

News from the colony

Objektyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1976)**

Heft 1718: **2**

PDF erstellt am: **22.07.2024**

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Diamonds are for ever! NSH glitters at 60

A diamond jubilee should, by definition, be a glittering and joyous occasion. The 60th anniversary celebrations of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique held at the end of March certainly lived up to expectations. A delicious dinner, well served in the somewhat dignified atmosphere of Kensington's Prince of Wales Hotel set the scene for what was to be an evening of pleasant reminiscences as well as memories of darker days gone by.

Somehow the NSH managed to

survive — indeed not only survive but grow in strength and influence until 1976 when it celebrates its 60th birthday. It is not the oldest Swiss Society in Britain (a fact pointed out with some relish later in the evening by Mr. Frank de Maria of the Unione Ticinese) but it is certainly one of the most dynamic.

But let the facts speak for themselves. NSH President Mrs. Mariann Meier had the pleasant task of welcoming a large number of honoured and distinguished guests — headed by the new Swiss Ambassador to London Dr. Ernesto Thalmann accompanied by Madame Thalmann.

In her speech Mrs. Meier also paid tribute to the other guests — numbering nearly 90 as well as to many absent friends. She made special mention of the help and support always given by the Swiss Embassy — borne out by the attendance of, in addition to the Ambassador, Minister and Mme. Fritschi, M. et Mme. Indermuehle, M. Ramseyer,

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Consul and Mme. Reutlinger and Vice-Consul and Mme. Kuenzi as well as some of the NSH's newer members including Miss Helga Lustenberger who has proved to be such an efficient Hon. Secretary.

Mrs. Meier also had special words of praise for other distinguished members who included Vice-President and Mrs. Baumann and Hon. Treasurer and Mrs. Roland Asch. She added thanks, too, for the sterling work of the Hon. auditors Mr. D. E. Bonnet and Mr. M. Rothlisberger.

Madam President's welcome to Pastor Mr. Stefan and Mrs. Stefan was tinged with sadness — after so much good work in London they are returning to Switzerland in a few months — "God speed and thanks", said Mrs. Meier. She added tribute to the Swiss Colony's Catholic Pastor Father Paul Bossard who, in addition to his hard work for young people, is also Mrs. Meier's deputy on the Commission of the Swiss Abroad.

The Commission's other representative, Dr. H. R. Bolliger was, regrettably, absent for business reasons but sent a special tribute to mark the occasion.

Next, a welcome was extended to the President of the Federation of Swiss Societies in UK, Mr. B. Simon and Mrs. Simon.

Apologies for absence, with warm and fraternal greetings came from Swiss Benevolent Society President M. Schneebeli and Mrs. Sharp whose husband was ill, although Miss Zumofeu and Mrs. Lyster were there to represent the Welfare Office for Young People.

ON THE FRONT COVER

Swiss ballet star Manola Asensio is currently dancing as principal Ballerina with the London Festival Ballet. An article about her will appear in a subsequent edition of the Swiss Observer. The photograph is by Alan Bergman.

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Mrs. Meier was particularly sad to note the absence of Oscar and Mrs. Boehringer. She recalled the work of Mr. Boehringer's father who founded the *Swiss Observer* was back in 1919 and paid tribute to Oscar's hard work on behalf of the Community today. The *Swiss Observer* was, however, represented by the Chairman of its Advisory Council Mr. F. Burri with Mrs. Burri and by its Editor and Mrs. Sommer.

Next, Mrs. Meier made special reference to loyal and long serving NSH members, among them Antoinette and Paul Bessire, Dr. & Mrs. Rast, the Schedlers, the Burns, Mr. Bonjour and the Misses Bigler, Kaufmann, Oswald, Ruettimann and Spengler.

Warmest regards were extended to Mrs. Grob, whose husband died recently, and to Mrs. Weist the wife of a previous Hon. Treasurer. It was earnestly hoped that they would both continue to grace NSH functions with their presence.

Mrs. Meier continued "You will wonder why I left two names till last – Willy Renz and his wife and Hon. Vice-President Hans Egli? Simply because without these two men we should not be here today for it is entirely due to them that the Nouvelle Société Helvétique did not collapse after the last war.

