

"The little parliament" meets in Berne

Autor(en): **Meier, Mariann**

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THE spring meeting of the Commission of Swiss Abroad met at the "Federal Palace" in Berne on March 5. Mr Philippe Garraux, member of the Executive Committee, was in the chair, both the President and the Vice-President being ill.

He welcomed the 60 delegates, deputy delegates and members from inside Switzerland, especially the Hon. President, Monsieur Louis Guisan, the President of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, Mr René Retornaz, and the President of the Solidarity Fund, Mr Alfred Matter.

From the UK, the two members for GB North, Mr Bernard Simon and his deputy Dr Ursula Ditchburn, and Mrs Mariann Meier for GB South, attended the meeting.

The draft of the annual report was discussed and accepted. In its introduction, the question was asked how the Swiss communities abroad could count on survival when fewer Swiss than ever managed to get permits to work abroad, although the interest in emigration had increased due to the more difficult economic climate.

Ironically, those who stand the best chance of getting a permit, certain technicians and members of the catering trade, find it easy to get a job in Switzerland. On the other hand, the Swiss who return because they become unemployed abroad belong to trades and professions where there is unemployment in Switzerland, too.

Under the circumstances, the future of the Swiss communities does not look too rosy, and the organisation of Swiss Abroad and its Secretariat in Berne has an even more important part to play.

The accounts for 1982 showed a deficit of over 10,000 francs which, however, is less than a quarter of the budgeted loss.

It is hoped that the budget for

1983, which shows a loss of 72,000 francs will also be well below the estimated loss. The accounts presented by the new Hon Treasurer, Mr Francesco Maurer, were accepted.

Dr Weber, who had been at the helm of the organisation since 1978, had tendered his resignation. There would be an opportunity at the next meeting to express recognition of his work.

Professor Dr Walther Hofer, Berne, was elected as new President in his place. He is an Auslandschweizer, having lived in Berlin, New York and other countries.

He was a National Councillor (SVP-People's Party) from 1963 to 1979 and is a candidate again for the coming parliamentary session. He has been a member of several national and international bodies and is an author of repute. The new President was received with acclamation.

Another election was that of Mr Joe Broggin, deputy delegate for GB South, to the Executive Committee of the Commission. He is the first member of an English-speaking country and will doubtless make an excellent contribution. Congratulations!

Regarding political rights, a report on a possible change in the law would be ready for the Commission to discuss in August. The question is still open as to whether Swiss residents abroad can vote by post.

The Chairman made a plea to members to register with their Embassies or Consulates so as to be able to vote in federal matters in their Commune of origin or of their last place of residence - so far, this has only been possible when they happen to be in Switzerland during a plebiscite.

'Little Parliament' meets in Berne

The question of a possible reorganisation of the Commission was shelved as the new President would obviously like to have a chance to make suggestions. Several proposals had been received and noted.

The National Council had accepted the recommendations of the Council of States and had voted in favour of the citizenship campaign, according to which Swiss mothers married to foreigners abroad would be able to pass on Swiss citizenship to their children. The Federal Council will now work out the text which will most probably be put to the electorate early in 1984.

Regarding the AHV/AVS, concern was expressed that the petition which had been sent after the Assembly in Siders last August had not yet borne fruit.

This asked for a fair solution to the changed situation of Swiss wives of husbands, insured compulsorily in Switzerland, who were no longer insured unless they applied individually before the age of 50. (Note: in the meantime, the Federal Council has decided to recommend to Parliament that a change be made to allow such wives to join retrospectively without loss of benefit. It will, however, take some time until this becomes law.)

Several members voiced disappointment at the new regulations that AHV/AVS contributions would henceforth have to be paid in Switzerland in Swiss

francs. Information about the best way to proceed was needed urgently.

The organisation has tried, mostly unsuccessfully, to arrange for the Swiss abroad to join Swiss sickness insurance. Further negotiations will take place.

The position of the Swiss schools abroad gives cause for concern. More and more cuts are being made.

The Organisation has been trying very hard to gain sympathy and practical help from the authorities. It will continue with its efforts. Mr Garraux hoped that the "Patronatskantone" of the schools could give more assistance.

The meeting was informed of the arrangements for the next Assembly, from August 26 to 28 in Zurich. The theme will be "Switzerland and the United Nations."

There will be a Government representative putting the case for Switzerland joining and a public figure speaking against, as well as a panel of six Swiss from abroad, three for and three against.

A circular about this will be sent to all societies. (Note: This has been received, and there will be a public discussion, see forthcoming events.)

After the meeting, the usual luncheon took place at the Bellevue Hotel, which Secretary of State Probst attended.

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On Friday, March 4, the spring

meeting of the Solidarity Fund's Council was held at the offices of the Swiss Bank Corporation in Berne.

The annual report was considered. It made clear that the activities of the Solidarity Fund was again marked by the way Swiss emigration over the last few years has developed.

On the one hand, the difficulties of getting work permits abroad and the new short-term emigrant who works abroad for a Swiss firm for a definite period only, the "Kontraktauslandschweizer", and on the other hand the bad economic conditions in some countries which have led to protectionist measures, often meaning loss of livelihood for Swiss residents.

In view of this, the Solidarity Fund has tried to increase publicity inside Switzerland and in countries where political risks are small.

In spite of increased admissions in 1982, the total membership is down - 10,328 as opposed to 10,589 in the previous year.

Lump sum compensation paid out was slightly higher than in 1981 - 0,265 million francs. These payments were made to members in Iran, Zaire, Zimbabwe, Iraq, Kenya, Mauretania and Poland. The Fund's finances are in a satisfactory state, although it was pointed out that more members must be found to make sure the Fund can cope with increased claims.

In this connection, I should like to point out that membership in the United Kingdom is rather low - 259, who would receive a total of 2,335,000 francs in compensation.

This is low, compared with 2,136 members in Germany and 3,099 in France. Even in Italy, Spain and Austria membership is higher than in Britain.

It must be remembered that the Fund is a unique kind of insurance against loss of livelihood in case of war, political upheaval, nationalisation.

It is also an excellent way of saving in Swiss francs because, at the end of it, premiums are repaid to a large extent. One can also choose three different categories, higher compensation and lower interest, or the other way round.

The value of the Fund has been proved again and again, and readers would do well to consider joining, either by paying a lump sum or by making annual payments.

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Not to speak of the solidarity which we who live in a stable country would be showing to our compatriots who reside in lands where conditions are precarious to say the least.

Mariann Meier