

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Band: - (1945)
Heft: 1042

Artikel: The constitution and working of the Office suisse d'expansion commerciale
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691758>

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THE CONSTITUTION AND WORKING OF THE OFFICE SUISSE D'EXPANSION COMMERCIALE (O.S.E.C.)

Text of a Lecture given to the Swiss Mercantile Society
held by

MR. A. J. STAEHLIN, Delegate for the U.K. of O.S.E.C.,
at Swiss House, London, on 10th October, 1945.

Mr. Chairman,

Dear compatriots,

It is a great privilege to have been invited by your Committee to give you a talk to-night on the institution which I have come over to England to represent, namely OSEC or Office Suisse d'Expansion Commerciale, respectively Schweizerische Zentrale für Handelsförderung or Swiss Office for the Development of Trade. I shall be calling it OSEC, so as to use its popular abbreviation of title by which it is known in various places. Some of you, members of the Swiss Mercantile Society, may have heard of or perhaps have had dealings with Osec at one stage or another or have had knowledge of the plans concerning the opening of an agency at London. As presumably the majority of those present this evening have not been able to return to Switzerland since the outbreak of the war, I venture to hope that my talk may convey something new to you, as your President, Mr. Boos, assured me it might. I shall try, therefore, to make you familiar with one of our Swiss institutions engaged in the field of our national economy.

I propose to divide my subject into two parts roughly and shall try to answer the questions

- (1) what is Osec, and
- (2) what is its objective or to use a wartime synonym its target.

Osec, which had formally been founded in 1927, by amalgamation of three already existing organisations, is a semi-official institution with head offices at Zurich and Lausanne and with a string of agencies on the Continent and overseas. Originally its financial means were mainly put up by its members. As time progressed and as the necessity for promoting the general interests of our export industries and trade were more and more recognised, increasing annual grants of the State were allocated to it. Osec counts to-day some 1400 members, amongst whom we find many of the most prominent industrial and trading concerns in our country, firms like Ciba Basel, Brown Boveri Baden, Sulzer Bros. Winterthur, Aluminium Chippis, Paillard Yverdon, Volkart Bros. Winterthur, to name just a few. The majority of members consists, according to Swiss standard, of medium size and smaller firms. Last year the Federal Parliament voted in favour of a recurrent annual state subsidy of 2½ million francs, which, in addition to Osec's own income derived from some of its services and the contributions of its subscribing members aggregating about 950,000 francs in all, it is in a position to spend within the framework of an approved programme set up by the directors. There is a committee of supervision to which the Federal executive, the Vorort of the Schweizerischen Handels- and Industrie-Verein, the Schweizerische Gewerbeverband, the Schweizerische Bauernverband, appoint delegates, the remaining members of the committee being elected by the general

meeting of members. On this committee the Swiss Mercantile Society has also a delegate in the person of National Councillor Schmid-Ruedin. Schweizerischer Handels- and Industrie-Verein and Osec are not identical. I would mention this with reference to a misconception that appears to have occurred in the annual report of your society for the year 1944. Osec is legally registered as a society by virtue of the composition of its collective and individual members and is fundamentally an institution of Swiss industries and commerce. The said status permits it to engage in work, the like of which would not or could not always conveniently fall within the scope of a government department or official representation. Such type of incorporation is not militating against the equally important other fact, namely that there exists a very close collaboration and coordination between the competent government office, in this case the Handelsabteilung or Division du Commerce at Bern, and Osec. You should not, therefore, be surprised to find the Swiss Office for the Development of Trade to have been put up temporarily in the premises of our Legation, but wherever it will be stationed eventually, the Commercial Secretary, Mr. von Graffenried, and I will be working closely together. This synthesis of cooperation between Atachés commerciaux or consular officers and Osec's delegates obtains in most countries in which both, federal authorities and Osec, are simultaneously represented, the idea being that the two should assist each other, where the task is common. It is known to all that our Legations and Consulates have an exceptionally heavy burden of work to cope with and that they also have preoccupations other than those lying in the sphere of commerce. Osec's agents are usually men with commercial experience, former merchants, directors of companies or engineers. They enjoy more freedom of movement in foreign countries than our official representatives as a rule possess and this greater liberty is one of the cardinal practical advantages of the structure of Osec. In India, East- and West-Africa Osec's delegates have the title of Swiss Trade Commissioners.

