switzerland have been greatly alarmed by happenings in Nigeria, and they, too, made handsome donations to help the starving populations. The Swiss Evangelical Church Federation, the R.C. Bishops'

Conference and the Bishop of the Old-Catholic Church approached the British Council of Churches and the R.C. Bishops' Conference of Great Britain to ask for support in demanding a cease-fire and a stop to arms deliveries to Nigeria. Incidentally, the allegation that Switzerland had sent arms to Nigeria, was denied most vigorously by the Federal Military Department.

On 25th June, a delegation arrived in London, consisting of the former Federal Councillor Wahlen, the President of the Swiss Evangelical Church Federation Mr. A. Lavanchy, the Bishop of Chur Dr. J. Vonderach, and three other clergy. They found a sympathetic reception with a few Parliamentarians and Ministers of the Crown, whilst Church dignitaries received them with reserve.

Thanks to the efforts of the Swiss Churches, and at their expense, a delegation of seven from the Biafra Churches were sent to the World Conference of Churches at Uppsala in Sweden.

The Swiss Delegation entertained by the Swiss Church in London

During their stay in U.K., the delegation was entertained to lunch at the Royal Court Hotel by the Swiss Church in London. Mr. O. Béguin, President of the Consistoire, was in the chair. The meeting was also attended by the Chairman of the Swiss Catholics in London. Mr. O. Grob, K.S.G., Mrs. W. Meier (Chairman of German-speaking Parish Council), Monsieur G. Bodmer and Consul F. Adams (Swiss Embassy), as well as by clergy of both denominations.

On 24th July, the "Kontakt" Youth Group of the German-speaking Swiss Church in London arranged a community meal. This was in effect a Communion Meal which left a deep impression on all who took part. A collection was made for Biafra, resulting in the astonishing sum of £23. This was all the more spectacular as the participants were young boys and girls throughout.

Vietnam still in People's Minds

The Biafra crisis has somewhat pushed aside the concern for Vietnam. Nevertheless, demonstrations, collections in aid of refugees, substantial support to aid campaigns by various organisations, consignments of food and medical supplies, are being organised. On 22nd June, there was a "Vietnam Day" when thousands demonstrated in many Swiss towns. This followed a "Tournée Vietnam" of the "Caritas" organisation, which toured Switzerland in an effort to collect funds.

The official visit of a North-Vietnam delegate to Switzerland helped towards better understanding, but no political action has resulted.

Refugees . . .

Help for refugees in the Near East still goes on. An organisation founded in Geneva in April, actively supports a model farm near Jericho. As a first act of assistance, 100 Swiss cows were sent.

Tibetan refugees have settled in Switzerland, and "Swiss Tibet Aid" launched a successful scholarship scheme. Well over a million francs was collected in a few months for assistance which included the creation of an industrial settlement in Northern India. The Dalai Lama attended the opening and thanked the Swiss people for their help. The "Swiss Tibet Aid" was founded seven years ago and has over 100,000 members.

Refugees from Sicily, poor children from France and handicapped refugees from various countries are being cared for, temporarily or permanently.

[A.T.S.]

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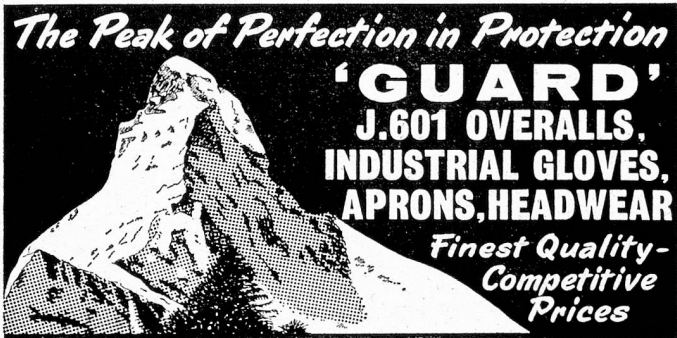
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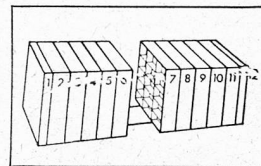
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