

George's reign...the golden age of Britain's Swiss diplomats [to be continued]

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MEMBERS of the nouvelle Société Helvétique's London group and their friends met at the Swiss Embassy Lecture Hall recently to hear an illustrated talk on "Britain's Swiss Envoys" by Peter M. Barber.

Dr Barber works in the Manuscript Department of the British Library at the British Museum and is the author of "Diplomacy - The World of the Honest Spy." The book is obtainable from the British Library, Reference Division, Great Russell Street, London WC1 3DG.

With the author's kind permission, the lecture is being serialised in the Swiss Observer starting here with Dr Barber describing Switzerland's most important export - its men . . .

George's age of Britain's

HISTORICALLY speaking, Switzerland's most important export has been not its chocolates and watches but its men.

The best known examples are the soldiers who fought under many flags throughout the world in order to provide a living for themselves and their families.

It is less well known that the scions of several good Swiss families became diplomats of other countries. This may seem surprising to most people nowadays, who are used to regarding their diplomats as the embodiments of their countries abroad. But traditionally diplomats have been the representatives not of their countries but of their sovereigns (who may have ruled over several countries).

Even today, British ambassadors are officially "her Britannic Majesty's ambassadors." And, in the past, monarchs took care to select their diplomatic representatives primarily for their ability and their personal loyalty to them, whether or not they were their born subjects or had or had not been naturalised.

And so it was that several Swiss

* *British Library Additional Manuscript 61537 H. 181-191 passim.*

* *St Saphorin to Luke Schaub [September 1720], British Library Add. Ms. 4299 H. 14-16.*

Catholics came to represent the kings of France and Spain at other courts while their Protestant compatriots served the rulers of Prussia, Denmark and England in the same capacity.

The basic reason why Protestant Swiss were so acceptable to English rulers as their representatives abroad was because they compensated for

and Italian - then the main diplomatic languages - knew Latin and often German, and were "known for (their) Loyalty to the Crown, eminent for (their) zeal and (for their) piety to the Protestant Interest"* - a major consideration between about 1540 and 1780.

Above all, they were quite ready to remain abroad for as

In Geneva, which was not then an integral part of the Confederation, one did not have quite these difficulties, but Genevan politics hardly offered scope for a really ambitious and capable young man.

Service on the king of England's behalf, however, offered much more than simply money and a career, for England was regarded as one of the leading champions of Protestantism in Europe.

To serve its king was to serve a noble cause and was regarded as a way of protecting one's co-religionists inside Switzerland who, through their representatives in English service, could call on the king's support if necessary.

On a more personal basis, one enjoyed enhanced status in one's own community and even, if one was serving inside Switzerland, privileges and immunity from prosecution, as a British envoy.

The Swiss who did act as British envoys can be divided into two groups - those who served outside Switzerland and those who served in Geneva, Berne and Chur, the capital of the Grey League which then, like Geneva, was linked to the 13 Swiss cantons only by alliance.

The earliest Swiss-born envoy was Etienne Le Sieur of Geneva (d. 1631). He first came to notice in the 1570s as secretary to the rather glamorous poet and soldier Sir Philip Sidney.

In the 1580s Le Sieur per-

‘ The Protestant Swiss gentleman had good solid reasons for wanting to serve the English king ’

England's lack of a professional diplomatic service.

Until about 1750 there were few Englishmen with the proper social background or knowledge of foreign courts and languages who were prepared to go abroad for their sovereign - and risk the neglect and irregular, insufficient pay that often accompanied it.

The Swiss Protestants on the other hand, having been born and bred in the middle of Europe were, in the words of a petition on behalf of an aspirant in 1708: "acquainted with the Genius of those People and knowledgeable of the constitutions of their distinct governments."

They were fluent in French

long as was required and were prepared to tolerate the hardships that deterred most English gentlemen.