The man in the street or call it the tax payer might be inclined to question the necessity of such elaborate organisms. I am sure, however, the issue is not affecting you personally this time by increasing your obligations of payment of military tax. I have to recall to your memory the abundant difficulties of trade which set in in the thirties, when unilateral measures were taken by many of our foreign competitors in the form of actions instituting restrictions in payments, introductions of import quotas, of preferential tariffs and so forth. Swiss trade had suffered all the consequences of such enactments, whether the countries concerned had resorted to them under the force of circumstances or voluntarily with a view to the furtherance of their own national interests. The deflation of prices in our own small country at the time offered no final remedy for the consequences of the catastrophic decline of our exports. The devaluation of the franc in 1936 and the intensified harnessing of our importing capacity, the latter intended to secure a fair share to our export trade, were not enough to produce employment for all of our hands. Very special efforts had to be made in Switzerland to assist industry and commerce to enable it to keep the flag flying wherever possible, to devise ways and means of over-

coming a great number of obstacles abroad. Similar difficulties prevailed to a large extent and, as you all know, in an accentuated form in the period of our isolation during the war and they still do largely subsist to-day. It was, in the years of depression, imperative to marshall all available forces for safeguarding our legitimate claim to the maintenance of production and of external trade and to make use of all appropriate capacity to help in the service of our national need of exports. By common consent one of the instruments that were well suited to move the cart on the cobblestone road was Osec, which, on the strength of its ramifications in Switzerland, its experience in the discharge of certain particular functions within our economy, further, through the establishment of its foreign agencies, was in a position to render valuable assistance. Incidentally, in recognition of its potential capacity, in acknowledgement of work hitherto done, and of its *raison d'être*, the Federal Parliament have put the increased subsidies allocated to Osec on a more stable footing than last year.

You will now ask me what its services actually consist of and that leads me to point two of my lecture.

Osec covers a wide field of activities and by various methods and there is a certain division of work. The Zurich Office keeps the most extensive and up-to-date register of Swiss manufacturers and of trading firms and it publishes the "Directory of Swiss Manufacturers and Producers" each year in different languages. The respective information service is usually also at the disposal of the visitors of the Mustermesse at Basel, of the Comptoir Suisse at Lausanne and the Fiera di Lugano. The Zurich Office assists Swiss manufacturers to find agents abroad or vice versa foreign representatives to get into contact with Swiss producers. Further, it organises or participates in preparing Swiss exhibitions abroad. Lausanne is attending to film, radio, press propaganda, the issue of commercial and technical publications, and executes special studies of branches of industry with a view to developing new trading possibilities. Between themselves, the two Offices control the 18 Osec agencies abroad, each in its particular sphere according to the latter's geographical location. There is a staff of about 60 people at Zurich and about 30 at Lausanne. I joined Osec only a few months ago. From what I have seen in the head offices I think I may state that those working teams are active and are exercising a fair amount of initiative. In saying so, I hope not to be accused of passing the bounds of what I feel is a justifiable assertion.

The goal which Osec set themselves, is as a rule being approached by two different methods, namely

(1) embracing efforts of a general character, the other comprising work of a more-specialised type. In the first I count trade exhibitions. You will probably know that Osec have played a leading part in the organisation and conduct of many Swiss Industry Fairs or participations in international exhibitions abroad, some of the most outstanding having been held during the past six years at New York, Sao Paulo, Lyon, Budapest and Ankara. It has been found possible, even in 1945, to hold three exhibitions, that is to say at Lisbon, Porto and Barcelona. It is necessary to mention that the difficulties to be overcome, especially with regard to the transport of goods, were tremendous. Opportunities that existed still in countries like Turkey, Portugal and Spain were taken and the success achieved in fostering mutual trade and goodwill was undisputed. On such and similar occasions many millions francs worth of Swiss goods are being shown to the foreign public, machine tools, turbines, electrical motors, textiles, watches and so forth. Special advisers of each particular branch of production are usually stationed in the halls with a view to giving interested parties all desired information. The exhibition at Porto, e.g., which was organised by Osec, held in May 1945, drew 100,000 visitors, notwithstanding bad train communications. A fair amount of orders were booked, and a considerable number of trade enquiries resulted.

