

The 49th assembly of Swiss abroad

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THE 49th ASSEMBLY OF SWISS ABROAD

THE WORKING SESSION

The Swiss Abroad held their Annual Assembly at the tourist resort of Brunnen on the lake of Lucerne during the last week-end of August. It was a highly successful gathering, blessed by the weather, a happy spirit and a series of interesting conferences. The bulk of the work of the Assembly was carried out on Saturday, 26th August, and the participants spent most of that day in the modern assembly hall of the primary school of Brunnen, facing the particular aspects of the life of the Swiss Abroad.

The working schedule of the Assembly was as follows: On Friday evening, an open gathering was organised in the *Parkhotel* where participants could voice their ideas and ask questions to the representatives of the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad. Two other meetings, that of the Swiss Solidarity Fund and that of leaders of Swiss youth groups, took place on that same evening.

Everybody met in the assembly hall the following morning at nine o'clock. After having been welcomed by the President of the Commission for the Swiss Abroad, the State Councillor Dr. Louis Guisan and by Mr. Jean-Claude Nicole, Central President of the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique*, they heard a report by the Director of the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad on the results of the enquiry staged throughout Fifth Switzerland on the theme of the 1971 Assembly: The Swiss Abroad under the influence of two worlds, that of the homeland and that of the country of residence.

This central exposé and its findings were corroborated by two successive speeches by Mr. Gerhard Opitz, a Swiss management consultant living in Germany, and Mr. Marcel Gehrig, a Swiss from Marseilles and currently President of the *l'Union des Suisses de France*. Mr. Opitz made an exhaustive analysis of the 122 answers to the questionnaire obtained in Germany abounding in data and statistics. Mr. Gehrig's exposition was fortunately shorter and less quantitative. Participants also heard a speech in Italian by Professor Gerardo Broggin, reading law in Milan's *Universita Cattolica*, and by Dr. Gustav Emil Muller, a learned philosopher who gave a fascinating and witty account of Swiss emi-

gration and assimilation in North America.

His speech had to be curtailed because the planned schedule had been overrun. Delegates were free for a three-hour lunch break. Those interested were invited by the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches to savour a crusty leg of chicken and a racy glass of red wine in the parish hall. These libations were followed by an exchange of views on the problems besetting the religious life of the Swiss Abroad. We heard interventions by the President of the Swiss Church in Rio, by the chargé d'affaires in Salvador, and by Swiss churchgoers from Paris and London. The main fact which emerged from this after-dinner debate was that, although there was a need for a Swiss Protestant Church in the countries with a concentration of Swiss but deprived of a Swiss Church, it could not be fulfilled practically. This was the case of Paris, where Swiss Protestants went to *l'Oratoire*. A delegate from South America said that although one could not envisage sending a Swiss minister over there, it was possible to associate national identity and faith to some degree provided there was a nucleus of dedicated Swiss Christians prepared to maintain Swiss religious life in these countries.

Many addresses followed to thank the Churches for their hospitality. An 84-year-old woman who had been a cook for 40 years in Paris, who was manifestly tipsy, insisted on performing a yodelling act. The ministers present backed a suggestion that the concern of the Swiss at home for the Swiss abroad should be reciprocated by a suitable gesture. A collection in favour of the victims of the Joux Valley tornado was thus organised. The collection box was later passed round at the plenary sitting and a thousand francs were collected.

At three o'clock we were back in the assembly hall for the second part of the plenary session. It began with an address by Mr. Maurice Jaccard, head of the section for the affairs of the Swiss Abroad at the Political Department.

Mr. Frederic Siordet, a lawyer and member of the management committee of the Solidarity Fund, then gave us a picture of the work of this institution. Its membership stood at 14,000, it had awarded indemnities amounting to 4 million francs to 388 dispossessed Swiss abroad. Mr. Siordet encouraged his audience to support this work and in so doing, express our own solidarity as Swiss abroad.

Dr. Louis Guisan, who chaired all the proceedings, then invited the assembly to voice any questions. One man immediately sprang up. He was Mr. Wehrli from Chile. Owing to an electronic shortcoming he had to climb on the stage and delivered a complete speech which he had prepared in advance on the nefarious federal withholding tax which claimed a vicious 30 per cent of the gains of savings held in Switzerland by Swiss abroad and which amounted to an unjust double taxation. Mr. Wehrli demanded that the Assembly should vote a resolution asking for a reduction to 10 per cent of the withholding tax and submit it directly to the Federal Council. The delegate from the North of England, Dr. Bolliger, said that it was not for the Assembly to legislate on these matters — echoing Dr. Guisan, who had stressed that this question had been actively debated by the Commission for the Swiss Abroad and should remain in its hands. Despite another objection from a delegate residing in Ceylon, this position won the general assent.

