

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 38 (2011)
Heft: 3

Rubrik: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad

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Meeting of the Council of the Swiss Abroad

The Council of the Swiss Abroad held its spring meeting in Brunnen, rather than its usual venue of Berne, on 8 and 9 April. There was a packed agenda, and some items produced a lively debate. The main causes for concern were the reorganisation of the consular service at the FDFA and the Swiss banks.

Gerhard Brügger, who has been made Director of the new Consular Directorate at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA), presented the FDFA's reorganisation of the consular service to the 100 or so Council members present in Brunnen. He did this eloquently, but was unable to placate the anger that had built up beforehand. There is still great dissatisfaction with the FDFA's decision to close many consulates and consular departments at embassies. Many councillors were also outraged that the FDFA had made its decisions without consulting the Swiss abroad or the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA). The Swiss abroad will, in some cases, be forced to make long journeys if they wish to use consular services as a result of the closures. To give just one example, the Swiss in Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia will, in future, only be looked after in Vienna (Austria). Brügger explained to the Council that this step had already been decided and was non-negotiable, but that the FDFA would endeavour to accommodate the Swiss abroad through "support measures", such as mobile consulates and new regulations on the recording of biometric data for passports (see box below). The Council of the Swiss Abroad passed a resolution on this matter in Brunnen (text can be found in German

at www.aso.ch under Politik / Auslandschweizerrat / Aktuelles).

The conduct of the Swiss banks towards the Swiss abroad (which include account closures and exorbitant charges), an issue already covered by "Swiss Review", was described as "scandalous" by the Council. However, the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad does not have any means to intervene in this regard (see also the "OSA advice" section on this page).

The presentation on the topic of "Switzerland and Europe – an External Perspective" by Peter Winkler, correspondent for the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" (NZZ) in Brussels, was also met with great interest by the Council. Winkler diagnosed a "sometimes aggressive attitude towards the EU" in Switzerland and said that many people in Brussels are under the impression that Switzerland wants to reconcile two things that are incompatible: access to the positive achievements of the EU while, at the same time, remaining on the outside in those areas with which Switzerland does not agree. Winkler described this as "à la carte membership". Winkler added that objectivity is lacking in the debate. It is, he said, quite simply a question of what Switzerland must bring to the table to be able to participate. He said that he often hears the term "cherry-picking" in relation to Switzerland in Brussels and that many EU Member States are increasingly becoming less inclined to grant Switzerland exemptions.

In addition to the resolution on the consular service, the Council of the Swiss Abroad also approved an election manifesto concerning the national elections on 23 October 2011 (the text can be found in German at www.aso.ch under Politik / Auslandschweizerrat / Aktuelles).

The reason for holding the meeting of the CSA in Brunnen was the 20th anniversary of

the "Area for the Swiss Abroad" in Brunnen. The ceremony in the park took place on the day after the Council meeting and was followed by a sightseeing excursion with a boat trip, a walk along the "Swiss Path" and a visit to the Rütli. The 200 or so participants from Switzerland and abroad enjoyed coming together for the excursion in glorious sunshine.

OSA advice

QUESTION:

I am a Swiss citizen abroad and I am having difficulty opening or holding an account in Switzerland. Some banks levy very high bank charges to manage the accounts of people domiciled abroad. What can I do?

ANSWER:

The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad regularly receives letters of this nature. Legally, the banks benefit from freedom of contract. They therefore have the right to decide whether or not to establish a banking relationship with a client for their own reasons. The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad advises persons concerned to contact small banks or banks with a more restricted geographical area of activity, such as the cantonal banks or branches of Raiffeisen, etc. Some Swiss abroad seem to have found solutions in this way. However, responses can vary from one branch to the next and it is therefore worthwhile enquiring with different branches of the same bank. We also recommend asking the banks concerned if there are alternatives to make account management easier (for instance, by nominating a person of trust in Switzerland to receive mail). Other people seem to have resolved their problems by contacting Postfinance. However, it should be noted that this situation is constantly evolving and these options are subject to

ORDERING A SWISS PASSPORT

Swiss citizens abroad who are registered with a Swiss representation abroad can also record their biometric data for a new passport in Switzerland or at a Swiss representation in another country.

The following procedure applies:

- The passport application must be made with the representation abroad (consulate/embassy) via the website www.schweizerpass.ch or by telephone. Applicants must indicate at this stage which data capture centre they wish to use to record their biometric data.
- The representation informs the passport office or the representation chosen.

