

Speech by visiting Ambassador, Walter Thurnheer

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Speech by visiting Ambassador, Walter Thurnheer

In December, all five Swiss Clubs were visited by Mr Walter Thurnheer from Switzerland's Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA). He traveled to Singapore, Australia and New Zealand to speak about Switzerland and the Swiss Abroad.

In describing some of the big changes facing Switzerland over the past several months, Mr Thurnheer quoted Jacob Burchkardt's words: "*Wir dürfen uns nicht einbilden, dass wir ewig verschont bleiben werden und dass uns das Schicksal immerfort besondere Küchlein backen wird!*" ("We cannot allow ourselves to lapse into assuming that we will always be spared the bad news and that fate will continue to deliver us with special treats!") The following is an abridged version of the very informative speech he gave:

Changes in Switzerland The shock of September 11 was immense. In the first 24 hours, the DFA received approx. 3000 inquiries about friends and relatives in New York. Thousands more were received about the security situation in other travel destinations. Tourism collapsed over night. A few weeks later, a deranged gunman stormed into the Zug cantonal parliament building and shot dead 13 parliamentarians and government members. Switzerland was stunned by the shock. The attack, even in this extreme form, shows in a most tragic way how even in Switzerland the resort to violence and aggression has increased. Only a few days later, Swissair was grounded - this again is something that no one had anticipated - suddenly leaving over 40,000 people unemployed. Shortly afterwards, a SAS airliner rammed a hangar, killing more than 100 people. And then came the accident in the Gotthard tunnel, in which eleven people died as a result of a collision between two lorries. Such events could never have been foreseen - they were unimaginable, but show how Switzerland has changed.

In the last 50 years, Switzerland has become a major economic power. Today, it exports goods and capital to the value of over \$180 billion, compared to \$5.5 billion in 1950. Switzerland ranks among the world's biggest foreign investors and Swiss banks manage a third of the world's private capital invested abroad.

Also in the last 50 years, Switzerland has become a *mixed* multi-cultural society. It has always been multi-cultural, but for the first time in its history, its different cultures have begun an irreversible process of integration. Forty years ago, when the first Italian seasonal workers and their families arrived in Switzerland, they were received like aliens, and their unfamiliar customs gave the locals goose pimples! Nowadays, in addition, there are also 300,000 people who speak Serbo-Croat, 130,000 Portuguese speakers, more than 80,000 Spanish speakers, and over 90,000 Turks in Switzerland.

Switzerland has become more colourful in the last 50 years. The Swiss still practice the traditional pastimes of 'schwingen' and yodeling; the 'Tellschpiele' are still thriving; and no other country has as many 'Schützenvereine' - but now Switzerland also has round the world hot-air balloonists, rock singers, private TV stations and Swiss sitcoms.

Switzerland is the only non-member country, besides the Vatican, of the UN. It pays but doesn't want to have a say. A referendum on this issue is to be held on 3 March, 2002.

Switzerland is the only country whose head of state is a seven-member body. The country continues to have one of the most stable governments and one of the most unstable constitutions in the world. There are still many more unique and colourful aspects to modern Switzerland - the age structure of the population; worrying drug and alcohol problems; or crime. The point is that Switzerland is changing, both from within and as a result of what is happening in the world. And notwithstanding September 11, it has always been the case, and this is how it should be.

Changes in the Swiss Expatriate Community

50 years ago, 270,000 Swiss citizens were registered abroad - today there are almost 600,000 and increasing by 10 - 20,000 every year.

Initially, most only had Swiss citizenship, but now most Swiss abroad also have a second passport. But increasingly, fewer Swiss expatriates remain abroad permanently. More now travel abroad for only a few years: with many returning home after completing their overseas training or contracts. The expatriate community is somewhat younger than the population at home, and women are in the majority. The Swiss Abroad are doing a lot better now than 50 years ago, and today are generally more integrated in their adopted country than in the past. In the last few decades, many institutions and publications, initially set up by Swiss expatriate communities, have disappeared. Although this is regrettable, many have undoubtedly outlived their usefulness. Their existence should meet a common need for support or simply to make life more fun, but they should not be there just because they existed before. There's no point worrying about the local Swiss Club's future because there aren't enough members to form a choir anymore!

However, there are still about 750 Swiss associations around the world, which are superbly represented by the Swiss Abroad Organisation in Switzerland.

Changes in policy concerning the Swiss Abroad Over the last few years there have been concrete changes in some policy areas concerning the Swiss Abroad, in particular voluntary AHV - and this is an endless matter!

Political Participation - Out of 450,000 Swiss Abroad entitled to vote, only about 79,000 actually participate in the referenda and elections at federal level, and that with varied enthusiasm. In New Zealand, under 12% actually vote, compared to Italy 30%; Kazakhstan 60%; Solomon Islands 80%; and Kiribati even 100%! - however, it must be added that there is only one Swiss national in Kiribati, but at least he does vote!

Time and again the DFA receives inquiries about *simplified naturalisation*. This is a complicated business because the relevant laws have changed several times in the last 20 years. Different rules apply depending on whether the person is the wife, husband, or child of a Swiss citizen, as well as other conditions to be met. For example - today (since 1985), children of every Swiss mother are automatically Swiss citizens. But for a child of a Swiss father to be Swiss, the father and mother must be married. However in many cases Swiss descendents, regardless of age, are able to apply for simplified naturalisation if they have 'close contacts' with Switzerland. Because some situations can be very complicated, the DFA Service for the Swiss Abroad has prepared information sheets to discuss specific issues concerning naturalisation. These can be obtained by contacting the Embassy.

The main tool for reaching the Swiss Abroad is the Swiss Review, with six editions per year and a circulation of more than 300,000. This costs the Confederation nearly \$3 million annually. Increasingly, however, important information is available via the internet.

Publication Planned The Swiss Federal Archives would like to publish a book on the history of foreign policy concerning the Swiss Abroad. The DFA would like to make its contribution graphic and lively by providing concrete histories of emigrants and the happy (or grim) experiences that Swiss Abroad have actually been through. If, therefore, you have an interesting (or unfortunate) story to tell, we would be grateful to you if you would contact us at the DFA.