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HOME AFFAIRS.

by PIERRE BÉGUIN.

“Aid to Swiss citizens who have suffered from the War.”

The Swiss have always been inclined to become expatriates very readily, and there are tens of thousands of our fellow-countrymen to be found living abroad. It is not in vain that the expression “the fifth Switzerland” has been coined, meaning that Switzerland abroad which can be added to our four language regions: German, French, Italian and Romansch.

Apart from some rare exceptions, these Swiss remain closely attached to their home country, to which they render great service by playing the role of voluntary ambassadors and by opening up large markets for the products of our export industries.

However, a large number of our compatriots have suffered a far from enviable fate, twice already within the space of less than half a century. Residing in countries which have been overwhelmed by the horrors of war, they have suffered serious losses. Their property has been destroyed, their fortunes have been annihilated. Above all, in a great many cases, they have lost their jobs, their means of livelihood. They have returned to their own country where, very often, they no longer possessed any family or friends. Very often, also, they were either too old or else too greatly affected in their health to be able to start a new life.

For a long time it was hoped that these fellow-countrymen could receive compensation by virtue of the same rights as those possessed by the nationals of the countries in which they were established. After the First World War, our Government proceeded to take a great many diplomatic steps in order to obtain such a juridical assimilation. It even laid this claim before the competent authorities of the League of Nations. The results, however, proved practically nil. The same problem arose after the Second World War. Once more, such equality of treatment to be applied to the nationals of the belligerent countries and to the Swiss who resided therein was pleaded for, claimed and affirmed. But all these efforts were in vain and, apart from a few exceptions, our diplomacy found itself facing a categorical estoppel.

Switzerland had no juridical obligation in regard to her sons who had suffered from war damage. But

she could not, quite naturally, leave them in the lurch. The Cantons and Communes which have witnessed the return of their former inhabitants, as a result of circumstances due to the war, have spent large sums of money in order to come to their assistance. The Confederation, alone, has allocated 160 million francs for such aid. That, certainly, is not a negligible amount.

Moreover, the Confederation has set aside for this purpose a sum amounting to approximately 130 million francs. This appropriation is derived from the reimbursement by Western Germany of part of the commercial debt contracted with our country by Hitler's Germany. For a long time the payment of this debt seemed to us to be a risky business. However, when it was guaranteed, the Swiss Government decided to allocate this money to our compatriots who had incurred war damage.

It may seem strange that twelve years after the end of the second world conflict the repartition of this sum has not yet been realised. This is explained by the tremendous number of claims which have been received and by the difficulties which have arisen when efforts have been made to reach a really equitable solution. A first project for the distribution of this aid, submitted by the Federal Authorities, was rejected by the people. This project consisted in the repartition of the available credits of 130 millions in proportion to the damage incurred. Although equitable mathematically, this solution would not have been so from the moral standpoint.

Now, the Federal Council has given its preference to a very different solution. According to this new scheme, the Confederation is to grant aid to those Swiss, victims of the last war, who have lost their jobs and who, for reasons of age or of health, have not been able to start earning their livelihood afresh. Thus, should this project be adopted finally, certain of our compatriots who have incurred great losses, will not receive any compensation whatsoever if they happen to possess any other assets, or if they are once more engaged in normal business activities. Others, who have been less affected by their losses which represented only modest assets, but who nowadays find themselves reduced to a position of real need, will receive an indemnity and, in certain cases, an allowance. This solution would appear to be inspired by a loftier conception of justice. It puts the accent on present needs more than on the losses incurred. And that is a good thing.

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