

Swiss Benevolent Society

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IN his report to the Swiss Benevolent Society, the president, Mr V. Berti, reviews the society's work and the efforts of the many helpers during 1982.

Swiss Benevolent Society responds as times change

AS we look back over the last year we feel that our work is changing in many ways, though our aim stays, of course, the same, and we are trying to respond as best we can to the varied needs that are brought to our attention.

Firstly, it was with great sadness that we learned at Easter that our old friend and member of the Executive Committee, Dr Hugo Rast, had died peacefully.

Not only do we owe him a debt of gratitude as a society, but many are the Swiss who have cause to remember his great kindness and deep awareness of their physical and emotional pains.

One change, which has been foreseen, is that the number of pensioners in need of regular aid from us is declining slowly and steadily, as more people are in receipt of retirement pensions from their jobs while the overall size of the colony is shrinking.

However, we do find that there are an increasing number of elderly, or younger people, who turn to us for advice on all kinds of matters.

When old persons have to make alternative arrangements for the remainder of their lives this is a period of intense insecurity and apprehension, and one client alone can take up a very large slice of our time at a given moment.

This problem is magnified by the fact that, so often, there are quite large distances to cover for one single visit, but we feel that this service of counselling and support is both necessary and very worthwhile.

With others who elect to remain where they are and cope with the help of the domiciliary services, we may be called in to take increasing charge of their financial affairs to ensure that no bills get overlooked.

Wherever possible, we try to arrange that the elderly are on the telephone so that frequent checks can be made with them to avoid any serious problems cropping

up. Some, however, remain suspicious of the phone and refuse to have one installed.

In other cases there are no real problems which need solving, but the loneliness is acute and the need for a visit or telephone call is great.

Having the advantage of not being a statutory service, there is sometimes less reticence in consulting us because we are not equated with what is termed as "the welfare".

In many cases, though, and with the agreement of the clients, we do bring in the statutory services because our resources are not sufficient to deal with the problems that confront them.

This is particularly so where housing is concerned. It continues to be one of the most difficult aspects of our work, particularly with people who have some capital, which puts them outside the scope of the traditional organisations and local authorities but whose resources are not enough to buy or rent a suitable place.

Among the younger families the problems we encounter are manifold, with unemployment of the breadwinner becoming more common and the worries created by this threat destabilising relationships which often were rather precarious at the outset.

One way in which we have helped our mothers again is by enabling their children to go to Switzerland under the Pro Juventute scheme. We owe a great debt to that organisation which is always willing to make allowances for unusual requests and problems.

The experiment of using the premises at 31 Conway Street as an emergency hostel for young Swiss women has proved to be

successful, even under the rather primitive conditions in which it was started.

We have learnt a great deal, and at the time of writing this report we are awaiting the relevant permissions to do some building work to increase the amenities to a more acceptable level.

Much of the success of this venture is due to the excellent relationship with the Swiss Welfare Office for young people and the unceasing support of our caretakers, Mr and Mrs D. Jackson.

Christmas has brought its usual happy hustle and bustle and so numerous were the people who have helped us with the preparation and distribution of the parcels, that we can no longer name them all; but we are deeply appreciative of the joy they have given to our clients in one way or another.

At its monthly meetings, the Executive Committee has been busy with all the problems pertaining to the smooth running of the society.

It has given careful consideration to the requests for material help and spent a great deal of time on the various problems connected with the conversion of the house into a smooth running and friendly hostel.

The Embassy has been represented at the meetings by Consul C. Duboulet and Vice-Consul W. Leuz.

We are glad to report that the happy co-operation with the Swiss Welfare Office for young people has continued during the year, and we are grateful to Mrs Margrit Lyster for the support she continues to give to our secretary.

During the holidays and a prolonged absence of our secretary, we were lucky to enlist once again

the capable help of Mrs Priska Studer, and we thank her for the interest she is taking in our work.

Our secretarial assistant, Mrs Ursula Schwarzenbach, left us to return to Switzerland with her husband and we had the great good fortune to secure the help of Mrs Catherine Arnold, who has become very much a member of our team.

We are grateful to her for her able and friendly help.

We should like to express our thanks to our Honorary President, Ambassador M.C. Caillat, and to the members of the Embassy staff for their help and support.

Our individual supporters continue to be most important to us and we thank them for the interest which they take in our activities.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to the Swiss Churches, the Mothers' Group of the Swiss Church and members of a great number of English social services, both voluntary and statutory.

For professional reasons, our former hon. assistant treasurer, Mr Jean Meyer, had to return to Switzerland. We were sorry indeed to lose him, and thank him for the interest he has shown in our cause during his stay in London.

We extend, as always, our gratitude to Mrs Anna-Regula Sharp for the constant help and advice she gives to the committee during the course of their deliberations and all the other work she has to undertake on behalf of the society.

One problem which has been much on the Executive Committee's mind is the question of how the Swiss colony as a whole could be more involved in and aware of our activities, and we hope that the coming year will bring us a step nearer to this goal.