The Protestant Swiss gentleman had good, solid reasons for wanting to serve the English king. As perhaps the best known of this group, François Louis de Pesme, Sieur de St Saphorin, wrote in 1720: "Quelque agréable que soit ce Pays (i.e. Switzerland) on ne peut supposer que ce soit veritablement une Patrie pour ceux qui ne sont pas bourgeois de Berne",* and the difficulties of making one's mark and earning one's living were all the greater if one was a younger son.

reign... the golden Swiss diplomats

formed some solid services as envoy to the Duke of Cleves, and in the last years of Elizabeth I's reign and the first of James I's he took part in commercial negotiations in northern Germany and Denmark.

His performance was clearly regarded as satisfactory, for in 1608 he was knighted and sent to Tuscany to secure the release of The Mayflower, which had been impounded by the authorities there.

Though in the end the ship was released (and seems to have been the same that later carried the Pilgrim Fathers to America), his performance in Italy should have given rise to concern. An inborn arrogance, allied to the fervid Protestantism naturally associated with a native of Calvin's city, met with hostility in Catholic Italy.

Nevertheless, barely had he returned to England than he was sent to Germany and seems to have set himself the task of mediating between the various claimants to the Duchy of Cleves, whose duke had died childless.

In pursuance of this goal he soon found himself at the Emperor's court, then at Prague. His mission was a total disaster. His support for the Calvinist elector of Brandenburg alienated the Lutheran elector of Saxony, who had Le Sieur ejected from their last meeting with the cry: "Er solle sich packen sonst wolle er ihm den Becher ins Gesicht

werfen" ("Pack up and go – otherwise I'll chuck the mug in your face").

He was no luckier in Prague where his anti-Catholicism and support for Rudolph II (d.1612) against his brother and successor Matthias led him to be repeatedly banished from court.

In 1613, James I finally recalled him and he returned to England a disillusioned and discredited man in 1614. Ignored and unhappy, he lived out his remaining years at his home in Chiswick.

A century passed before a Swiss again represented England abroad, mainly because before 1689 the Stuart monarchs preferred to pursue a passive foreign policy and because, on the whole, Englishmen could be found to man the relatively few diplomatic posts that remained.

In the same period the national prejudice against foreigners grew and found expression in a provision of the Act of Settlement of 1701 which

was intended to prevent them – even if naturalised – from representing the English crown abroad.

Unfortunately for the English chauvinists, however, the Protestant rulers who were installed on the throne after 1688 – the Dutch William III and the German George I – did not, understandably, share these prejudices.

Moreover, George I was able to flout the relevant provisions of the Act of Settlement by appointing foreigners to represent him technically as elector of Hanover, even though they took their orders from England and their pay from Ireland (which had its own parliament and laws and lay beyond the jurisdiction of the Westminster parliament).

Such subterfuge was necessary, for after 1688 England again began to pursue an extremely active foreign policy, as leader of the European alliance against Louis XIV, and there were not sufficient English born

diplomats to answer to the needs of the time.

The reigns of George I and, to a lesser extent, of George II marked the golden age of Britain's Swiss diplomats. The longest serving, and probably best known, of them was François Louis de Pesme, Sieur de St Saphorin.

As his name indicates, he stemmed from St Saphorin near Vevey on Lake Geneva, where he was born in 1668. Being a younger son and not being a *bon bourgeois de Berne*, which then dominated the Pays de Vaud, he had little alternative but to seek his fortune abroad.

After a short period in the service of Hanover as a military cadet and of Hesse-Cassel as a secretary to the Duke, a chance meeting led to a career with the Austrian fleet of the Danube.

Within a decade he had become admiral of the fleet. More important, he had become friendly with most of the up and coming Austrian leaders, such as Prince Eugene of Savoy.

By 1697 he was informally being employed by Berne to support its interests in Vienna. So skilfully did he manage this that, with the outbreak of the War of the Spanish Succession, he was sent into Switzerland by the Austrian authorities as one of their representatives.

(To be continued)

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6 Friendly with most of the up and coming Austrian leaders, such as Prince Eugene of Savoy 9