Passport offices can reject applications (due to insufficient capacity or on other grounds). In such cases, the applicant must select another passport office in Switzerland or visit the representation abroad.

- If approval is granted by a passport office in Switzerland, the representation abroad forwards the application and informs the applicant.
- Applicants can then agree a date directly with the passport office in Switzerland.
- Once the data has been recorded, the passport is sent by post to an address in Switzerland or to the representation abroad, from where it has to be collected. It cannot be delivered by post to applicants abroad. Further information is available from the FDFA's helpline +41 (0)800 24-7-365



change at any time. The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad also wishes to point out that having a bank account in Switzerland does not constitute an exemption from declaring it in the account holder's country of residence.

We also advise anyone who contacts us about this matter to follow the discussions on the [swisscommunity.org](http://www.swisscommunity.org) website where the Swiss abroad exchange their experiences and provide each other with advice, in particular concerning the solutions they have found.

Link: www.swisscommunity.org

"Area for the Swiss Abroad" to be made more attractive



The 20th anniversary of the "Area for the Swiss Abroad" in Brunnen will be celebrated this year on 1 August. This park, which was purchased from a private owner thanks to generous donations from numerous Swiss abroad in 1991 on the 700th anniversary of the Swiss confederation, is seen as the "Rütli of the Swiss abroad" and symbolises the solidarity of Swiss people abroad.

However, this wonderful meadow in Brunnen Bay has been very underused to date. That is now set to change. The Foundation for the Area for the Swiss Abroad and the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad have given a group of students from the University of Applied Sciences Northwestern Switzerland the task of producing a concept for new possible uses and improved marketing.

"This location urgently needs a feature that is instantly recognisable and which people will remember and associate with it", says Aileen Morgenthaler, one of the students involved in the project. However, it is not an easy task as there is insufficient funding for a building, a monument or a "Botta tent", like the one Brunnen had in 1991. They have therefore, Morgenthaler explains, set themselves the task of identifying sponsorship and partnership opportunities and drawing up a

basic marketing and communication strategy as part of the project.

The project group believes that "people should leave their mark on the site". This could be achieved very simply and at minimal cost with a virtual guest book, for example, which people from all over the world could use interactively. Morgenthaler adds that the concept will also set out proposals for events, initially perhaps only for people from the surrounding area or from Switzerland and neighbouring countries. The project group will present the detailed proposals to both the Foundation and the Organisation over the summer.

Offers for young Swiss abroad covering activities, politics and sport

The offers that the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) provides for young people give Swiss youngsters abroad fascinating and topical insights into Switzerland. We offer unforgettable holiday experiences with young people of the same age from all over the world as well as educational visits that allow Swiss youngsters from abroad to discover their own roots.

"Direct Democracy in an International Context" is the theme of the 2011 Congress of the Swiss Abroad, which will take place in Lugano from 26 to 28 August. Young people are also welcome to attend this congress. Anyone who would like to gain a better understanding of the Swiss political system can take part in an exciting project week in Ticino. The first few days will be spent at a camp. You will be introduced to the congress topics in workshops and will have the opportunity to speak with Swiss politicians. The week will also include an enjoyable fringe programme and sporting activities in Ticino. At the end of the week, we will move into the youth hostel in Lugano as the voice of young people must also be heard at the congress. Federal councillor Doris Leuthard will be available to answer your questions.

Immediately after the congress, OSA will organise a seminar on the 20th Federal Youth Session. You will be prepared for this event in Berne and will receive an introduction to various political topics on the agenda of the Youth Session. On the Friday, you will have the opportunity to meet all the other young politicians and to help with the

drafting of petitions. You will then be able to discuss issues with experts and parliamentarians.

October elections

A new Swiss parliament will be elected on 23 October 2011. The campaigning has already started. OSA encourages all Swiss abroad to take part in the elections. We are organising a seminar for young people in the week prior to the election weekend where we will take a look behind the scenes of the election. OSA will firstly provide an introduction to the Swiss political system. You will then become familiar with the candidates. We will examine the media coverage and experience live TV and radio reporting. Finally, we will share the election-day excitement with the parties and then analyse the results together with experts.

Information on the offers for young people can be found under "Offers" at www.aso.ch.

