

Museum of the Swiss Abroad : not just a collection of gaiter uttons

Autor(en): **Grobéty, Anne-Lise**

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Museum of the Swiss Abroad:

Not just a Collection of Gaiter Buttons

Whosoever enters the Château de Penthes, near Geneva, never doubts even for a moment that this is a place which is living! All the framed faces, serious or smiling, are they not merely waiting to narrate episodes from their lives at tea-time? All of them, whether in soldier's uniform or in gala dress, have one thing in common, they are Swiss, who, in one way or another, have achieved fame beyond the Helvetic borders.



The «Museum of the Swiss Abroad», Pregny

How is it that such a tiny country has left its impact on the whole world? And how, from here, have so many ideas originated in the fields of Theology, Pedagogy and that of Human Rights? The «Museum of the Swiss Abroad» wishes to portray something of all this, and the National Institute of Research for the Relations between Switzerland and Foreign Countries, of which the Museum is a department, shows it even more.

400 Years of Alliances, and other things...

The first phase of preparation dates back 30 years. At this time, it was necessary to bring a collection to be placed in the Château de Versailles, which reminds us of the role of Switzerland in the service of France, alas, the pro-

ject could not be realised in this form. That was not so bad! The interest in Switzerland was awakened and the initial idea materialised. As important as military service had been in France, it represented only a part of the services abroad and the policy of making treaties. At Coppet (the first refuge of the museum during fifteen years) special importance was given to the origin and history of the alliances during the 15th and 16th centuries which had sealed the destiny of the Confederation to those of the principal European Powers.

Today, the military aspect of foreign relations is represented in approximately half of the Halls in Penthes. The enrichment of the collections went hand in hand with new objectives. A Museum ought to be something which

lives, grows and ripens – just as everything else! Very soon the two initiators, Gonzague de Reynold and Jean-René Bory, Conservator of the Museum, felt the necessity to extend the field of investigation to other forms of relations of Swiss with foreigners. Besides, Gonzague de Reynold, shortly before his death, warned his colleagues: «Our Museum ought not to be just a collection of Gaiter buttons!... Every form of foreign relation that our country has known in the course of centuries, merits our attention, in the measure of their contributions, as an approach to a better understanding of our history!»

Life at the Château

Today at Penthes – (the property has been put at the disposal by the Council of State of Geneva in 1978), the civilian side has been much developed. Therefore, we are received in the Château de Penthes by bankers, confectioners, scientists, business men, archaeologists, engineers, hoteliers and architects who have all played a role beyond the Helvetic frontiers. One has only to think of the architects and stucco-workers, who left Tessin and Grisons to earn their livelihood in Italy, Bohemia, Austria or Eastern Europe; and the architects of the Popes, who in the 16th century built a third of Rome. Venice owes numerous celebrated constructions (such as the «Bridge of Sighs») and almost the whole town of Saint-Petersbourg is their work.

Activities surround the Museum: the Halls serve for Conferences, Visitors and Audio-Visual Presentations. Research activities take place in the E.-M. Sandoz Centre (libraries, archives, ikon collections). At the same time, in seven years the Museum has already received 160 000 visitors.●

Anne-Lise Grobéty