In Switzerland Osec patronised the attempts that have been made during recent years to create Swiss fashion products, namely ladies' dresses, evening wear — this word may sound ambitious in austere England —, hats and shoes. Swiss models of gowns, however, failed to come up to what was generally considered scratch, therefore, basing upon experience gained, the idea of general propaganda was carried out in a different form. Instead of showing textiles and models exclusively of Swiss creation, the fashion shows held under the directorship of Osec at Kongresshaus at Zurich in July last presented Swiss textiles made up at Paris. Leading French people in the haute couture were personally present at the model show at Zurich. The French live mannequins who went to Zurich gave the display a special note. You may probably know that the *Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne*, with whom Osec closely cooperated at the aforesaid fashion show, recently held a display of fashion dolls in Piccadilly.

Activities of a general trend do not end with exhibition work. On the 1st of August at the Stoll Theatre I was struck by the most enthusiastic reception which the short film showing our peaceful vaudois wine growers received. I admit it was hard lines to gulp plain water after having seen that. Well, Osec

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Lausanne with their secretaryship of the Swiss Wine Growers Association, a body intended to promote the marketing of Swiss wines abroad, has your cravings for Fendant, Dôle and Bernecker in mind. Unfortunately I must add that it does not look to me that we shall soon have overflowing barrels in London. Osec Zurich has a special agricultural department, whose task it is to coordinate efforts in the direction of exporting Swiss agricultural products. As you know, the severe stringency which we have suffered and the rationing of foodstuffs in Switzerland have stopped a good deal of our prewar exports of cheese, milk products and of bloodstock, but it is hoped that as soon as the position reverts to normal, it will be possible to increase our trade in these commodities again. Thanks to the plan-Wahlen and our efficient system of rationing and to imports Switzerland could still get through, we somehow managed to emerge from all our trouble, even if there was not all the bread on the table which our growing lads would have wished.

Very likely you have seen copies of Osec's publications "Swiss Industry and Trade," "Swiss Technics," "Swiss Textiles" which try to give an impression of current developments in the home market. But there are whole series of other publications by Osec conveying data about certain subjects such as in the sphere of market research. Members have the benefit of the documentation of the Lausanne Office which is continuously registering the latest happenings in the way of fresh regulations abroad concerning imports, exports, finance and so on, some of which it also publishes in the "Economic News." For some time, Lausanne has moreover been issuing a weekly bulletin containing abridged intelligence about domestic occurrences in Switzerland, economical, political and social. A special department had been set up at Zurich to give information about clearing treaties and for assistance in the selection of partners in compensation business. When our Consuls return home, either on duty or on leave, Osec very often arranges meetings between the Consuls and our manufacturers. Osec also organises tours for foreign trade delegations who wish to see our industrial works, power stations, etc. I could go on citing further instances of the more general activities of Osec.

It is obvious that, if a merchant of Teheran wants to buy 50,000 Dollars worth of artificial silk piece goods, an Indian contractor a centrifugal pump, a

Canadian Departmental Store embroidered handkerchiefs or a particular brand of wrist watches, a Chinese industrial concern textile machinery, or a South African company a power plant, it is in the interest of our Swiss industry, if the potential buyer is put into contact with the proper manufacturer. Osec's foreign agencies attend to this particular kind of work which varies between giving information about sources of supply and, in certain special cases, more concrete support in bringing pending enquiries nearer the order book at home. Some of our delegates have to deal further with administrative matters connected with the import licensing put in force by foreign governments, so in Spain, also at Budapest, up to the Russian conquest of Hungary. Our delegate in Bombay acts as an intermediary between the Indian Commerce Department, Delhi, and the indigenous purchasers of Swiss goods, inasmuch as he assists in the repartition of available import quotas allotted by the Central Government, further in the price fixing for Swiss goods by the Control authorities. Applications for agencies of Swiss makers and the preparation of formal agreements of representations always require individual attention. The range of activities of an Osec delegate is thereby not exhausted, but I hope to have given you at least an idea by these indications. To give you one concrete example of trade introductions effected by Osec: In July last, a manager of a French trading company, who was cut off during the war, came to our Zurich office with the request for advice and assistance. With the help of Osec he succeeded in placing orders for several hundred thousand francs within a few days.

Should you desire to put to me the question as to what Osec's agency is intending to fulfill in London, I can tell you that within the frame of our agreement with the Legation it has principally fallen to me to advise prospective Swiss exporters and importers how to sell, respectively where to buy. This information service is also at the disposal of my compatriots here and of British firms, inclusive of shippers to the Dominions, India and the Colonies, desirous to resume or open trade relations with Switzerland. Having thus been entrusted with the aforesaid task, it is the intention that Osec should organise its own office in premises separate from the Legation, when suitable ones can be found. My office is further to attend to the promotion of trade agents' agreements, and, in due course, to exhibitions in this country.

