

News from the colony

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High British Honour for one of our Fellow Citizens



Acrow Chairman William de Vigier has been awarded one of the highest British honours to be bestowed on a foreigner.

In the Queen's New Year Honours List he was appointed an Honorary Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (CBE). The honour has been bestowed on Mr. de Vigier in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the prosperity and exports of the British engineering industry.

Bill de Vigier, as he is affectionately known in Britain, was born in Steingrubenstrasse, Solothurn in 1912. He came to London in 1936 and soon afterwards founded a small business

under a railway arch in London. Today he is chairman of the Acrow Group of Companies, an engineering empire with operations all over the western world. It employs about 12,000 people and last year achieved a turnover in excess of £200,000,000.

Another of Bill de Vigier's many achievements is the fact that he is a Director of British Airways, the world's biggest international airline. A directorship on a British nationalised undertaking is only very rarely offered to a foreign citizen.

We at the *Swiss Observer*, on behalf of all our readers, would like to add our warmest congratulations to Mr. de Vigier.

NEWS FROM THE COLONY

WALTER STEINMANN RETIRES

Walter Steinmann, Swissair's U.K. cargo traffic and industry affairs manager and a well-known figure on the London air cargo scene, retired at the end of December after 27 years with the Company.

In the 1950s and 1960s he organised and built up Swissair's U.K. air freight business, supervised the introduction of progressively more efficient all-cargo aircraft between the U.K. and Switzerland and developed the cargo reservations system. In addition, he had a variety of administrative duties and throughout his time with Swissair represented the airline on the IATA agency investigation panel, the cargo investigation panel and at the cargo terminal charges meetings.

In recognition and appreciation of his services to the Company, Louis Nart, Swissair's general manager for U.K. and Ireland, presented Walter Steinmann with a carriage clock bearing an inscribed tribute and a Swiss gold coin, traditional on such occasions. *Photo: page 10*

MR VON SPEYR RETIRES AFTER 46 YEARS

After 46 years of service with the Swiss Bank Corporation, of which 40 of them with the London Office, Mr. Th. von Speyr, Manager, retired on 31st December, 1977.

After an apprenticeship with the private banking firm of Paravicini, Christ & Co., Mr. von Speyr joined the Swiss Bank Corporation in his native city of Basle in August, 1931, transferring to the London Office in October, 1937.

From January to June, 1945, he was seconded to the then Swiss Legation, Special Division, under Mr. Wm. Preiswerk, being engaged during that period on the inspection of prisoner-of-war camps in Britain.

After having gained experience in virtually all departments of the London Office he was promoted to Attorney in 1974 and shortly afterwards moved to the West End Branch, then at 11c, Regent Street, as Branch Manager.

Subsequent promotion came in 1952 (Sub-Manager) and in 1959 (Deputy Manager). In April, 1964 he became Manager of the London Office and was, in fact, the sole full Manager during the period April, 1964 until July, 1976.

In connection with his banking career Mr. von Speyr was President of the Banques de Langue Française from the beginning of 1967 until early 1969, and Representative of the Foreign Banks and Affiliates Association for the year 1973.

In 1970 Mr. von Speyr was elected to the Committee of the Overseas Bankers Club and served as Chairman of its House and Premises Committee from June, 1971 until 1975. Mr. von Speyr was also President of the City Swiss Club from April, 1961 until April, 1963.

We take this opportunity to wish Mr. von Speyr health and happiness in his retirement which he will share with his wife, Mavis.

BASLE – HOTEL INTERNATIONAL

The first-class Hotel International in Basle is offering "Lucky Holiday Weekend" package arrangements. Prices start from Sw.Fr. 50 per day and include accommodation in a twin-bedded room with bath, breakfast, service charge and free use of indoor swimming pool, sauna and sun lamp. This week-end arrangement should be booked at least four to five days in advance. It is not valid during the periods of trade fairs and congresses.

Hotel International, Steinentorstrasse 25, 4001 Basle. Telephone: (061) 22 18 70, Telex: 62370.

