

La Nouvelle société helvétique

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LA NOUVELLE SOCIÉTÉ HELVÉTIQUE

The *Nouvelle Société Helvétique* may appear to be a congregation of cultured Swiss residents meeting once a month at the Swiss Hostel in London to listen to scholarly conferences. But these educated members form but a "section" of a vast patriotic organisation which has played an eminent role in Swiss history. The *Nouvelle Société Helvétique* has in fact been compared to the *Alliance Française* and the *British Council*. This may have been due to the N.S.H.'s involvement with the Swiss abroad and the spreading of Swiss culture. The N.S.H. is, however, not a state institution and fundamentally intended for the Swiss at home and abroad. The nearest Swiss imitation to the British Council and the vastly ramified *Alliance Française* is the *Pro Helvetia* Foundation.

The *Nouvelle Société Helvétique* was a re-creation of the original *Société Helvétique* which was founded in 1762. But the purpose of the two societies were basically the same, despite the separation in time, and the conditions prevailing at their respective creations were surprisingly similar. The *Société Helvétique* was founded by poets, scientists and intellectuals in quest of the Swiss soul. Switzerland was still a loose conglomeration of semi-independent cantons, slackly governed and suffering from many iniquities. The original members met annually at *Schinznach*, a village equidistant from Basle, Zurich and Berne and debated on the meaning of the word "nation", on the ways of adapting the country to the enlightened views of the 18th century. The *Société Helvétique* opened sections in Zurich, Berne, Fribourg and other cities with the result that for a generation it came to form a patriotic *intelligentsia* which was the heart and conscience of progress in Switzerland.

The creation of the Confederation in 1848 and the democratic principles of its constitution satisfied the Society, which considered its mission as accomplished and ceased to exist in 1858.

But in the years preceding the First World War Swiss intellectuals were feeling a definite *malaise* about the Swiss predicament. Switzerland, they felt, should be more than a pragmatic political assemblage, she should be a nation with a common ideal. The ferment of such sentiments lay in the growing awareness of the unrecognised but real cultural achievements of the Swiss. This cultural awareness was more particularly felt by French-speaking intellectuals. The need for a common patriotic ideal was felt all the more at a time when nationalism was at its peak and the political situation of Europe highly unsettled.

Three *Romands* took the initiative of reviving the original *Société Helvétique*. They were Alexis François, Gonzague de Reynold and Robert de Traz; a journalist, an historian and a writer. The founding assembly was held in the Casino of Berne on 1st February, 1914 and was attended by an array of federal councillors and 180 young and fervent intellectuals. They defined their crusade in six points during that meeting. The *Nouvelle Société Helvétique* was spiritually to be a fraternal *entente*, distinct from all political parties and well in view of the Swiss people. The aim of the N.S.H. was to fight for the preservation of the national heritage, to strengthen the patriotic feeling of the nation and to prepare Switzerland for the future. The Society was to foster by every means a growing concern for the national interest while at the same time seek to preserve the particularities of each region. The programme, as it was first defined, was to encourage national education, to revive a civic sense by struggling against the preoccupation over exclusively material things and to strengthen the ties between the Swiss at home and abroad. The N.S.H. was to concern itself with the study in common of the problems of the country and their practical solutions. The assembly adopted the N.S.H. motto. It was "*Pro helvetica dignitate ac securi-*

tate."

The war years and the 1920's were the heydays of the N.S.H. It enjoyed the membership and support of such respected creators as Charles l'Eplattenier, Paul Seippel, Ernst Zahn, Philippe Godet and Carl Spitteler. The Society came to raise the Jura problem very early in its existence. It militated in favour of Switzerland's entry into the League of Nations. Among all the other problems which the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique* has raised and examined in fifty years of activity we can mention those of post-war unemployment, the Defence Front, the revision of the constitution, emigration and immigration, old age pension, financial reform, recognition of *Romanche* as the fourth national language and the creation of open universities.

The N.S.H. publishes a highly esteemed *Jahrbuch* presenting a picture of the events of the year and the problems of national and international interest. The N.S.H. was a source of unbiased information during the First World War. Its most original and active creation was probably the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad.

The N.S.H. may have lost some of its significance as a patriotic and spiritual force. The spirit of the meetings at N.S.H. sections round the world is one of uninvolved general interest. The innumerable present lay members of the N.S.H. are no longer as engaged as the militant ideological nucleus which the Society was in earlier days. One may, however, not deny the continuing influence of the N.S.H., an influence warranted by the distinction of so many of its members. The Swiss Abroad owe more to the Society than to any other institution for the renewed concern which they enjoy from the motherland. The circumstances which gave birth to the N.S.H. have certainly changed and there is a current lull in patriotic fervour which may have diluted the role of the N.S.H. Many of its founder members, men like Gonzague de Reynold, Gottfried

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Bohnenblust and Charly Clerc are now dead and their successors will necessarily see things differently. This doesn't mean that the spirit which animated the founders has disappeared with them. It has changed in expression and adapted to new times. Even though the N.S.H. may no longer hold the limelight, it remains as a kind of mentor to our masters and as the conscience of Swiss democracy.

