

# The fiftieth assembly of the Swiss abroad

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# THE FIFTIETH ASSEMBLY OF THE SWISS ABROAD

The last Assembly of the Swiss Abroad which took place for three lavish days in Berne during the last weekend of August, was the most important in the history of these annual events. It was a marking event as a Jubilee, it was important because of the theme that was proposed to participants—the desirability of political rights on home matters for the Swiss abroad—and it enjoyed an unprecedented attendance: About 700 participants from every continent.

## PRELIMINARY MEETINGS

The actual Assembly was preceded by various events placed under the patronage of Fifth Switzerland. There were exhibitions by Swiss artists abroad, concerts and decorated streets. On the day before the official opening, a shooting contest was organised for compatriots overseas in which two London marksmen scored very honourably indeed. Guests from abroad were then treated to a military demonstration and saw soldiers in combat gear stage mock warfare amid the bolt of explosions. This was a spectacle which many had not witnessed ever since their call up during the war, or perhaps even before, when they carried out their duty under the flag.

Although one or two Swiss from Britain were attending for the first time, most of our Colony's representatives were regular Assembly goers. Indeed, the Swiss of Britain were probably the most sparsely represented. There were about twenty of them, as against fifty "Germans" and ninety "French".

A series of more or less specialised commissions held their sittings on Friday, 25th August, eve of the Plenary Assembly. Most of these meetings were held in the upper floor of the Casino, others at the Rathaus. The following Fifth Swiss bodies held meetings during the day: the Commission of the Swiss Abroad; the Committee of the Solidarity Fund; the Committee of the Association of Friends of the Organisation for the Swiss Abroad. The latter two later held their AGM.

An interesting debate on Swiss schools abroad was held under the Chairmanship of Professor H. Roth, President of the Assistance Committee to these schools. Those present heard Mr. W. Martel, General Secretary of the Federal Department of the

Interior, explain the outline of a preliminary report that will secure more federal help to the 20 or more Swiss schools abroad, many of which would not survive for long without such help.

Later that day, a discussion among young Swiss abroad was conducted by Mr. F. Schmid, the new youth leader of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad. Many youths took part in the Assembly, most of them having just spent a few weeks at a holiday camp organised by the Secretariat. Questions which arose at the discussion related to youth camp organisation the equivalence of Swiss and foreign school certificates; the contents of the "*Weltschweizer*"; military duties and other matters.

For the evening, participants to the Assembly were invited to a Bernese supper at the huge *Kornhaus* Restaurant. The hall was packed. A folk ensemble was performing as patrons from overseas waited an hour for their meals to be served while television crews were milling around.

An open air dance with several bands and beer in profusion was held in the Kramgasse during the night. Crowds of Bernese joined in the festivities for a 4 franc ticket. Many shop windows under the arcades of this beautiful street had exhibits reflecting the life of the Swiss abroad. The most successful and elaborate exhibit was the vast model of the Yorkshire village of Hebden Bridge on the day of the Annual Landsgemeinde of the Swiss of the North. It was displayed in the window of the shop "*Heimwerk*". It represented the Hebden Bridge main street bordering on the Memorial Park where the Swiss of the North meet each year before their excursion. The principal square of the town and its town hall were distinctly recognisable. The railway line was not overlooked. Hardcastle Craggs and the moors beyond were ingeniously reproduced and the ceremonial gathering on Hebden Hay vividly depicted inside a gilt picture frame. This device focused the attention of spectators on the figurines and gave a remarkable impression of perspective.

The Swiss of London also had their own display of photographs centering mainly on the youth work of the Churches. The original plan had been more elaborate but the shop offering its windows for the display had chosen to keep it down to more moderate proportions.

## THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY

Work began the next day at 9 o'clock in the modern Kursaal overlooking the Aar. After a welcoming address by Mr. Jean Claude Nicole, Central President of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, which patron the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, the Assembly heard State Councillor Louis Guisan describe what had already been achieved towards materialising Article 45bis, voted six years ago, which calls on the Confederation to promote political rights for Swiss Abroad. He recalled that proposals had been worked out giving the Swiss abroad the opportunity to vote whenever they found themselves in Switzerland at the time of a federal vote. He also said that a new law on assistance to Swiss expatriates would be discussed by Parliament next year. He added that the main purpose of the present discussion would be to sense the position of the Assembly on the proposals for political rights, to which end a panel of six delegates were invited to air their views. These were Mr. de Planta, a Swiss of France; Dr. H. R. Bolliger, representing the Swiss of the North at the Commission for the Swiss Abroad; Dr. J. Werner, a Swiss from Stuttgart; Professor Zimmerli, a Swiss from South Carolina; Dr. A. Crespi, legal Councillor to the Tessin Government and Mrs. Tilo Frei, National Councillor from Neuchatel.

It wasn't long before the deep division among the Swiss abroad on whether they should accept the proposals put forward by Berne became apparent. The "French" speaker enumerated all the political advantages that were given to the French abroad. He noted, however, that only about 4 per cent of expatriate French residents availed themselves of the opportunity to vote in consulates. But the speaker firmly demanded a solution guaranteeing voting rights in federal matters and said that a predictably poor turnout was no reason to abandon the idea. The delegate from Stuttgart held similar views and stated that, Switzerland being a political entity, it was all the more important that her nationals abroad should participate in home life by exercising political rights. He suggested that polling booths should be set up at border offices and at Kloten airport, and mentioned as an example those trainloads of Italian workers returning home for the national elections earlier this year. As for Dr. Bolliger, he held an entirely

opposite standpoint and pointed out the geographical disadvantages suffered by the Swiss of Britain, as compared with their compatriots in countries sharing common borders with Switzerland. He warned of the risk of two classes of citizens being created by distance and varying financial means. He added that it was not fair to vote on matters for which one did not pay taxes, and on issues which one did not really experience at first hand.

Very tactfully, he thanked the government officials present for their kind offer, but told them that it was preferable for the Swiss abroad not to accept it and stick to the status quo. The speaker from America went with him nearly all the way. He had a special reason for doing so: The 35,000 Swiss of the U.S. would forfeit their political rights in that country if they exercised political rights pertaining to Swiss matters. He also mentioned the impracticality of making the journey to Switzerland and spoke of one area with an elderly Swiss colony whose members on average only visited Switzerland once every ten years.

#### PERSISTING DIVISION

Historical insight was given by Dr. Crespi and Mrs. Frei, who respectively spoke of the Tessin and Neuchâtel. Both cantons are unique in that the Tessin's expatriate citizens had the right to vote on communal and cantonal matters until that right was abolished during the war, whereas Neuchâtel very early on allowed, and still does today, its foreign residents of over five years standing to vote on communal matters. However illustrative these examples were, they were of little more than academic interest, as the context of the present debate was entirely different. This was pointed out emphatically by Dr. Crespi, who expressed scepticism on the possibility of voting from abroad.

After a break, a number of speakers were invited to add their views to what had been said. A Swiss from New Zealand welcomed political rights as a means of maintaining close ties with the homeland. A Swiss from Lyon, France, introduced a polemical tone in the debate by pressing the authorities to hurry up giving the Swiss of France political rights. This was a question of "human dignity", he said.

Minister M. Jaccard, the person at the Political Department in charge of the Swiss Abroad, then occupied the rostrum until lunch time. He said that a project based on the report by the Commission for the Swiss Abroad on the question of political rights for Swiss abroad would be submitted to political parties and Cantons as the

basis for eventual legislation. He noted the division among Swiss abroad on the whole matter, and stressed that it would not be possible to vote by correspondence, proxy or at a consulate. All this would be too complicated and carry things too far, particularly in view of the reciprocal rights which Switzerland would have to give to foreign residents.

The dinner that followed took place in the Assembly Hall. Covers were laid on speedily. After a little confusion, all the 700 delegates managed to find seating and enjoyed a meal that led, after two hours, to the second part of the programme which was highlighted by a speech from Mr. Nello Celio, President of the Confederation. But this was preceded by a noisy intervention from a Swiss from Germany. He shouted through the microphone that he had waited long enough for his right to vote.



