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THE ATS IS 75

On April 20th the shareholders of the Agence Télégraphique Suisse met for their General Meeting. They approved the new organisation as presented in its 1969 report, they elected the new members of the Board and appointed Mr. Pierre Béguin, former chief Editor of the Gazette de Lausanne, as Chairman of the Board in succession to the retiring Chairman, Mr. Walter Egger.

The meeting was succeeded by a banquet celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the foundation of the ATS. This banquet was honoured by the presence of such prominent personalities as Mr. Hans Peter Tschudi, President of the Confederation, Mr. Matthias Eggenberger, President of the National Council, Mr. Paul Torche, President of the Council of States and Mr. Angelo Marchioni, Papal Nuncio and Doyen of the Diplomatic Corps.

The ATS can look back on 75 years of uninterrupted growth and eminent service to the Swiss public. Its creation sprang from the need of gaining independence from foreign news agencies. During the 19th century Swiss newspapers had to rely on leading foreign agencies such as Havas in Paris and Kontinental-Telegraphenkompanie in Berlin, a situation which was felt as financially and intellectually disadvantageous to the Swiss Press. Three distinguished journalists, Charles Morel of the Journal de Genève, Dr. N. Bissegger, chief Editor of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung and Hermann Jent, chief Editor of the Bund took the initiative in 1895 of launching our national news agency.

It was founded as a limited company initially owned by 20 papers. It began its operations from a small office above the Spitalstrasse in Berne with two editors and an errand boy. It had offices in Zurich, Geneva and Basle as well and produced 24,000 words of foreign news to the attention of its subscribers every month. A long way from the 1.4 million words which the Agency now delivers every month in three languages.

Among other recent changes, the ATS has decided to increase its capital by issuing new shares and enlarging the circle of its shareholders. The capital has now been raised from 150,000 to 1m fr. and the number of shareholders from 47 to 106. These shareholders are, almost exclusively, the Swiss papers, the three Swiss press associations and the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation. The ATS has made history on March 1st by launching its teletypesetting service. This system (which we have described in a recent article on the Swiss Press) not only sends out information but the actual composition of the page column as well. It is still in a running-

in period and will be definitely established in July. It will be highly appreciated by papers wishing to print late sports news as fast as possible.

The ATS is a wholesaler in news. It receives information from a variety of sources and transmits it to its subscribers, whose subscriptions are commensurate with their circulation. The Swiss Observer is an exception since it receives ATS news sheets free of charge, a service for which it is most grateful. The central editorial office is in Berne. It is responsible for management, expedition, translation, Federal and Bernese news and information to radio and television. The ATS holds a practical monopoly in the supply of news to the Swiss Broadcasting Corporation. It obtains foreign news through its subscription to Reuter, Agence France Presse and Deutsche Press Agentur and through its link with the "Group 39" of national agencies. This group comprises the national agencies of Austria, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Switzerland. The ATS also has two correspondents abroad, one in London and one in New York, and would like to increase this number. Further home news comes from editorial offices in Zurich, Berne, Chur, Délémont, Geneva, Lausanne and Lugano. Many ATS correspondents are simultaneously engaged in the local press of the towns where they are stationed.

The ATS is by far the most important Swiss News Agency. It co-operates closely with its sister agency, "Sport-Information". There is a third news agency, "Swiss Political Correspondence" of much smaller importance and output. As Mr. Tschudi pointed out in his address at the 75th Anniversary Banquet, the ATS can be said to have a unifying effect within Switzerland. As a common source of information presenting national events under the same light to readers of the three languages, the ATS contributes to the harmony of the nation. Indeed, far more so today than in earlier days, when the ATS was appreciated primarily for its foreign service and when papers were self-sufficient for home information. Nowadays the ATS is a vital tool in conveying to a national readership the multifarious news of 25 autonomous cantons and half cantons. Even the larger papers with their strong teams of correspondents cannot dispense with its services.

The ATS was the first news agency on the Continent to introduce a telephone news service. Any person having missed the news for a reason or another and wishing to be informed of the latest events may dial a certain number on the telephone and receive a spoken summary of the latest news. This news

can be obtained in German, French or Italian.

The 1969 ATS report contains some personal remarks by Georges Duplain, the director of the ATS, in which he expresses his concern over the training of new correspondents. He writes that the ATS has trained countless journalists who have later gone to work with papers. He accounts this exodus to the attraction of writing personal and signed articles, an opportunity necessarily denied by a news agency. The work of the news agency correspondent is much dryer. He must submit himself rigorously to objective facts, he has little scope for self-expression, he may not indulge in stylistic flourish and must remain anonymous. Mr. Georges Duplain holds that there should be more co-operation between the ATS and its customers. More specifically, these customers should not make the work of the ATS more difficult by pinching its valued and qualified collaborators. This was particularly important at a time when, as a result of increased rates and the advent of new technology, the service rendered by the ATS had to be better than ever.

(PMB)

(I am indebted for this article to Mr. Gottfried Keller, London correspondent of the ATS and the Basler Nachrichten, Chairman of our Swiss Observer Advisory Council, who kindly communicated the ATS report to me).

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