(PMB)

COMMENT

IMPROVING THE PHYSICAL FITNESS OF THE SWISS

On Sunday, 28th September, the Swiss people will have a busy time at the polls. Besides various cantonal matters they will tick their voting slips over the controversial "right for a home" initiative and a constitutional amendment providing for improved encouragement to sports.

Both issues involve a stepped up federal participation in the life of the nation. In the first case voters will be invited to call for more federal housing subsidies; in the second they will have to endorse a legal framework for sports.

Although there is not much originality in a vote seeking to establish the relationship between the practise of sports and the State, this was something long overdue and interesting from the historical point of view. The proposed article requires that the Confederation should legislate on the practise of gymnastics and sports. It has the right to decide, for example, whether sports should become compulsory in schools. The Confederation is also required to encourage adult sports and maintain a federal school of gymnastics and sports (a school which al-

ready exists but which will now have a federal status). The detailed application of future federal decrees in the matter of sports will be left to the discretion of the cantons. The present legislation on sports dates from 1907 and does no more but stipulate that young boys should have compulsory gymnastics at school. This means that nothing has been provided legally for school sports and that the physical training of Swiss girls is forgotten entirely. This does not in practice preclude basketball and such like contests in school gymnasiums, it only means that Swiss schools have not had the obligation of providing girls with a chance of practising sport. Boys enjoy the additional advantage over girls of being able to exercise their bodies in the Army.

The concern for the health of the Swiss, young and old alike, had been expressed in repeated interventions in Parliament in favour of federal assistance to sports. After all, the Swiss are reported to be sturdy and hard working people with a tradition of fitness to keep up. The statistics however contradict the Sempach and Morgarten image of the Swiss as stocky, muscular, determined, strapping and tanned leather-necks. Of a hundred young men inducted for national service, only 43 were found to be totally fit—free from bent backbones, flat feet, diseased teeth and crooked legs. Eight years ago, just over half of the boys medically gauged before recruitment were found to be completely fit. These and other figures have been a cause for concern to many a responsible citizen and prompted them to start taking steps to improve the lagging health level of an increasingly sedate and slovenly population. Sports for all in plenty was the new golden way to a revival of national health and the only *ersatz* to the lost life in the woods and the fields. The proposed article fits in as well with the problem of planning mass leisure time. As working hours are being steadily reduced, substitutions will have to be found and sports appear to be one of the most inoffensive, cheapest and healthiest among them.

Switzerland's paltry performances in international sports is another strong motive behind the initiative. Swiss Olympic medals have cropped up as historical rarities and have usually been won in non-athletic disciplines such as judo, show-jumping and yachting. Some of our national athletic records are about as brilliant as British public school parent-day records and there are Olympic disciplines for which no Swiss athlete is actually able to qualify.

It appears that the only sports in which the Swiss have distinguished themselves in the past six months were car racing and ski-ing. Our teams have showed little glory in ice-hockey and football competitions. Louis Noverraz's disappointing results in the

America Cup yachting contest be-
reaves the Swiss of one of their rare
titles of glory.

The support which the initiative is bound to get from voters will reflect their keen desire to see Switzerland shine in international competitions. There is enough money, free time and talent in Switzerland to see the best sporting results. It all needs a little more encouragement and organisation.

(PMB)

SWISS NEWS

A NEW SEASON AT THE SCHAUSPIELHAUS

The new director of Zurich's main theatre, the *Schauspielhaus*, will have an arduous task in rehabilitating it in the eyes of the Zurich public. Mr. Harry Buckwitz has explained in a long-awaited press conference that his style of management will be different. The Peter Loeffler era, where plays were a direct attack on their middle-class audience, is over. The emphasis at the Schauspielhaus will henceforth rest on the quality of the plays to be produced rather than on the chances of self-expression which they may afford to charismatic individual actors or their revolutionary impact. The public will be wooed by impeccable productions and flawless performances. Not surprisingly so, as the Schauspielhaus was rated as Europe's least-frequented theatre last year, with an average occupation of 42 per cent of the seats. The programme of the coming season offers a wide and eclectic sample of modern and classical plays. The season will start on September 17th (simultaneously with the beginning of the Basle season) with a public demonstration and talk-in on "What Theatre Is". The following day will see the première of Alfred Jarry's controversial play "King Ubu" (titles are the Editor's translation), followed on September 24th by Goethe's "Egmont". Then a new political creation by Adolf Muschg, "Goethe's Agitation", will be presented to the public. Other plays to follow will be "Urfaust" by Goethe, "The Ruling Class" by Peter Barnes, "Guerillas" by Rolf Hochmuth, "Naked Hamlet" by Joseph Papp and "Waiting for Godot" by Samuel Beckett. Finally, the season will culminate with the première of Friedrich Durrenmatt's new play, "Portrait of a Planet". This will take place on March 18th.

Mr. Harry Buckwitz intends to campaign in favour of the Schauspielhaus and the theatre on a wide front. A monthly theatrical journal will come out and a weekly "Night Studio" performance starting at 10.30 p.m. will show avant-garde plays at the Schauspielhaus. Mr. Buckwitz also plans to co-operate with the Schauspielhaus