The last speech came from Mr. Ernst Brugger, head of the Department of Public Economy (our own Board of Trade). As a successor to Hans Schaffner, one of the strongest political personalities of the decade, he appears refreshingly human and unassuming. His speech touched on the major problems affecting the Swiss abroad, in particular the slowness with which the Constitutional Article 45-bis referring to them was being practically implemented. He ascribed this to Swiss political individualism. He then covered the panorama of the country's problems and the issues it had to face in the world of today.

He was warmly applauded. His

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speech concluded the plenary session of the 1971 Assembly of the Swiss Abroad, closed by Dr. Guisan.

A press conference was held a short while later and so was the general meeting of the *Vereinigung der Freunde des Auslandschweizer-Werkes*. This ended the work of the assembly and the remainder of the week-end was devoted to enjoyment.

THE PROBLEMS RAISED

Those who regularly attend the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad will agree that the primary object of such gatherings is not so much to reach decisions rather than to take stock of the many problems particular to the Swiss Abroad and to give these people an opportunity of meeting each other. The "lay" Swiss residing abroad would be surprised to learn the multiplicity and complexity of their problems.

Many of them, but by no means all, were raised during these hours of discussion. One which was raised with particular emphasis during the sitting with Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad on Friday evening was the plight of Swiss schools abroad. Mr. Steinhauslin, a trustee of the Swiss school in Firenze and the headmaster of the Swiss school in Genoa, both embarked in a long inventory of the afflictions of these two institutions. The school in Firenze was 70 million liras in the red and the situation with the Genoa school was almost as bad. Neither school could hope to muster the necessary finance to pay the salaries and taxes of their Italian staff. The Swiss community in Firenze valiantly raised the equivalent of 20,000 francs every year to keep the school going but the building was nonetheless in a dilapidated condition. The Genoese delegate plainly said that if the Swiss government did not show more concern for the meaning and purpose of these schools by sending more hard cash, then they might as well close down. The time had come, he said, to make a definite stand and face its consequences. The headmasters of the Swiss schools in Accra and Rio also spoke of their problems. They were not as acute, but they all the same were heavily reliant on continued support from Berne.

The general problem of giving educational opportunities in Switzerland for young Swiss abroad was equally raised, and Mr. Marcel Ney reminded the attendance that there were bodies affiliated to the work for the Swiss abroad concerned with these matters. He recalled that the federal monies currently amounting to an annual 160,000 francs, were put to good use in giving study grants to young

Swiss abroad. He also stressed the recognition in Berne of the usefulness of Swiss schools abroad, not only in catering for the children of overseas residents, but also in propagating the cultural presence of Switzerland. There are 20 Swiss schools abroad and details on them have been given in an article in our last issue.

Another recurrent problem was that of the federal withholding tax. We were told during the plenary sitting that the feasibility of relieving it had received all the consideration of the competent bodies, but that these problems were very delicate and could not be solved off hand. One possibility which has already been advanced is to use the earnings on this tax imposed on Swiss abroad, estimated at 10 million francs a year, to help the ailing schools abroad.

An American Swiss raised the question of sickness benefits and asked why both sickness and old age pension funds could not be transferable when an ageing Swiss returned to end his days in the motherland. Mr. Ney explained that these problems were covered by bilateral agreements, either existing or in the offing, and that they too had received attention. An official from the Department of the Interior said that a project for a social insurance accruing to the Swiss abroad was under way and could become a reality by 1973. The intricacies of the problems of double fiscality were stressed again by Mr. Ney, who said that facilities had not yet been worked out for every case. Father Bossard raised a theme dear to his heart—the proper and official information of the young people setting out for a big city like London with ignorant or preconceived ideas. He was told that a document was being drafted and that his demands had acquired official recognition.

The French delegation felt particularly concerned about the political rights of the Swiss abroad. The 45th Article paved the way for the participation in Swiss political life of nationals abroad, yet nothing has been done in the two years this clause has been inscribed in the Constitution. Many are forsaking political and professional advantages by clinging to their Swiss nationality and strongly wish to have the moral compensation of being consulted on the issues of Swiss life. They are considered as aliens by the French and not accepted as fully fledged citizens by the Swiss at home. Some of them have described themselves as "second-class citizens". The scope of this problem goes beyond the competence of the Secretariat and it will be for Parliament to statute on this vital matter. It will be the theme of the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad next year.