The President then read, from the 14th October 1966 issue of the *Swiss Observer*, an article written by herself entitled 1966 The Year of "Fifth Switzerland" – the beginnings of the London Group of the NSH. This interesting piece traces the origins of the Society back to its beginnings in 1916. Photocopies of this article are available on request.

Mrs. Meier continued, "Those are the foundations on which the Society has survived. It thrived in the 'twenties and 'thirties. Strangely enough, it began to decline in the second world war. Why – it is difficult to say. The monthly meetings at which our member Gottfried Keller, now retired to Switzerland, spoke on 'views on the news' were reasonably well

attended. But in 1947, the President Mr. Fred Suter who had been at the helm for many years, retired and Mr. Renz took over. But in spite of his tremendous efforts, the response was small, and the Society needed a new structure. Two men, the then Press Attaché, later Ambassador August Lindt, and the late Alfred Renou asked Dr. Egli to start afresh.

"Renou provided about 200 addresses of potential members, and together with Willy Renz, Paul Bessire, Walter Schedler, Alice Gretener and others, Dr. Egli began the uphill task. Will Renz took over as President from Hans Egli until 1961 when Max Homberger became President. He had to retire to Switzerland for reasons of health, and once again Dr. Egli took over, specially since he was one of the initiators of the hoped-for cultural forum of Switzerland.

"Already in 1949 he had been instrumental in forming a campaign committee for a social centre. He, Raoul de Cintra and Walter Meier created the Presidents' Assembly, later to become the Federation of Swiss Societies. In 1948. NHE made recommendations for restructuring the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad in Berne, later largely accepted. Also in the late 'forties a Youth Club was formed and successfully run by Mr. & Mrs. Isacco and Mr. & Mrs. Bachofen. Money saved was used recently for refurbishing Swiss Church in Endeli Street, now a small cultural centre.

"In 1949 a guide to the Swiss Colony was published. Where would one find men and women today to undertake such a gigantic task? In 1966, President of OSA Dr. G. Schuerch attended Golden Jubilee, at which he praised the Society's work and excellence.

"In 1970 there was a great step forward – the election of a woman president.

"Little has been done since then compared with what was achieved in the early years and again in the 'forties and 'fifties. And I feel most humble and undeservedly honoured tonight to have the privilege of chairing this diamond jubilee. Just how much appreciated our modest activities of today is evidenced in the messages of goodwill."

At this point the Swiss Embassy's Press Attaché M. P-A. Ramseyer read, in French, a letter from Dr. Louis Guisan, President of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad, praising the work of NSH and Mrs. Meier read, in German, a telegram from Dr. E. Basler, President of the mother society in Switzerland.

Messages were also received from Ambassador Weitnauer, Minister Jaccard in charge of our affairs at the Federal Political Department and the Director and Deputy Director of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad, Messrs. M. Ney and L. Paillard.

Mrs. Meier continued, "But with all due respect to the aforementioned gentlemen, it is the special message of congratulation from the former Federal Councillor F. T. Wahlen, a great friend of the Swiss Abroad, which delights me. It is

rather flattering personally. So I spare you my blushes. Friedrich Traugott Wahlen is one of the great Swiss of this century, a man who knows the true human values, but also the obligations put on us free Swiss.

"In his book 'Committed to one's conscience' I read about the Swiss Abroad (freely translated) It is he from whom the foreigner who knows our country only from hearsay forms a picture of Switzerland. Thus it is clear that only the very best men and women in every respect are good enough to make the contribution abroad which one must expect of a Swiss outside his homeland.

"It means that thorough training and experience must go hand in hand with vitality and a high ethical attitude in order to ensure success, not to forget a dose of adventurous enterprise and courage. The chapter finishes with the words: the authorities at home include us Swiss abroad in their worries and preoccupations. They put their trust with us in the future, Switzerland under the protection of the Almighty, a Switzerland consisting of five Parts, united and indivisible.

"We are part of that Switzerland. If I have dwelt rather long on past achievements, it is not to rest on laurels, but to give us courage to face the future. In a few days, the period for the optional referendum on the Government's proposals, accepted by both Chambers, to grant us voting rights will become law. With it we are given a tremendous lot of responsibility. Our Society will be in the forefront of passing on information and discussing matters up for a federal plebiscite. And may be we shall be faced with a task bigger than we now imagine. But with your help and loyal support we trust we and our successors will be able to cope with the problems.

