

The work of the secretariat for the Swiss Abroad

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THE WORK OF THE SECRETARIAT FOR THE SWISS ABROAD

The Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad in Berne has sent its 51st Annual Report to the Swiss Observer. This report discloses its particularly numerous and fruitful 1969 activities and shows that the Secretariat really has the interests and the welfare of the Swiss disseminated across the world at heart. Although the impression derived from a prolonged residency in Great Britain would rather be that the population of **Fifth Switzerland** is dwindling, the figures contradict that notion. At the beginning of the year covered by the report, 163,685 pure Swiss and 140,829 double-nationals were registered at foreign consulates, a total of 304,514 persons. The corresponding figure for 1950 was 237,443.

The Secretariat pursues various activities which can be described under the headings: Commission for the Swiss Abroad; Care of the Swiss Societies Abroad; Information for the Swiss Abroad; Advice, Social Security and Insurance for the Benefit of Elderly Swiss Abroad needing help from the Motherland; Attendance to Swiss Youth and Education Abroad.

The Commission for the Swiss Abroad

This Commission is a "legislative" body and is distinct from the 12 full-time employees of the Secretariat in Berne. Its members are Swiss citizens living across the world and concerned with the problems of the Swiss abroad. They met twice in 1969, successively in Berne and Montreux. They are mainly concerned with **general** problems such as the introduction of Constitutional provision for the Swiss abroad, the principle of choosing cantonal or federal welfare services for the Swiss abroad, the adoption of voting rights for the Swiss abroad and the refund of capital tax to Swiss abroad. The Commission is the senate of the Swiss abroad and their antenna in Berne.

The Care of the Swiss Societies Abroad

The Secretariat files the addresses of and maintains regular relations with the 550 Swiss Societies abroad. Not all these societies are found in the Nouvelle Societe Helvetique's list of recognised societies abroad. Four new societies have been entered in that register last year. They are the **Societe Suisse de Tirs Anvers**, the **Canberra Swiss Society**, the **Sociedade Suica de Beneficencia Bahia**, and the **Sociedad Suiza de Beneficencia y Socorras mutuos Helvetia Valparaiso, Chile**. The greatest number of Swiss societies are to be found in America and Europe. However, quite apart from a growing disinterest for organised activities, they suffer from the ageing process. On the other hand, Swiss societies are springing up and prospering wherever the distance from home

is acutely felt, either because of a totally different cultural environment (Africa and Asia), or because of failing entertainments (certain parts of Canada, South America, Australia and New Zealand). The Secretariat not only endeavours to foster the activities of these 550 cited associations, but also those of Swiss cultural, economic, linguistic, choral, sports and markmanship associations.

The practical support afforded by the Secretariat is given in the form of **films** lent and circulated among the societies, in the form of **grants** to help restore Swiss club buildings, in the form of **personal presence** at the conferences of the various federations of societies (last year, the Secretariat sent a man to Swiss meetings in Amsterdam, Darmstadt, Epinal, Innsbruck, Lyon, Manchester, Naples and Oslo). The Secretariat furthermore issues the **Pestalozzi Calendar** and sends out the Presidential greetings and distinguish speakers on the occasion of the **National Day Celebration**.

Last year's highlight was a round-tour of South America by **Ständerat** Dr Louis Guisan, President of the Commission for the Swiss Abroad. With the help and information supplied to him by the Political Department and the Swiss Latin-American consulates, he was able to visit 70 Swiss associations in two months and prepare an exhaustive report which will serve as a basis for future policy.

Information

The Secretariat is best known to many for ECHO, its monthly publication. The Secretariat also co-operates closely with the Swiss short-wave services and a useful outcome of Dr Guisan's Latin-American tour was a welcome publicity in the Press on the work and usefulness of the Swiss Short-Wave Radio Services. An indication of its hearing was the success of the Radio "World-shoot" last year.

