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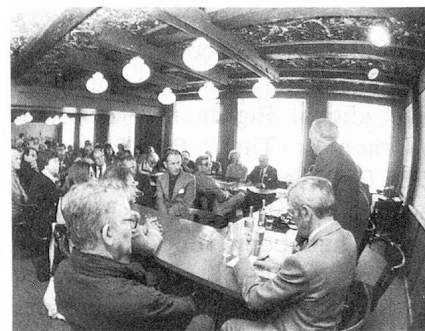
The 59th Conference of the Swiss Abroad held in Solothurn

The beautifully renovated old town of Solothurn, which was justly awarded the Henri-Louis Wakker Prize, provided an ideal setting for the 59th Conference of the Swiss Abroad, held within the walls of this city from the 21st to the 23rd of August. The occasion for holding the conference in Solothurn was the 500th anniversary of the admission of Canton Solothurn to the Swiss Confederation. This city in a festive mood was an ideal place to meet not only because of the setting of the old town, but also because of the traces visible everywhere of Swiss emigrants.

The theme of the conference was temporary emigration. While earlier emigration was dominated by people who wanted to start a new life abroad, today the emigrants are primarily «contract Swiss». This new type of emigrant no longer relies on luck alone when he goes abroad, but takes an employment contract in his pocket, if possible one from a Swiss firm. The problems confronting this new group differ in many respects from those of the traditional emigrant. While the fate and welfare of the latter were basically tied to that of his chosen country of residence, come what will, returning to Switzerland after some years is a given fact from the very beginning for the temporary emigrant. While he is secure materially, the questions of education, social security as well as political rights stand in the foreground. The

aim of this year's Conference of the Swiss Abroad was primarily to draw attention to these problems of temporary emigration, emigration which is eminently important for our country. These problems definitely deserve attention since the high Swiss standard of living depends to a large extent on the efforts of our citizens working abroad. The problem of the Swiss schools abroad was already handled in detail at the 58th conference, held in Lugano from the 22nd to the 24th of August 1980. In Solothurn, therefore, one refrained from discussing this topic at length. Nevertheless the President of the Organization of the Swiss Abroad, former National Councillor Dr. Alfred Weber, clearly expressed disappointment in his speech at the opening of the general assembly about the fact that subsidies had been abolished not only for the schools of Florence, Genoa, and Naples, but also for two schools serving, among other things, to educate the children of contract Swiss. The Organization of the Swiss Abroad firmly maintains the position that these schools, which enable the children of temporary emigrants to re-enter the Swiss school system, are highly worthy of subsidies, in view of the importance of these emigrants for our export industry.

Besides the education of the children, social security in particular is of central importance. Among the traditional emigrants



During the hour of questions

there was already a strong interest in remaining in the Swiss old age insurance programme, the AHV. This interest is even greater among the contract Swiss. As a rule, the temporary emigrant does not benefit at all from the social security of his country of residence, although he must contribute, since a contribution period of 10 to 12 years is required normally before a social security pension is paid. Remaining in the Swiss AHV, therefore, is extremely important for the temporary emigrant since, as is well known, even short interruptions in contributions result in a smaller pension due to the complex structure of our old age insurance system. This can be prevented through contributing voluntarily to AHV while abroad. The cost, however, is not low since the premiums are the same as are paid by people who are self-employed. In addition, as a rule, one has to pay into the social security system of the country of residence.

The situation is different for those employees of Swiss firms who continue to be insured through their employers in the obligatory AHV programme. As was made clear at the general assembly, there can be problems here too since the spouse is no longer covered automatically, as would be the case in Switzerland. To remain within the AHV scheme, she has to join the voluntary AHV. This applies even when the spouse is not employed and on these grounds does not have to pay the contributions. This problem has become particularly acute as even the Swiss Government personnel abroad remained unaware of this state of affairs until very recently because of a serious lack of information, even though they were affected by it. The consequence of this problem is that these women, if invalids, have no right to a regular invalid pension. At best one might make an exception.

When returning to Switzerland not only an unbroken membership in the AHV is impor-

The official opening



tant, but also being able to rejoin a health insurance plan without having to accept serious disadvantages. Here for about 80% of the Swiss abroad a solution has been found in the form of bilateral social security agreements. For the remaining cases no such solution exists, and the problem must be worked out individually.

The importance of temporary emigration has not yet been fully studied statistically. As a survey by the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad of 100 firms showed, the number of contract Swiss can be estimated at 10 000. When Swiss employed by international organizations, by the Confederation, or in the field of development aid are included, then the figure is about 13 000. If one includes family members, then the contract Swiss represent about 10% of the 350 000 Swiss abroad. As one can conclude from the talk by the Head of the Emigration Section of the Federal Office for Industry, Trade and Labour, the traditional emigrants are encountering more and more difficulties in their search for new countries of residence. Many of the traditional emigration destinations, in particular the USA, ended their open door policy long ago, and have passed strict immigration regulations. The main condition for receiving a residential permit is usually a valid employment contract. The restrictive policy of the traditional emigration countries, of course, has strengthened the trend of temporary emigration.

A temporary emigrant, even during his stay abroad, usually remains closely tied to his homeland. In order to be able to re-integrate without problems into Swiss society upon his return, he also has a strong interest in continuing his participation in the political development of Switzerland. In these circles then the desire to exercise one's political rights from abroad is greater, whether by post or by voting at the Swiss embassies, than is the case among traditional emigrants, as was shown by a survey made by the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. A total of about 10 000 Swiss abroad, either by signing a register, or by answering the survey mentioned, expressed their desire for improved possibilities of exercising their political rights.

The highlight of the general assembly of the 59th Conference of the Swiss Abroad was certainly the speech by the representative of the Swiss Federal Council, Fritz Honegger. The sincere applause indicated the positive reaction to his remarks on the position and role of the Swiss abroad in the framework of Swiss society. And so the Spokesman for the



lively discussion



The theatre performance



Guided tour of the castle of Waldegg



High spirits at the Dance at Bad Attisholz

Federal Government deserved thanks for stating clearly and to the point that being a Swiss abroad is not a thing of folklore: «Again and again I have to admire the energy with which people of all classes and all ages in our nation go abroad to seek a new life, and in doing so find stamina which they would hardly have considered possible earlier.» Federal Councillor Honegger also joined with the Swiss abroad in the hope that further cuts in the contributions to the

institutions of the Swiss abroad would not be necessary.

The annual conference in Solothurn, attended by about 500 Swiss abroad, came to a rainy but pleasant end on Sunday with an excursion to Bad Attisholz and to the castle Waldegg, built at the end of the 17th century by the Solothurn emigrant family Besenval. One parted as one had met at the opening on Friday – in a friendly way and in a good mood.

Jörg Kistler



View of the castle of Waldegg

(Photos Rodo)



Christmas-Skicamp at Zweisimmen

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