"10 years ago I had the honour of addressing a distinguished gathering in Basle on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad. At that time the new Constitutional Article concerning the Swiss Abroad had been created, and for the first time it was one in which man was in its centre. And as I said then, ladies and gentlemen, in this I see our importance as individual members and as a society – Max Frisch expressed it so pertinently – 'Our home is man. To him above all belongs our loyalty. The fact that homeland and man do not exclude each other, makes us so fortunate in being sons and daughters of a small country.'"

When the tremendous applause for Mrs. Meier's speech finally died down our Ambassador rose to address the guests.

His speech ran as follows:– "It is a great pleasure for my wife and I, on our first outing among the Swiss Community in London, to be the guests of your Society and to share with you this delicious dinner marking a memorable occasion.

In 1916 when the London Group of the NSH was formed, Europe was in the midst of a bloody war, a war which

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left scars which have now completely healed. Lloyd George was Prime Minister in this country while in Berne Decoppet, Head of the Military Department, was President of the Confederation and Hoffmann was the Foreign Minister.

"The Federal Council was confronted with the grave problems of supplying food for the population, preserving Switzerland's independence, defending her frontiers and making sure that the belligerents would respect her neutrality."

Our Ambassador continued:

"But our Government also had the paramount duty of maintaining 'moral contact' between the various parts of our country which, as you all know, did not exactly share the same attitude towards the belligerents; the German-Swiss, if they were not 'Germanophiles', as they were later unjustly accused of being, were 'terribly neutral', and the 'Romands' were on the side of the Allies. To help them close this rift and reconcile the different parts of the country, the Federal Council were fortunate to have 'La Nouvelle Société Helvétique', which was founded on the 1st February 1914 by 250 Swiss meeting together in Berne. The aims of the Society were later strengthened by Carl Spitteler's memorable speech in Zürich in December 1914.

"The London Group and the one in Barcelona were founded two years later thereby establishing the basis of the 'Commission of the Swiss abroad' on which you are represented by your President, Mrs. Meier.

"You can be justly proud to be the

successors of those true patriots of 1916; the achievements of your Society, year after year, and the review of the 1975 programme which your President has just given are proof that you have not betrayed the aims of your founders. I am convinced that it is not an easy task in this age of uncertainty to maintain a purpose. At a time when moral values are changing so rapidly and when the developments of technology make the things of yesterday seem old-fashioned today a great sense of lasting realities is indeed required.

"Members of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, you have chosen as your President a lady who, thanks to her many fine qualities, her dedication to duty, her untiring enthusiasm, deserves the confidence each one of you has placed in her. May I take the opportunity tonight of thanking Mrs. Meier for all she is doing to maintain the spirit of the founders of 1916.

"As your new Ambassador, I see it as my first duty to foster the relations between Switzerland and my country of residence in all important fields of international life which, as you know, cover a wide range of subjects including cultural and scientific questions, the economy, finance, the press and social affairs. My second task will be a very pleasant one indeed, as it will be to keep in touch with the Swiss Community. Rest assured that you may count on your Ambassador's support in all your endeavours. I have learned during my previous activities abroad, and at Headquarters in Berne, how immensely

valuable for the Government and for the Federal Administration is the link which so happily exists between the Fatherland and its citizens abroad.

"In closing, let me paraphrase some remarks made recently by Federal Councillor Chevallaz which seem particularly appropriate to this occasion. Recalling the turbulent days of 1914 and 1939, when we Swiss had all 'kept our cool' in spite of the chaos on our borders, he said that we shall continue in future to hold our destiny in our own hands. We shall not fall for ideological crusades and we shall not be frightened into appeasement. This will require constant patience, self discipline, determination and conviction: we must equip our army adequately, defend our economy and strengthen our social cohesion. Our country is the business of each one of us, and that applies also to the fulfilment of our civic duties.

"I should like to raise my glass to the prosperity of your Society, to the well-being of its President (she deserves your confidence) and Council members, and to all present here. May I express the hope that the spirit of 1916 which inspired the founders of the London Group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique will remain alive among us in 1976."

The evening ended with more short and lighthearted tributes from members of other Societies, especially the President of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the U.K.

A memorable evening indeed and an unforgettable landmark in the history of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique.

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