FROM ZERMATT TO THE GLACIERS – A COLOUR-SLIDE LECTURE

Desmond and Marjorie Parish specialise in the photography of wild flowers in their natural habitat.

On Saturday, 11th March, 1978, at 3.00 p.m., they will be giving a public lecture illustrated with slides and supported by a display of photographic colour prints.

Venue: British Museum (Natural History), Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7.

ANDRI PEER AT THE SWISS EMBASSY

"Rhaeto-Romance – the development and survival of an alpine language".

On Thursday, 10th November, Dr. Andri Peer gave a lecture at the Swiss Embassy on the fourth Swiss national language. The Cultural Councillor, Monsieur J.-J. Indermuehle, introduced the distinguished writer and poet to the large gathering. He said that the Embassy had traditionally welcomed German- and French-speaking writers, and two years ago added an Italian-speaking author, Giovanni Orelli. To introduce the fourth language was to take a risk, because who studied Rhaeto-Romance at British universities? But the response had been most encouraging, for the Departments of Celtic and Romance languages were keen to invite a speaker dealing with Rhaeto-Romance. The programme worked out included seven or eight university colleges, and that night's important gathering was further proof that the undertaking had been worthwhile. He expressed thanks to the "Pro Helvetia Foundation" for making the visit possible. Monsieur Indermuehle went on to say:

"One of the pioneers in protecting Rhaeto-Romance lived in England. He was Joseph von Planta, the son of a clergyman and Keeper of the Library of Natural Sciences by decision of Queen

Charlotte. Joseph von Planta was born in 1744 at Castegna in the Grisons and came to England with his parents when he was eight years old. He studied languages and literature at Utrecht before spending a few years in Brussels in the diplomatic service. He returned to London when his father died. He became Keeper of the manuscripts at the British Museum and later Keeper of the Museum's Library.

"Rhaeto-Romance owes much of its present status to this scholar. Joseph von Planta was particularly struck by the interest that a Bible written in that language aroused among his friends of the Royal Society, of which he was a member. He devoted his life to revealing the origins and characteristics of Rhaeto-Romance, both written and spoken. Among other things, he sent Sir John Pringle, President of the Royal Society, a letter entitled "An account of the Romansh language" written on 10th June, 1775 and read before the Society on 10th November, 1775.

"Joseph von Planta explained all about Rhaeto-Romance and the extent to which it was written, read and spoken in the Grisons at the time. Von Planta did much to preserve a language which, without defender, would surely have disappeared by now. It was not until 1938, however, that those who fought to protect Rhaeto-Romance at last won the

day. In a referendum held that year, the Swiss people recognized it as a national language by an overwhelming majority."

Monsieur Indermuehle finished his interesting introduction by stressing how much Dr. Peer had done to further the cause of Rhaeto-Romance and to make Swiss people better acquainted with the language and literature of the Grisons.

Dr. Peer called his talk "*The Rhaeto-Romans or the splendour and misery of a minority*".

"Fifty thousand Swiss people, living mainly in the Grisons, are Rhaeto-Romansh. They are a part of that Alpine population to whom the Dolomite Ladins and Friulians also belong. Although Rhaeto-Romansh was accepted as the fourth Swiss national tongue in 1938, this ancient minority culture is threatened nowadays with extinction.

"Since the days of Graziadia Isaia Ascoli's 'Studi Ladini' one is used to grouping the Rhaeto-Romansh with the Friulians and Dolomite Ladins whose languages are related originally. The results brought by the romanisation of the Alpine peaks and the area south of Kaernten, are even today remarkably far beyond the realms of scholarship. In many important words and usages, the three languages are indeed very alike. It can be assumed that the Romance dialects of the Alpine peaks formed a

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linguistically linked landscape from the Gotthard right across to Trieste. Despite the fact that the area had long been politically divided, it showed strong common bonds, so that one must speak of independent languages and not of Italian dialects, as nationalistically minded linguists did in the time of Irredentismus before the first world war.