Mr. Ernst Brugger mentioned in the course of his speech the problem of military service. He left open the possibility of giving a free ticket to the

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young volunteers coming from far-away lands to perform their military duties. He also suggested that a revision, possibly a reduction, of the military tax on Swiss abroad should be envisaged.

Mr. Maurice Jaccard evoked the problem of information. Successive enquiries and the experiments carried out in Belgium and in France indicated that a centralised information reaching the Swiss on every continent was desirable and a world-wide distribution of free information was planned for next year.

Another thorny, latent problem, which was, however, not raised publicly, was that of the dispossessed Swiss of Algeria. Mr. Maurice Maire, a Neuchatel company director who had been forced out of Algiers and robbed of his possessions by the Algerian government, arrived at the conference with a pile of duplicated sheets claiming for official Swiss pressure against the Algerians. He held that the Swiss who had fled from Algeria had been deprived of 9 million francs of retirement pension and 40 million francs of property. The only way to make good this injustice, he maintained in his leaflet, was to confiscate the National Liberation Front treasure still kept in the vaults of a Geneva bank. This treasure has been held in Switzerland by virtue of the numbered account and has been

a bone of contention between the Algerians and the Swiss ever since independence.

Mr. Maire finally did not distribute his leaflets. He thought better and managed to have a long talk with Mr. Brugger. He received assurances that the matter had already received the attention of the Federal Council and that action of some kind would probably be taken in the near future. Mr. Maire left the Assembly quite satisfied with the outcome of his quest.

A problem which recurred in the course of conversations was the difficulties encountered by many Swiss returning home after a career abroad in finding accommodation. This is one of the most pressing problems facing the people in Berne in charge of us, Swiss abroad. The fact is that not every body should be advised to return home. It is of course impossible to delimit who should and who should not come back, but the Secretariat is eager to inform all candidates to the homeland of the actual cost of housing, of the changes which the Switzerland of their childhood has undergone, of the problems of assimilation which they will have to overcome. There is a vast human problem and it is indeed difficult for the Secretariat to give the right advice to all those enquirers on the conditions of a definite return.

One thing which is advised to all is not to pack up bag and luggage before making a preliminary reconnaissance in Switzerland. This may cost money but will spare the tribulations affecting those who are stranded in a different Switzerland, past the point of no return, because they have not taken the necessary precautions.

Finally, the Secretariat's report on the outcome of the opinion poll carried among Swiss abroad on the theme of the influence of two worlds carries with it some interesting conclusions. 1,456 replies from 67 countries were sent in, substantially more than were expected. Mr. Ney reckons that they represent the thoughts of some 3,000 to 4,000 Swiss abroad, one per cent of the Swiss population abroad, and that they adequately reflect its general trends.

In France, 50,000 questionnaires were distributed, 281 replies were received. A hundred and twenty-two replies came in from Germany.

The main features derived by Mr. Ney from his compilation of replies were as follows: The German-Swiss tend to be more open to the language of their country of residence than the French-Swiss; the majority of Swiss abroad try to teach their children one of our national languages; this is getting increasingly difficult owing to the growing independence of children; the number of parents intent on giving their children a Swiss formal education is on the increase; the information services (short-wave services, for example) are greatly appreciated by many Swiss abroad.

Further conclusions related to other fields of life are: Being Swiss is more often than not a helpful asset in business; the majority of Swiss are content in their adopted country, but this does not preclude home-sickness; the main causes of attachment to the new country are its climate and its outlets for entertainment; a minority of those who return feel they are considered as strangers by fellow Swiss at home and others run into conflicts with their relatives; married women abroad find assimilation more difficult than their men; the great majority of Swiss abroad find assimilation as a personal enrichment and very few try to resist it.

Mr. Ney put forward the interesting suggestion that people belonging to mountainous lands remained more attached to them. Examples would be the Swiss and the people of Savoy. It has also been shown that Swiss mothers married to foreigners have considerable patriotic influence on their children. Children of Swiss mothers are more attached to the homeland than children of Swiss fathers in mixed marriages. The conclusion should be that children of Swiss mothers ought to be granted the right to opt for Swiss nationality.

We should mention to conclude a rare case of patriotic fidelity mentioned by Mr. Ney. A Swiss who emigrated with his parents in 1938 to the foot of

the Andes in Argentina wrote: "I have remained Swiss 100 per cent. I am here only because I was brought here by my parents as a child".

