

# The bicentenary of the Nouvelle société helvétique

Autor(en): **Büchi, Jo. Henri**

Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - **(1961)**

Heft 1388

PDF erstellt am: **28.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690249>

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# The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER.

**The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain**

*Advisory Council:* R. DE CINTRA (Chairman), O. F. BOEHRINGER, J. EUSEBIO, GOTTFRIED KELLER, R. J. KELLER, A. KUNZ, A. STAUFFER, G. E. SUTER.

EDITED BY P. HOFSTETTER WITH THE CO-OPERATION OF MEMBERS OF THE SWISS COLONY IN GREAT BRITAIN.

Telephone: CLERKENWELL 2321/2.

Published Twice Monthly at 23, LEONARD STREET, E.C.2.

Telegrams: FREPRINCO, LONDON.

Vol. 47. No. 1388

FRIDAY, 30th JUNE 1961

PRICE 11D.

## THE BICENTENARY OF THE NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE

by JO. HENRI BÜCHI

The third of May of A.D. 1761 was a hot but beautiful day. The sun was still high in the sky when two gentlemen from Basle, the one youngish, the other of early middle age, stepped down from their carriage and entered the shady gardens of Bad Schinznach. The one was Isaak Iselin, Town Clerk of Basle, the other Captain (ret.) Johann Rudolf Frey. Eagerly they looked out for their expected friends, who, however, had not yet arrived.

However, they did arrive later in the afternoon. Salomon Hirzel and Hans Heinrich Schinz were the first. The latter also brought with him two learned gentlemen from Uri, the *Freiherren von Beroldingen*. Only a quarter of an hour later the well-known poet Salomon Gessner from Zürich and his friend Captain Hans Kasper Keller entered the premises. But no one appeared from Bern. Dr. Zimmermann from Brugg, however, completed the gathering next day.

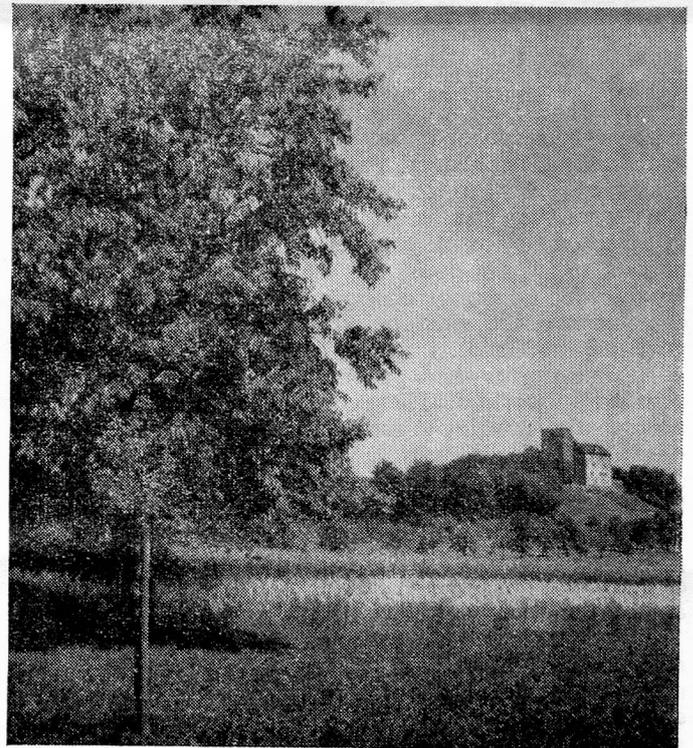
They had agreed on Schinznach as their meeting-place because it lay an almost equal distance from both Zürich and Basle, and the main road to Bern and Luzern passed by it. Meetings of the kind our friends had planned were looked upon with suspicion by the powers that be. Nor could one put on paper freely what one thought and be sure that only the addressee would see its content. Besides, discussion by correspondence among a number of persons is always cumbersome and unsatisfactory. Thus our friends' decision to meet, and, since a meeting at a Spa would be least noticeable, to meet at Bad Schinznach.

Bad Schinznach must have been a very quiet place two hundred years ago. No motor car or coach would shoot along the road to Aarau-Olten-Bern, as they do to-day. There were, of course, no railways then, and neither steam nor electric trains would compete with — and drown — the whisper of the wind and the rustle of the leaves. But, as to-day, the river Aare would wash the western boundary of the Bad's gardens. And as to-day, there was the view across the river and the broad valley into the northern ranges of the Jura. On the left, looking south, there was then as now the long range of hills clad with lush meadows and patches of forests, with the old Habsburg crowning the scenery. The atmosphere of the place and its surroundings was indeed ideal for companionship and leisurely conversation, as well as for those walks over the hills so conducive to the meandering thoughts of attuned minds.

The nine companions assembled that first week in May had not, as yet, a fixed programme. Their talks

ranged over cultural and political themata. From the fact that Iselin, who as clerk of the Basle Council was intimately connected with politics, and that Salomon Hirzel, the other leading personality of the nine, was the author of a play "Iunius Brutus", a passionate exposition of autocracy versus democracy, we can surmise that for those two at least politics were their main interest for the society to be.