If, to-night, you were to expect me to make a statement about the future of Anglo-Swiss trade relations or about Swiss commercial policy, I am afraid I shall have to disappoint you, as I am not competent to express an official view. However, I am myself conversant with past and present difficulties, notably the restrictions on imports from Switzerland. I am aware of the anxiety manifested by a great number of interested merchants who are anxious to get down to brass tacks and desire the restoration of normal trading conditions. The commercial community at home knows that you have gone through most trying times. Swiss trade with England has languished since years. You would be well advised, not to hail me, viz. Osec's delegate, as the doctor, who has arrived to cure the ill. I do not aspire to be a quack with extraordinary powers of healing. I shall do all I can to facilitate relations of individual firms, when soli-

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cited, with due consideration for the legitimate interests of those who have been established here since long. But the general Anglo-Swiss trade problem is beyond one man or one organisation to grapple with.

One can have nothing but the greatest admiration for the enormous efforts and respect for the sacrifices which England has made to win the war and for the suffering of all those who sustained the Blitz. It is not always fully realised in Switzerland that British industry has entirely to be reconverted and that this process will take time. Many of our pushing firms at home do not quite follow, for instance, why their import propositions are not meeting with quicker response as it is assumed that Britain should be anxious to secure a slice of Swiss trade which is offering. Easier conditions of mail intercourse and better facilities for the press and for travelling should now soon put knowledge about the situation à jour. But there are still quite a number of other things which are not readily understood and which need explaining. Let us hope that when the great Anglo-American economic issues now pending at Washington emerge from the melting pot, Anglo-Swiss trade relations will in course of time also benefit eventually in a solution, compatible with mutual interests and in keeping with the friendly relations which have always existed between both our countries.

I will not close my talk without referring to a problem which has been in the care of your society for a great number of years, namely the question of providing educational facilities in England for our young men at home and to your desire to assist in the preparation of that flow of employees equipped with linguistic faculties to restore which is of so great importance to our industries and trade. With the prolongation of the war this scheme has assumed an increasing urgency. Pressure and exclamations of feelings of frustration through adverse circumstances are not emanating only from our graduates and disciples of the K.V. anxious to grasp the very first opportunity to go abroad. I may be permitted to remind you that the second world war has thrown up hundreds and thousands of compatriots in the territories at the time occupied by the Germans, who were compelled to give up good stations and who had to seek refuge and temporary employment in Switzerland. Many are middle-aged or advanced in years, still keen to work, but financially ruined. They have taken upon their shoulders their share in the military duties at home during the war.

As for the young men who are waiting so impatiently, most of whom have 600-1000 days of active service in the army to their credit, it would certainly be appreciated by those anxious to come to London, if your Society could soon provide them with a fair knowledge of idiomatic and colloquial English. In connection with this question of commercial education, I may mention that Osec's Zurich office has an understanding with some cantonal governments, by which it undertakes to prepare candidates of the age of 22 to 33 for employment in the commercial service of our Legations or Consulates, Secretariats of Swiss Chambers of Commerce abroad, in big foreign companies and naturally also in Osec's own agencies. They must possess sound basic school knowledge of at least three languages. When I left Zurich there were quite a number of such prospective assistants who made use of

these facilities at our head office and who were endeavouring to master some of the more general practical problems and intricacies of our national economy. Two or three of these men have been sent out to Africa by Osec recently.

Regarding the numerous temporary public servants to which I have also referred and whose jobs will become redundant by the abolition of rationing and other war-time controls, you may know that the American military authorities have offered to take over thousands of Swiss commercial men, technicians, teachers, etc., to help in the administration of Germany and that our Government has been negotiating in the matter. I am convinced that many of those whom the home market cannot absorb, but whose immediate future is, notwithstanding available qualifications, unsettled, will be glad to be able to accept such an opportunity. I have mentioned the foregoing just to draw your attention to the divergence of the situation in England and Switzerland, namely, while there is a shortage of staff here, there are people in Switzerland and especially Auslandschweizer who would welcome a possibility of finding an outlet for their capacity.

Let us hope that we shall soon see a more settled state in economic conditions, so that the young who desire to become pioneers, and the older hands, who have been, and whose energies are not yet spent, will both succeed, and that they will have the privilege of working for the honour and welfare of our beloved Switzerland, which, I know, you have personally embraced in your heart during these years of war, and which your society has always so admirably been defending in England.

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