

The Federal Council and the hijacks

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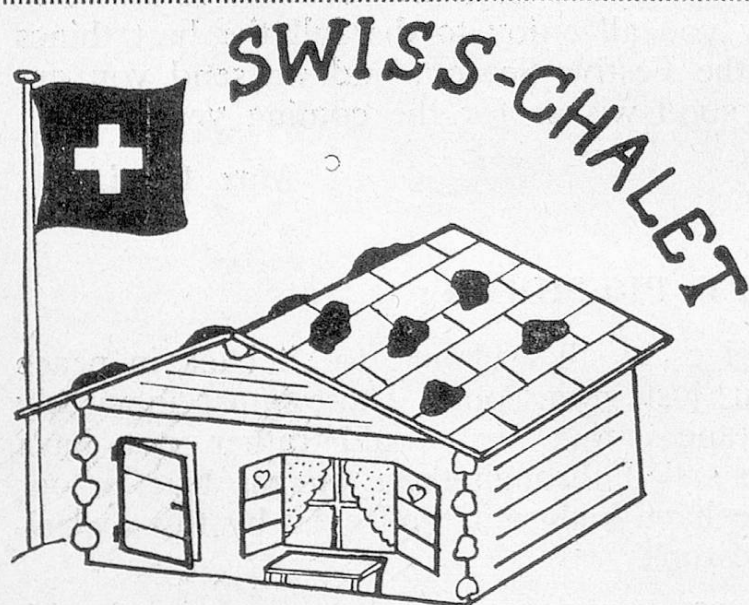
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THE FEDERAL COUNCIL AND THE HIJACKS

The hijacks which struck a Swissair jet and three other airliners gave the Federal Council a number of sleepless nights. On Sunday, 7th September, at 12.39, Swissair flight SR 100 for New York started off from Kloten with 143 passengers. Minutes later, as the plane was overflying Mulhousen, a girl and a 14-year-old adolescent took control of the flight and ordered the pilot to swerve back toward the east. As the jet flew over Zurich again, the female hijacker radioed the airport to say that the plane was firmly under Palestinian control. The rest of the story, shared by the unfortunate passengers of two other airliners, is well known.

The Federal Council met that evening (in the surprising absence of Mr Pierre Graber, head of the Political Department) and tried to devise a plan of action. Insufficiently informed, the meeting thought that the hijackers' primary target was Switzerland and the three Palestinians jailed in Zurich after their failed attack on an El Al airliner in Kloten last year. The Federal Councillors decided to send the Swiss ambassador back to Amman and wait for further precisions from the Jordanian Government, which they held legally responsible for the affair. They met again the next day and issued a communique, through the mouth of Mr Pierre Graber, during the afternoon. Mr Graber said that the Federal



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Council had decided to **accept** the exchange of the three Swiss-detained Palestinians for the passengers of **both** hijacked planes. Humanitarian considerations, he said, were more important than the letter of the law and the safety of the planes' passengers went before the rest.

This decision provoked a wave of indignation among the Swiss, whose anti-arabic feelings had been spurred by the hijacks. An officer was reported to have resigned from his post in protest. The "Nouvelliste du Rhone" compared Pierre Graber with Pilet-Golaz and called for his resignation. The "Neue Zurcher Zeitung" spoke of a "new Munich".

Pierre Graber naturally sought to defend himself. He said in a press conference that the hijacks had actually been foreseen and special security precautions taken at Kloten Airport. The Federal Council had come to an agreement with the Great Council of Zurich many weeks beforehand on the policy to be adopted in the event of a hijack against a Swiss airliner. They had agreed that they would give priority to the safety of the hijacked passengers. Members of the Zurich government had in fact been proposing the surrender of the detained Palestinians for some time. This, they believed, was the only way of forestalling further hijacks.

The unfortunate Monday communique was actually outdated because the situation had developed very rapidly. By Monday, however, the decision had already been taken of sending the Red Cross to Jordan, with the purely humanitarian task of seeing that the passengers imprisoned in the desert were humanly treated. Mr Graber summoned the ambassadors of Germany, Britain, America and Israel on Monday to inform them of Swiss decisions and to try to elaborate a concerted policy. The ambassadors were convoked again on Wednesday in order to get a round-up of the respective attitudes of their governments. By that time a concerted policy and global, unified terms of exchange had been agreed upon. The following day, the Swiss Government and the four ambassadors formed a "co-ordinating committee" synthesising the common stand of the five governments concerned toward the hijackers.

In Amman, Andre Rochat and his aides were trying to establish contact with the guerrillas. But chaos had broken loose over the Jordanian capital and he found it almost impossible to establish meaningful contacts with the leaders of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the authors of the three desert hijacks. There were also some shortcomings in the communications between the Red Cross delegation and its Geneva headquarters, and President Marcel Naville actually wrote a warm letter to a woman who had allegedly given birth to a child in the desert. Andre Rochat and his team returned, having possibly been instru-

mental in the release of the main batch of passengers. The Red Cross in Geneva had suffered qualms over its mission and hesitated for over 24 hours after the Federal Council had asked it to send delegates to Amman. Red Cross managers were initially asking themselves whether they could accept responsibilities that were so obviously to have political implications.

A week later nothing had of course been settled, but the governments concerned had not abandoned their efforts towards a concerted action where the main difficulty lay in agreeing on how much each had to yield to the Arabs. The Israelis took the hardest stand in this matter. But the co-ordinating committee in Berne agreed to entrust the Red Cross with the mandate of arranging a solution and Pierre Boissier (known to members of the Anglo-Swiss Society for his talk on Florence Nightingale earlier this year) left for the war-torn capital of Jordan.

Security has been redoubled at Kloten since this hijacking frenzy and Swissair is to have a force of 150 armed guards on its strategic routes.

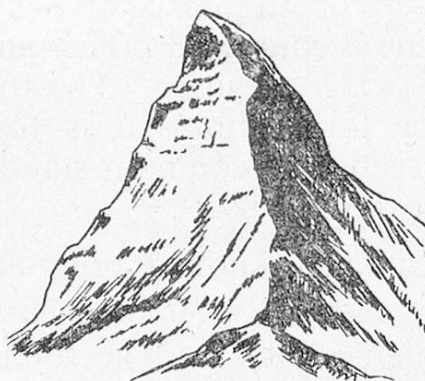
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