The Switzerland of mid-eighteenth century presented a very confusing picture. The policy of armed neutrality



"The old Habsburg crowning the scenery"

since the Thirty Year War was paying dividends. External events now affected the country but little. On the one hand there were 60,000 men still constantly serving abroad, enlisted in the armies of France, Austria, Holland and the rest. Soldier's pay was the main cash income for many

of the poorer communities. On the other hand the conditions of peace had created a feeling of security over the country as a whole. Few mercenary soldiers could be hired in Zürich, for instance. Flourishing trade and commerce made the town and its country almost immune from this remnant of past centuries.

Infant industries and trade in general grew rapidly, bringing increased prosperity also to country districts. Towns and villages began to exhibit a show of quiet prosperity, particularly so in the cantons of Bern and Zürich. Even subject territories such as the Thurgau and the Vaud were now governed with a fairly light hand — though the bailiffs (Vögte) still grew rich during their term of tenure. And whatever else they did or did not do, the cantonal and federal governments were governing with the utmost economy — in contrast to the spendthrift monarchical governments of the neighbouring states. Increasing trade and commerce combined with the frugality and industry of the people made the country look better governed and more prosperous than any other Continental country. This we know from the expressions of admiration, often mixed with a shade of jealousy, from visitors from abroad.

It was also a period of cultural expansion. Basle's Bernoulli and Euler, Zürich's Scheuchzer, the Bernese Haller, Saussure of Geneva, and other mathematicians and naturalists contributed to the fame of the country. Then there was the quartet, Bodmer, Breitlinger, Salomon Gessner and Lavater, in Zürich, drawing from the German Ewald von Kleist the remark about Zürich that the incomparable place possessed ten times more men of genius and taste than the large town of Berlin.

That is one side of the picture. There was another side to it, too. The Confederation, the Eidgenossenschaft, could hardly be called a state any more. It had fallen apart into a number of independent units, and the absence of an all-including Bundesurkunde (federal constitution) merely corresponded to the inner disorganisation (*Gagliardi*). The Federal Parliament (*Tagsatzung*) busied itself mostly with trifles. Since they acted only on instructions from their cantonal governments, they were unable to agree on any work of reform, indeed they were often unable to agree even on quite minor matters. *Dei providentia, hominum confusione Helvetia regitur* deftly characterized the situation. (God and human confusion govern Switzerland).

Almost everywhere governments had degenerated into petrified oligarchies. There was no political liberty for anyone not belonging to the aristocratic families. Nepotism was a natural collateral to the system. Only in Zürich did the guilds at least retain their franchise for the council. Even in the Landsgemeinde Cantons one found the same trend of affairs. Non-burgesses were deprived of their political rights; further, they were subjected to all sorts of economic chicanery in addition. The picture is one of absolute political depravity.

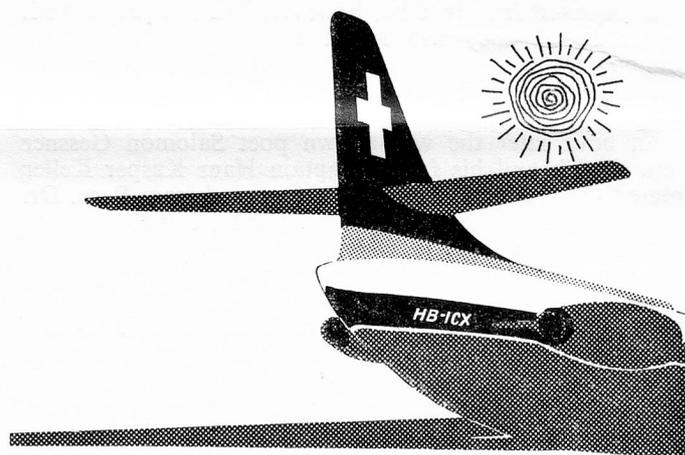
This, then, was the situation in the country when the nine friends met at Bad Schinznach in 1761. They were not revolutionaries, but they were concerned about their country. Their plan was to collect a larger number of enlightened people to meet in 1762, and to put before them definite questions for discussion. Thus, the following year they met again at Schinznach and there formally organised themselves into a society to which they gave the name "Helvetische Gesellschaft" — *Société Helvétique*.

These meetings were continued annually until the French invasion of 1798. After a break of nine years the society came to life again in 1807. The political develop-

ments after 1848, however, robbed it of its *raison d'être* and it became moribund and died the year before it would have reached the centenary of its foundation.

Oechsli writes of the meetings and dinners of the society that "though most of the well-known men belonged to it, it was unable to get beyond patriotic declamations and sentimental speeches". All the same, some influence seemed to have emanated from Schinznach. Why otherwise, should the governments of Bern, Freiburg, Luzern and Solothurn from time to time have forbidden attendance there? If the founders of the *Société Helvétique* hoped that their discussions and meetings might lead to action in the aristocratic and despotic circles towards reform, they had hoped in vain. It required a political earthquake to break the fossilized and petrified structure. It needed the French revolution and Napoleon's *Helvetik* to break it and a further forty years of confusion and re-thinking to clear the debris away and to replace the structure.

Clearly, even if the society as an organisation was unable, and unequipped, to storm the many bastilles, the very fact that so many of the enlightened and progressive men of the times were amongst its members proves that its influence on the mental and ideal plane must have been manifold. And traces of it are also to be found in the talks and writings which eventually led to 12th September 1848.



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