

News from the colony

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NEWS FROM THE COLONY

THE FIRST LANDSGEMEINDE OF THE SWISS OF SCOTLAND

It was a misty Sunday afternoon when the Swiss of Scotland converged on the small town of Alva in Clackmannanshire and met for their first ever "Landsgemeinde" in Cochrane Park Hall, the community centre of Alva. Driving in two cars from Edinburgh with Monsieur Jürg Iselin, First Counsellor at the Embassy in London, Mr. Born, Consul in Manchester, Mrs. Iselin and Mrs. Born, Mr. Hartmann, consular agent in Edinburgh and his three sprightly daughters and a special guest from Berne, Mr. M. Ney, Director of the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, our party had some difficulty in finding Alva. But eventually we fell on the correct road and drove towards a range of lofty hills which looked rather sullen in the bleak light of that afternoon. Alva lay at their feet. Cochrane Park Hall was decorated by Swiss flags and the cars which were already parked in front of it told us that the gathering had already begun.

A good eighty people of all ages were seated and conversing gaily in the hall. Half of them were children. They were running about and the atmosphere was agreeably familiar. We had the opportunity of meeting the organisers of the Landsgemeinde, Mr. and Mrs. Boscoe, who was dressed in a colourful Alpine dress, and members of the three Scottish Swiss Clubs present at Cochrane Park Hall — the West of Scotland Swiss Club, the Dunfermline Swiss Club and the Edinburgh Swiss Club.

When everybody was at last seated and the tattle had more or less settled down, Mrs. Boscoe climbed on a bench and welcomed us in the three Federal languages, only leaving out Romanche. She welcomed Monsieur Iselin, Mr. Born and Mr. Ney and beckoned us all to an enjoyable afternoon.

She invited Mr. Born to speak to us about what a Landsgemeinde was and the origins of this institution. He made a very clear and short exposé on the subject which must have kindled the curiosity of all those interested in ancient Swiss history and perhaps prompted them to study the history of the Landsgemeinde more in detail. It certainly did so with me.

Mr. Born's address was succeeded by a break during which we could help ourselves to tea, cakes, puffed corn and other goodies. This was a good chance of meeting our northern compatriots, a chance which I regret not having exploited to the full. I managed however to have chats with Mr. Vogt, President of the Swiss Club in Dunfermline and other members of the Club, and learned the interesting story of this Swiss silk community, which landed in Dunfermline in the early 1930s as a result of the economic vicissitudes of the industrial world. I was also surprised to note that there were only two French-speaking Swiss present.

When we had helped ourselves with cakes and ice cream in plenty, Mrs. Boscoe invited Monsieur Iselin to address us with a few words. He stood on the bench and conveyed us the greetings of our Ambassador in London. He expressed his gratitude at being present at Landsgemeinde and looked forward to an agreeable stay in Scotland. The numerous children brought by their Swiss parents to Cochrane Park Hall obviously did not enjoy speeches, or were left unconcerned by the care which the Embassy in London was bestowing on them and jumped about and raced across the hall so that these earnest speeches were punctuated by the shrieks of children!

Mr. Ney said a few words. He briefly explained what the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad was all about. He urged his audience to take the Solidarity for the Swiss Abroad Fund seriously and invited all those who had questions about what was being undertaken in Berne for the Swiss Abroad to come to him.

A second break followed during which all these Swiss families met in a relaxed and carefree atmosphere. The children had by then the time to make friends and were playing every kind of game, the most favoured of which was to bounce large balloons, which every now and then exploded with a resounding bang. A banjo player and a young guitarist gave a fitting musical background to this Scottish-Swiss pow-wow and the children flocked round them. Eventually Mr. Hartmann strapped on his accordion and the

music drifted from the Far West to the heart of the homeland.

We all changed our seats to sit around the stage at the end of the hall: it was time for the children to perform! They sang lovely pickings from the Swiss folklore—which never sounded sweeter to my ears. Mrs. Boscoe was conducting this young choir and its fresh and limpid voices. The children had had very few practice sessions but they sang their songs as well as the Vienna boys.

Mr. Hartmann then stepped on the stage. He said a few friendly words of welcome to everybody and launched the sing-song. With the help of the banjo and the guitar he played a number of well-known Swiss and British songs and those who knew the words responded with their heart in their vocal chords.

Not long after the final song, the first of the faithful compatriots at Alva prepared for the long journey home. There were tired children to be brought to bed! The Landsgemeinde of the Swiss of Scotland was one of the most relaxed and spontaneous Swiss gatherings which I have had the pleasure of attending. I dare say that the core of the Swiss of Scotland is no longer young and that the children who so gaily caroused in Cochrane Park Hall on that Landsgemeinde afternoon will turn out into perfect Scots, yet it is good to organise such meetings and remind them of their glorious origins!

(PMB)

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for

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