"This whole area which has never considered itself as being a political unity, was infiltrated by the invading Baiwars and the constant pressure of the Venetian neighbours. In the Grisons the once Romanic-speaking area shrank to occupy only a few valleys. The political history was also detrimental to the languages. During the first thousand years A.D., Rhaetia found itself first under Frankish and then Alemannic domination. In the ninth century the Bishopric of Chur was detached from the Archdiocese of Milan and annexed to Mainz. Since the Middle Ages the Bishops of Chur forfeited their political influence and became very German in outlook (Hapsburgish) and the Alemannic colonisation continued. Added to this, the German-speaking people from the Valais also began to immigrate to this originally Rhaeto-Romance area.

"Despite this, during the Reformation, the written language of Rhaeto-Romansh with all its variations, came into being. These are still in use today: Engadinish or Ladin (divided into Ober- and Unterengadinish); Surselvisch (Vorderrhein with Lugnez); Sutselvisch (Hinterrhein Valleys); and Surmeirish (Oberhalbstein and Albulatal). The French- and German-speaking Swiss

smile, if we try to make clear to them why we want to preserve the differences, especially now in these times of mass media. They regret the splitting up of the Romansh language into so many dialects, as indeed we do ourselves.

"Nevertheless, for four hundred years these dialects have driven roots too deep into the valleys and are too different one from the other for it to be possible to abandon the inherited oral and written structure. Added to this, come the differences in vocabulary and phraseology.

"For hundreds of years each group was proud of its own dialect and enjoyed playing this off against its neighbour. Other differences played their part as well. The Engadiners for example, were renowned for their finer culture, which included foreign elements in their architecture, their life style, their dress and their music. The Oberlanders on the other hand, prided themselves until very recently on their earthy rough diamond existence and on their political and local customs.

"It is only in the last fifty years, since the advent of increased mobility in traffic and of tourists, that the Rhaeto-Romansh people themselves see the disunity of their dialects as a disadvantage and thus try to bridge that gap by learning dialects from neighbouring districts to become Rhaeto-Romantic polyglots.

"Much worse than this, however, is that the use of the Rhaeto-Romantic language has been gradually falling off, especially in the last two decades. Those speaking Rhaeto-Romansh, number,

according to the last census in 1970, approximately 50,000 souls. A quarter of these people live either in German- or French-speaking Switzerland, or abroad. Even in the Grisons themselves the Rhaeto-Romansh people are losing ground both in the communities and in the valleys. Swiss-German is gradually taking over as it wins for itself the majority in this or that border community. As it is, the community itself decides on school and council policies, and in such a border community, the Rhaeto-Romansh primary school disappears and Rhaeto-Romansh will no longer be used for official and legal purposes. In the churches it is even worse. Even in areas where the Rhaeto-Romansh population still outweighs the German one, the German service is preferred.

"The Rhaeto-Romantic people never really looked upon the Alemans as foreigners and certainly not as outright enemies. They adapted themselves to live with the speakers of the other language. They also learnt to tolerate the other's beliefs; indeed the borders of language and belief are not identical. They, the Rhaeto-Romansh people, perhaps because they belonged to an older, finer culture than the newcomers from North and South, were willingly adaptable.

"This tolerant adaptability of the Rhaeto-Romansh was not returned in kind by the newcomer. He was delighted to accept the friendly advances of the Rhaeto-Romansh and never, in turn, strove to adapt himself. As soon as the newcomer was strong enough in the community and on the council, his demands began. After the voting in

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favour of the Rhaeto-Romansh becoming the country's fourth national tongue, many people found it difficult to understand why the extension of the respective language areas were not clearly defined at the same time. The definition of the territorial boundaries was neglected, according to which primary schools, church services and official functions should be held in that language. Newcomers should have been compelled and assisted to learn the language and adult courses should have been held. This 'jus soli' that is being tried out in Belgium, could doubtless have strengthened Rhaeto-Romansh. The character of the people however, together with their esteem for the other man (the Grisons area is a tourist land *par excellence*) made the introduction of such methods extremely difficult. That is why one looks for less radical means of saving the four-year Rhaeto-Romansh primary school in the mixed language area. Indolence, unfortunately, is strong and there is opposition to a language, which today, for practical purposes is useless.