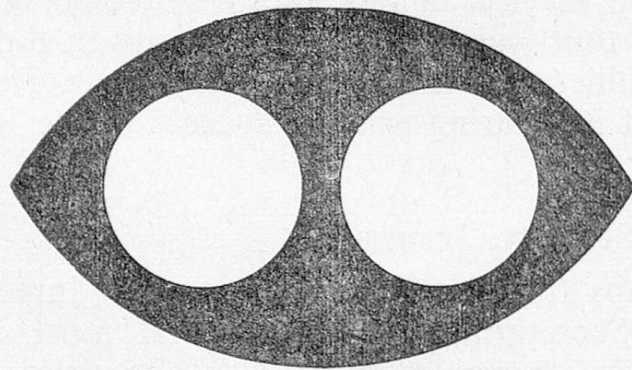
Advice, Social Security, Insurance

This is perhaps the lesser known but most important field of activity of the Secretariat. The Secretariat must come in with the ready answer to innumerable legal inquiries pertaining to problems of citizenship, inheritance and taxation. Compatriots from abroad write for information on oldtime relatives who have remained at home, for indications of university programmes, for legal facilities and even ask for commodities unavailable at their foreign domicile. Vice-versa, innumerable Swiss of all ages setting out for a temporary or lasting stay abroad seek information on working possibilities, on addresses, on pen friends, on exhibitions and cultural events.

The Secretariat has sought to alleviate a limited number of cases where elderly Swiss abroad wishing to spend the remaining

part of their lives in Switzerland, had fallen into financial difficulties for failing to have subscribed to Swiss Old Age Pension, or others who had been forbidden to return for lack of a necessary medical insurance. The Secretariat is not usually in a position to give **direct** help, but it can bring together the people and institutions who are in a position to help. The Secretariat has assisted many elderly Swiss abroad either wishing to return home or to reach their elected country in this way.

The financial position of the Solidarity Fund for the Swiss Abroad is satisfactory. Membership has increased and a favourable interest rate has pushed its assets to 6.1 million francs. There remains an important loan to be refunded to the Confederation and the fraternal insurance which the Solidarity Fund is cannot at present be ready to sustain heavy claims. The compensation fund presently stands at 450,000 francs, and 180,000 francs came in as welcome premiums to various Swiss living in Algeria, Kenya, Ghana and Morocco. The President of the Swiss Club of Lima had proposed in 1968 that each member should join the Solidarity Fund, which would receive payment for each member directly from the Club kitty. This was conceived as a gesture of support towards the fund and a protection of the members of the Club. The arrangement that finally prevailed consisted in the Fund's



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acceptance of yearly minimum and retrievable deposits of 25 francs and benefits to the Swiss Club of Lima for all newly-enrolled Fund members giving more than the minimum contribution of 25 francs.

The Care of the Swiss Youth Abroad

The Secretariat is intent on helping the younger Swiss across the world, relying in this on parently co-operation as parents are the only way in which 15-year-olds can come to the attention of the Secretariat. It distributes the **Weltschweizer**, a brochure on Swiss topics, to the young on its mailing list, five times a year. The Secretariat organised three well-attended ski holiday camps and a summer holiday camp during the year covered by the report. Efforts are made to keep in touch with Swiss youth organisations, of which examples can be found in Lyon, Strasbourg, Munich, Hanover and Braunschweig. A questionnaire seeking to establish guidelines for the Secretariat's youth policy revealed however that the need of a youth club was rarely felt as there were usually too few young Swiss to make it viable.

One of the 20 Swiss schools abroad, the Cairo Swiss School, had to close down. The Swiss School in Alexandria has been passing through difficulties and losing attendances. There are new projects on the way however, and work was begun on the new Swiss school in Sao Paulo last November. The Commission for the Swiss Abroad has approved expenditure of 280,840 francs in educational grants to some 186 young Swiss abroad wishing to get education in Switzerland.

Conclusion

These chapters have summed up the numerous activities of the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad. We should have mentioned the Annual Assembly of the Swiss Abroad which took place in Montreux last year and was attended by a record 500. The theme of the conference was, as readers may remember, the contribution of the Swiss abroad to the national economy. National Councillor Hans Schaffner made the opening speech.

The life of the Swiss abroad is following the stormy evolution of the world today. It is getting harder in the Middle East and in Brazil, where a deteriorating political climate and a tendency to covet foreign capital have made their livelihood increasingly precarious. They know however, that they can count on the unflinching support of an organisation whose very existence is the expression of the renewed concern of the nation for her children abroad.

—The Swiss Observer