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The Swiss Observer

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The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

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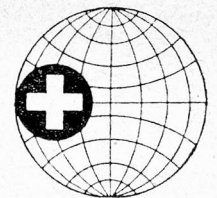
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FRIDAY, 23rd SEPTEMBER 1966

1966 THE YEAR OF "FIFTH SWITZERLAND"

THE 44th ASSEMBLY OF THE SWISS ABROAD

BERNE, 31st AUGUST TO 1st SEPTEMBER, 1966



To report on the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad in chronological order would be quite natural and perfectly correct. Yet somehow it was not just a get-together of 350 people in the Swiss capital, not only a few committee meetings and round-table discussions, receptions and jollifications. To me, the three days were a demonstration which could be summed up in the words of Nicolas de Flue "Give us everything which will bring us nearer to you". As I sat in the Concert Hall of the Casino on the last evening, listening to, or rather living through the magnificent performance of Honegger's dramatic legend, I felt that we Swiss outside our country's boundaries were also fighting a battle, and like the old Confederates, we needed guidance, wisdom and clarity of mind in order to succeed. The President of the London Group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, Dr. H. W. Egli, one of the speakers in the plenary session, finished his address by asking "Give us the tools, and we shall know how to use them".

At last year's Assembly in Solothurn, much criticism had been voiced with regard to Switzerland's efforts (or lack of them) in keeping the Swiss image strong and untarnished in the world. Much of this had been resented, and some of the consequences of courageous outspokenness were not exactly flattering to a democracy that prides itself in being fair-minded. Yet, many were the voices inside Switzerland which counselled attention to and investigation of the complaints, fears and suggestions expressed by the Swiss abroad. Again, we assembled, this time to talk about the "Achievements and future of Fifth Switzerland". We could be definite about the former, but less certain about our prospects. Once the new Constitutional Article has been accepted by the Swiss electorate, we shall have a tool, but a lot more is needed to make it an effective one.

The meeting of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad on the first morning considered plans for a publicity campaign prior to the voting on 16th October. Amongst the 60 members and deputies present from many parts of the world, were Mrs. Mariann Meier and Mr. Edgar Bonvin, from G.B. The President and Chairman, Dr. G. Schuerch, honoured the memory of a great *Auslandschweizer*, Fred Suter, for many years President of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique in London. The deliberations were unusually quiet, and not even the Press who joined the meeting at lunch time brought much life into the dreary "green" conference hall at the Kursaal.

For much of the time, there was a kind of undercurrent of expectancy, for the unusual lull at the conference table was only on the surface, and members were and are aware of the part they have to play in order to strengthen the position of the "Parliament of the Swiss Abroad." If ever in its history the term two-way traffic could be applied, it is now. In Switzerland, much is to be done to induce the largest possible number of voters to go to the poll and accept the draft Article as accepted unanimously by Parliament. Once, as is to be hoped, it is firmly placed on the Federal Charter, the Commission, with the help of jurists and politicians, will have to make proposals for the carrying out of the new law. And we, the Swiss communities abroad, have to study how best to use the new tool.

Some of the much-needed preparatory work is better co-operation within some of the Colonies. Over 500 groups are members of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad. Some are loosely-formed bodies, some are active federations, well-organised and efficient. A special meeting was held on the second day of the Assembly in Berne, devoted to how best to strengthen the whole Organisation. It was realised, the President said, that not all Colonies are the same, not all Swiss abroad require the same help, for is not the Swiss diversity reflected in its Colonies abroad, too? But there are ways and means of bringing the communities closer together, and everything which will help this effort, should be tried both at home and abroad. Here again, Nicolas de Flue's words come to my mind. One of the problems is to reach the isolated compatriots. From the discussions it was evident that every Colony has difficulties with this. One of the most effective remedies would be co-operation by the Embassies and Consulates who, unfortunately, are still not officially allowed to pass on addresses of registered Swiss nationals.

The Swiss in France, one of the largest communities, are working hard at the moment to re-organise. A well-constituted body like the *Collegamento* of the Swiss in Italy needs little improvement. Others have a very long way to go and are only at the beginning of the road to co-operation. The Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom have strengthened their position by replacing the Assembly of Presidents by a Federation with a Constitution and annual subscriptions from their member societies. How much more determination, however, will be needed to bring about the cultural centre in London, support both here and in Switzerland!

A special and, we hope, fruitful meeting was held between members of the Commission and heads of organisations like "Pro Helvetia", Swiss Office for Development of Trade (OSEC), Swiss National Tourist Office, Swissair, etc. The two former Federal Councillors, Dr. M. Petitpierre and Dr. F. T. Wahlen, addressed the meeting, and points of view were expressed by the representatives of the various organisations. From the remarks made by some of the Swiss from abroad, it was evident once again that inspite of many excellent efforts, still more co-operation amongst the organisations within Switzerland, and above all with the communities abroad is necessary. "Give us everything which will bring us nearer to you."