"One tries to make the best of both worlds by using Rhaeto-Romansh and Swiss-German indiscriminately side by side or, even worse, by making a grotesque German-Romansh mixture.

"Whether or not Rhaeto-Romansh can outlive these problems, despite a further but hopefully slower fading away, depends finally on the Rhaeto-Romansh people themselves. The state's recently

increased financial aid to the society for the preservation of the Romansh language, makes certain immediate aims possible. It is interesting to note, that the biggest threat to the language, the Swiss-Germans, have shouldered the main financial burden. The creed of Rhaeto-Romansh existence however, must finally be expressed by the community itself. This must come from a deep-seated belief that sacrificing a language is irreversible and can never be compensated by a *lingua franca*.

"Finally we come to the splendour of the Rhaeto-Romansh people. This includes its antiquity, its literature from the first Bible translation in 1560 to contemporary poems, dramas and novels, its aristocratic land-culture with the wonder of the Engadine houses and the living idyll of the Oberland farming villages, the national costumes and traditions. There are also splendid characters like Juerg Jenatsch, Clau Maissen, Benedict Fontana and Gian Marchet Colani and the spiritual champions like Chasper Decurtins, who around the turn of the century printed a twelve-volume chrestomathy of the Rhaeto-Romansh literature, and Peider Lansel who brought the Romansh lyrics up to European standard, collected folksongs, edited manuscripts and published, with his own money, anthologies of contemporary works.

"By the way, the Grisons is one of the world's best-researched regions. Not only as far as geology, botany, zoology

and climatology are concerned (the Swiss national park lies in this, the biggest Swiss Canton) but also concerning language and dialects. The 'Dicziunari rumantsch grischum' is a collection of the Rhaeto-Romansh dialect vocabularies, which is being composed according to the strong disciplines of a scholarly encyclopaedia. Five large volumes have been completed and the work has advanced up to the letter F. There is a comprehensive list of all the place names to be found in the Grisons and learned anthologies of folk and church music, folk tales and myths.

"In addition, the Grisons is the richest area in Switzerland for monuments of artistic merit (Muestair, Zillis, Rhaezuns and so on) one may certainly be more than a little proud of all this.

"I belong to that group of people, who in spite of the pessimistic view of Rhaeto-Romansh today, believe in its further life and indeed in the flourishing of its manifold culture, and strive for this aim."

Dr. Peer then went on to read some poems in Rhaeto-Romansh and their translations in English. This was followed by a lively discussion.

Prolonged applause showed the audience's appreciation of Andri Peer's interesting and informative lecture. Thanks were expressed once again for the indefatigable work done by this famous author.

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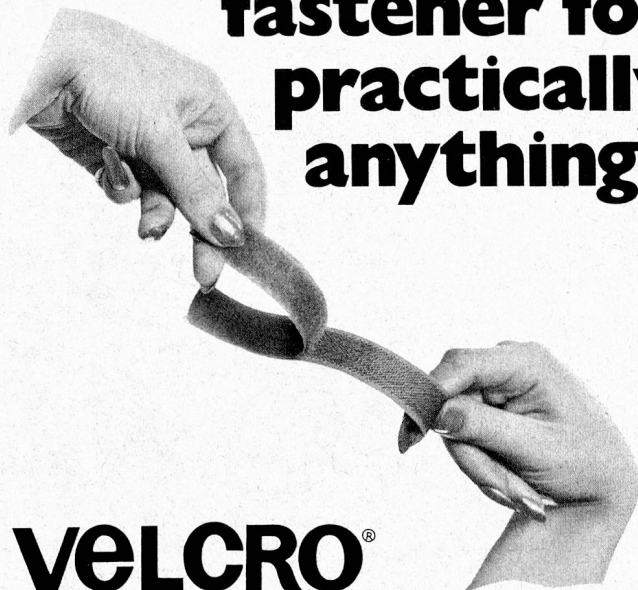


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