*Not all sessions were exciting . . .*

A former Swiss from Algeria called for a motion appealing for federal compensation for the loss of property suffered by Swiss overseas, particularly from Algeria, as a result of nationalisation and expulsion. Mr. Guisan informed us that his wishes would be conveyed to the Government on behalf of the 50th Assembly of Swiss Abroad. He recalled that it was not possible for the Assembly to vote on the motion in the way it had been proposed.

The main event of the day was Mr. Nello Celio's speech. It was a brilliant address made in the three languages and surveying the situation of Switzerland in the world today. He emphasised the important role played by the Swiss abroad in the nation's economy today. We have translated the address in the first pages of this issue.

Most participants met during the evening at the Stadt-Theatre to hear Mozart's *Zauberflöte* performed by

the Stadt-Theatre Choir and the Berne Symphony Orchestra conducted by Peter Maag, a Swiss abroad active in Berlin. Several other Swiss artists abroad starred at this Gala Performance with outstanding stage sets.

#### IMPRESSIONS

A revelation for us was the importance of the Home for the Swiss Abroad at Duerrenäsch. We met several people from as far as Latin America vaunting the merits of this proficiently run institution which is designed to welcome families of all generations. One 70-year-old man from Paris told me that he spent four months every year at Duerrenäsch. His paraplegic wife had died there last year and was buried in the village. He had met a Swiss widow whose husband had equally died and been buried at Duerrenäsch and together

they were spending the nicer part of their old age at the Home for the Swiss Abroad. They had left it to take part at the Annual Assembly.

One impression which one derives from seeing 700 Swiss abroad gathered in the capital of their motherland is that Switzerland is still very much alive to her expatriates today. Few of the Swiss present at Berne during the last weekend of August had come especially to Switzerland to take part in the Assembly. The majority had taken the advantage of being in Switzerland at the time. Many others were former Swiss abroad. For some of our compatriots in France, Swiss problems are considered as an enjoyable pastime. "*Les affaires suisses, ça me détend*" said Mr. Marcel Gehring, President of the Swiss of Marseilles, who nonetheless has been reading "*La Suisse*" for fifteen years and keeps in very close touch with Swiss events. He is one of the many residents in France who believe that voting rights



should be given on principle, even if in practice this would be used once every ten years. He said that few members of the Swiss Colony in France felt the need for voting rights with the same urgency as expressed by the speaker from Lyon earlier during the Plenary Assembly.

## OUTING TO INTERLAKEN

On Sunday morning we journeyed to Thun on a special train. A modern boat carried us along the northern side of the lake towards Interlaken. The weather was mild but misty, and it was impossible to see the Alps. The surface of the lake was as smooth as a mirror. Our boat glided towards the canal that connects with Interlaken as a yodeling group performed in the main lounge of the lower deck. When the hundreds of Swiss abroad had disembarked from the boat, a small drizzle began falling on Interlaken. The long procession walked along the wet streets of the resort to its Kursaal, where long rows of tables had been prepared for their lunch.

The patrons from abroad lingered over coffee amid the indistinct sound of a folk group. A curtain of rain could be seen across the vast windows of the hall and all hope of taking the walk for which there was ample time in the programme was in vain. Instead we witnessed a number of personal performances by volunteers. The Secretariat of the Swiss abroad had asked for anyone who felt endowed with entertaining gifts put to them to the enjoyment of others. A nurse from the Tessin residing in Paris for over fifteen years appeared on the stage and read a poem in Romansch with beautiful inflexions but which few people could understand. Then a Swiss lady from our London colony, Miss Erika Ruettimann, read a lengthy poem which the bad acoustics prevented people in the back rows from enjoying. A corpulent woman from Germany climbed on stage and sang a *Lieder* with piano accompaniment. Its unending refrains somewhat strained the concentration of her audience and she sang for ages amid a general clatter of chairs and bustle of conversations. Nevertheless, she was loudly applauded.