"FUN AND GAMES"

Attendance from Britain at this 49th Assembly of the Swiss Abroad was much improved on last year. Those present were Professor and Mrs. J. Inebnit, Father Paul Bossard, Mr. Bruno Frei, Mr. H. E. Von Gunten, Mrs. M. Meier, Mr. Harold Michel, Dr. and Mrs. H. Bolliger, Mrs. Lucie Green, Dr. and Mrs. E. Wiget, Consul and Mrs. F. Adams, Mrs. Winney and your Editor.

There was a strong representation from the various federal departments and in particular the Political Department. There was a string of diplomats and consular agents. They are held to attend these assemblies if they happen to be in Switzerland. This in fact counts as "work" and demonstrates once again the interest of our masters in Berne in the life of the Swiss abroad.

The "fun and games" part of the programme started on Friday afternoon, before the official opening of the Assembly. Excursions were organised to the new Göschenen dam, to the Hölloch cavern, to the recruit school 272 of the Schwytz troops, to the federal archives and the historical Turnmuesum, to the K. Hurlimann cement factory and to the Dettling kirsch distillery in Brunnen. The latter gathered the most participants.

On Saturday evening at eight o'clock the whole assembly was massed on the boat jetty ready for a lake trip. We sailed to Lucerne and back, stopping at various ports in which spot-lighted performances were staged in our honour. There were yodellers, brass bands and flag throwers. A good orchestra on board was keeping the younger participants on the move. The whole boat was humming with the gaiety and the laughs of a happy gathering.

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The following day we embarked at the same place and set out for the Rutli, blessed by fine weather. After the short climb to the Rutli plateau, which even he most aged managed to overcome, we gathered around a speaking platform covered with a Swiss flag and reared Mr. Alfred Weber, President of the National Council. His most rational disquisitions on the constraints of a consumer civilisation were followed by prayers by Professor Paul Kamer from Zurich and Mr. Pierre Schönenberger, minister at Brunnen. We sang two bilingual hymns for which were issued the words and said a prayer.

The blessing was followed by the walk back to the boat. Its paddle wheels churned the blue waters vehemently and the juggernaut sailed on a gusty lake towards the Bürgenstock. We were there in an hour-and-a-half. It needed three or four climbs of the aged funicular to convey all the assembly to the Park Hotel. We had a wholesome Bernese meal in the vast dining room of the hotel which overlooks the lake below. We were entertained by yodellers and accordionists. After coffee and brandy we then left to enjoy the sunny afternoon as we chose until the time of departure of the boat for the return journey. One possibility was to take a walk along *Felsenweg*, a giddy path hewn from the rock by Bücher and Dürer nearly a hundred years ago. At one point the way is barred and one has to take a lift built against the rock wall, whisking people up 150 metres in a few seconds.

When the boat headed back for Brunnen, many participants had left already. A farewell reunion was held in the Park Hotel and this closed the 49th Assembly of the Swiss Abroad.

An occasion like this presents the opportunity of meeting all sorts of interesting people. There was a mighty accumulation of life and experience at Brunnen on that last week-end of August. To relate the many reminiscences from abroad which I have heard would take too long. However, one character will be remembered by all participants. He was Mr. Marius Golay, a greying Genevese who had left a routine job on the local water board to try his luck in the Congo.

He had gone there posing as a water prospection expert and worked on a dam in the jungle before branching off into catering. He eventually managed a series of restaurants and hotels, winding up as master of a restaurant owned by the Union Minière mining company. He had been condemned to death three times, had horrible tales of tribal feuds and cannibalism to tell, had known the bloodthirsty negro-hunting mercenary Colonel Schram—but all this had not prevented him gathering a handsome nest egg conveniently tucked away in a Luxembourg account. With it he planned to

open a caravan site and a restaurant in Switzerland and end his days in more peaceful surroundings.

He had landed in Brunnen quite by chance, cruising across Switzerland in a Peugeot 204-estate in the company of his three pythons. The largest was 11 feet long and potentially nasty. It was left hibernating inside a jute bag in the car. But Mr. Golay trundled the smallest of the family in his rucksack and danced with it before a bemused audience on the lawn at the Bürgenstock top station.

Many participants appeared to have met each other on several similar occasions before and that is why these three days were so lively and friendly. I must encourage all our readers contemplating on giving the Assembly for the Swiss Abroad a try. It is a most enjoyable function and expertly organised.

In this respect all praise is due to the sterling work of the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad. All its staff are young and smiling. They work in a marvellous family spirit. They, more than anybody else, contributed to make the 1971 Assembly a great success.

Next year will mark the Jubilee of these annual events. The 1972 Assembly will be centred on the theme of the political rights of the Swiss abroad. It will be held in Berne and this festive Jubilee occasion is planned to last a whole week.

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