Unfortunately, the delegates' meeting of the Solidarity Fund was fixed for the same time as this discussion, which made it impossible for some of the members to attend. The Solidarity Fund is one of the tools which the Swiss abroad, with help from home, have forged for themselves. Many of our compatriots abroad, however, still stand aloof. Its first President, Dr. E. Froelich, has now retired, and the meeting elected the former Ambassador to South Africa, Dr. F. Kappeler, in his place. Dr. Froelich informed the plenary session on Tuesday that the Fund now counted just over 7,000 members, and that 2.8 million francs had already been paid out in compensation.

The strengthening of the Swiss cultural image abroad was also discussed at a meeting arranged between the Commission and the Swiss Federations of Publishers and Authors, representatives of "Pro Helvetia" and others. The theme was how Swiss books could best be made available to Swiss nationals living abroad, and how they could be distributed to make their impact on readers in foreign countries. From efforts already made on the part of the publishers since that meeting, it seems that their determination to help Swiss culture to its rightful place is more than just a pious hope.

Another meeting held during the three days was organised by the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches. A suggestion which came out of it was that future Assemblies of the Swiss Abroad should be opened with a short ecumenical service in the spirit of the Pact of 1291. It was also proposed that the work done by Swiss Churches and Missions should be stressed whenever the activities of the Swiss schools abroad are mentioned in communiqués concerning Swiss assistance to developing countries.

Speeches form part of every Assembly. Important ones on the main theme by National Councillor O. Reverdin and the President of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, Mr. O. Reck, framed the contributions made by several representatives of Swiss Colonies. The greetings of the Government were given by Federal Councillor Spuehler. More of the main addresses will be published at a later date. The exhibition at the Swiss National Library, too, deserves special mention. "La Suisse à travers les Ciècles" is a rich display of the work achieved by distinguished Swiss abroad. The exhibition will be open until 22nd October.

Finally, mention must be made of the social get-togethers. There was the dinner and dance at the Kursaal, when National Councillor Dr. M. Aebischer brought the greetings from the two Chambers whose Presidents were abroad on official mission. And on the last day, with a benevolent sun shining from a cloudless sky, an outing

was arranged to Castle Oberhofen, preceded by a tour of the Lake of Thun. The reception of the Canton of Berne was a cordial one, matched by generous hospitality. In the open, an informal luncheon was served, which gave ample opportunity for leisurely conversation. Never have our delicious Swiss wines tasted so good as on the shores of the peaceful lake, overlooked by the home of an *Auslandschweizer* of the fifteenth century, Ritter Konrad von Scharnachthal. The castle, which is a museum today, formed a dignified background for the happy gathering. A few yards away, the monument of the great fighter for freedom, Sir Winston Churchill, reminded us of the famous words he coined at a time of great stress "Give us the tools, and we shall finish the job". The job of the Swiss abroad is never finished, but with the right tools, we shall be able to do much more for the ultimate benefit of our country.

If the Government of the Canton, represented by its President, *Regierungsrat* Adolf Blaser, gave us a warm welcome, supported by the President of the Foundation, *Alt-Regierungsrat* Virgile Moine, and thanked eloquently by Mr. Th. Nagel from Sweden, the municipal authorities of Berne were no less anxious to do honour to the Swiss from abroad assembled in the Capital. At the end of the concert on the last evening, *Gemeinderat* and National Councillor Dr. R. Tschäppät expressed the Municipality's welcome at a reception in the "Burgerratsaal", attended by several Federal Councillors (past and present). As fate will have it, Dr. Tschäppät and another Berne Commune Councillor, none other than the President of the *Auslandschweizerorganisation*, Dr. G. Schürch, will oppose each other as candidates for the Municipality Presidency in the election on 16th October! This assures us that in Berne, at least, the citizens will go to the poll in large numbers on that day. For whichever of the two personalities they vote, we hope that the capital's electorate will have only a firm "Yes" for the Constitutional Article for the Swiss Abroad.

Now at the end of the report, we are back where we began, in the concert hall listening to the work of another great Swiss abroad, Arthur Honegger, to his "Liturgique" Symphony and his Nicolas de Flue, so expertly performed by the Berne Symphony Orchestra and three choirs from Brigue, conducted by Mr. Gregor Mueller. The original text is by Denis de Rougemont. That night, Alfred Lohner recited the German version written by Hans Reinhart. As we sat listening to the stirring music, a sense of gratitude and good-will was evoked in our hearts and our minds, and the feeling, so often glibly talked of as patriotism suddenly crystallised into something deep and meaningful. "Give us the tools and we shall know how to use them" — "Give us everything which will bring us nearer to you".

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