Circus performers sought

Every year, the Foundation for Young Swiss Abroad organises various two-week camps for 8 to 14-year-old Swiss children living abroad. This year, the foundation is offering a unique circus project week in Rapperswil-Jona in cooperation with the Pipistrello interactive circus. Forty Swiss children abroad will have the chance to take part in the circus together with 40 children from Rapperswil-Jona and the surrounding area as jugglers, tightrope walkers and clowns, etc. – anything's possible! And participants will, of course, also have the opportunity to discover

TRAINING CAMP FOR TALENTED SWISS FOOTBALLERS ABROAD

The Swiss Football Association (SFV) attaches great importance to developing talented footballers, among the Swiss abroad as well. In cooperation with Swiss Olympic, the association is organising a training camp to scout for talent at the Tenero sports centre from 25 September to 1 October 2011.

■ Anyone born between 1994 and 1997 who believes they have the talent, motivation and ability to be among the best in their age group should not hesitate to register at www.football.ch. All further details can be found there.

Switzerland (Swiss National Day celebration, trip to Zurich, and so on).

A gala show will take place at the end of the week, on Saturday, 6 August 2011. Anyone who would like to attend is more than welcome to do so.

No prior circus knowledge is required to take part in the circus camp. Any child can make his or her circus dreams come true without already being a master performer.

Information and registration at www.sjas.ch or www.pipistrello.ch.

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Vocational training in Switzerland

Many young people in Switzerland enter vocational training after completing their compulsory education. Heinrich Klaus, Rector of Fricktal Vocational Training Centre in Rheinfelden, explains why this path also offers a promising route into a career for Swiss abroad. This interview was conducted by Lauranne Zellweger and Silvia Hirsig from the Association for the Promotion of Education for Young Swiss Abroad (AJAS).

AJAS: Around two-thirds of young people in Switzerland complete basic vocational training after nine years of compulsory education. What is so special about this training?

HEINRICH KLAUS: It's the dual system, which combines practical training as an apprentice in a company with theoretical study at the vocational training college. There are over 200 types of apprenticeship to choose from.

What opportunities are available to young people afterwards?

A three or four-year apprenticeship resulting in a federal certificate of proficiency

(EFZ) is needed to move on to the next stage, advanced vocational training, where basic training is complemented with the federal vocational school-leaving certificate. The focus for this is on furthering the young person's general education. The vocational school-leaving certificate gives young people access to universities. Anyone with a commercial qualification and a vocational school-leaving certificate can study business at university, for example, or attend a teacher training college. The apprenticeship route is therefore a genuine alternative today to entering higher education via a grammar school.

Most young Swiss people abroad who contact AJAS are interested in university study in Switzerland. Very few plan to take the apprenticeship route. Why is that?

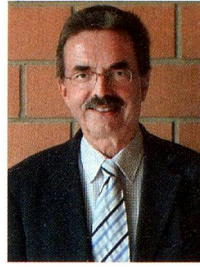
Very few people abroad are aware of our vocational training system, particularly our apprenticeships.

How expensive is the training?

There are no costs for the apprentices except for the teaching materials. They receive a decent wage of around 500 Swiss francs in the first year and between 1000 and 1400 Swiss francs in the third, depending on the sector.

What is the situation in terms of recognition of the apprenticeships in other countries?

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) was sceptical about our apprenticeships for a long time. That has changed in recent years because other countries have recognised how skilled our graduates are. However, reciprocal recognition is very complicated because the Greek certificate of professional training, for instance, is very different to that in Portugal or France.



HEINRICH KLAUS is an Executive Board member of the Swiss Conference of Directors of Vocational Training Colleges (SDK). In this role, he is also a member of AJAS.

What is the apprenticeship market like at the moment?

For a long time, people complained that there were too few apprenticeships. Then, in August 2010, there were suddenly 7,000 vacancies. One reason for this is that more apprenticeships were created; another is that more and more young people are attending grammar schools. There are currently enough apprenticeships in quite a number of professions.

What is the youth unemployment situation like in Switzerland?

Most apprentices find a job immediately. The direct relationship with the world of work is clearly a key factor. We have a low rate of youth unemployment in Switzerland in comparison to other European countries.

The vocational training system is a success then in that respect?

Absolutely. In his recently published book "Warum wir so reich sind" (Why we are so rich), the former price regulator and national councillor Rudolf Strahm writes that, in his view, our vocational training system is and will continue to be a decisive factor in Switzerland's prosperity and its strong position on the global market – thanks to better quality, greater precision and niche products. I agree with him entirely. Basic vocational training in Switzerland is therefore also an option that offers good prospects for our Swiss abroad as well.

Swiss abroad can obtain further information from the AJAS advisory centre.

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