The last performer was a fat boisterous man who also came from Germany. He was garbed in a custom officer's uniform and from his gait one gathered that his number was going to be a funny one. Unfortunately, his plump humour didn't come off and its delivery also extended beyond the reasonable bounds of time. The attention waned and the attendance more or less cut short his performance with a premature burst of applause.

The folk group then gave a display of dances, flag-throwing and whip-

banding exercises, the last of which was original and quite impressive.

We were then told by the organisers that coaches had been found to bring us back to the station because of the pouring rain. There followed a long but good-humoured wait at the entrance of the Kursaal as the two hired coaches evacuated our colourful

crowd back to the station, whence we boarded a special train that brought us back to Berne at about half-past five.

The parting of friends beneath the steel pillars of Berne station marked the end of a memorable Assembly which received wide attention from all the Swiss news media.

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# THE STORY OF THE "S.B.B."

## A Railway for Spanish Rolls?

The term *Spanisch-Brötli-Bahn* ("Spanish roll railway") is familiar to every child in German-speaking Switzerland. It is applied to any of the antediluvian trains that have been preserved from earlier days of railway romance and are still sent puffing and rattling along the track on special occasions. What "Spanish rolls" were, what they tasted like and where the term came from—these things have long been forgotten by the general public.

The original "Spanish roll railway" was the first to be constructed in Switzerland. It ran from Zurich to Baden and took up service 125 years ago. Spanish rolls were a speciality of Baden bakers which were very popular on the breakfast tables of Zurich's aristocracy. Up to that time they had been fetched from the famous watering-place by long-suffering servants, who had to plod for several hours through the night. The railway was thus their deliverance: the Spanish rolls were loaded on to the early train and were still warm when they reached Zurich. A railway, then, for Spanish rolls—this sort of idyll is often taken today to characterise the early days of the Swiss railways. The reality was quite different: an unceasing struggle on the part of their progressive and farsighted supporters against diehard traditions, narrow-minded regionalism and proverbial Swiss frugality. In the early forties of the nineteenth century, when the railway question first came up for discussion in Switzerland, other countries already possessed extensive rail networks: in Germany over 2,000 kilometres of track was in use, in France, some 800 km, and in Great Britain and Ireland no less than 4,000 km, or 2,500 miles. Various lines had already reached the Swiss frontier: that from Strasbourg and Karlsruhe ended at Basle, that from Lyons at Geneva, while others terminated in the Lake of Constance region. The circles that were intent on speeding

up the construction of Swiss railways, more particularly industrialists and tradesmen from Zurich, naturally had much more in view than a short local line to transport Spanish rolls from Baden. They were planning a line from Zurich to Basle that would connect up to the European networks and could be extended in the opposite direction to Chur, the starting point of the pass roads to the south: they were even thinking of an Alpine railway to Italy. Ten years before a single track was laid, one of the constants of future Swiss rail policy had already come into play: the need, the compulsion, to contrive a passage through the Alps.

A petition submitted by the Zurich Chamber of Commerce to the cantonal authorities on 16th May, 1836, opened up European perspectives: "... no country is better equipped to mediate successfully and efficiently, by way of railway connections, between North and South, between East and West, than Switzerland is". At the same time, the petition demanded "... that Switzerland should not lag behind unless she wishes to be pushed aside completely; therefore she must be the first to obtain control of these connections between the North and the South." Such words strike a surprisingly modern note.

The time, however, was not yet ripe. The section Zurich-Baden long remained the only one completed. For years no further construction took place, while fierce battles raged over cantonal interests. It was only in 1854, seven years after the first, that the second Swiss railway line was opened, and it was not a continuation of the "Spanish roll railway" but the Basle-Liestal section of the Hauenstein railway, which was clearly aiming at the Gotthard and was thus a competitor for the Zurich project based on a crossing of the Splügen or Lucomagno Passes in the Grisons. The Gotthard project was to triumph, but the clash of opinions about tunnels through the Alps continues to this day.