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Interview with the new Head of the Service of the Swiss Abroad, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Minister Max Leippert

«Swiss Review» (Interviewer):

On 1st of August 1982 you succeeded Minister Maurice Jaccard as Head of the Service of the Swiss Abroad. Will this entail any future changes?

Leippert:

I think we must distinguish between the aims of the Service of the Swiss Abroad and its various tasks. Subject to unforeseen circumstances, there will be hardly any changes worth mentioning in the aims of the Service of the Swiss Abroad. These consist in drawing up the Federal Council's policy towards the Swiss Abroad and in efforts to harmonize and coordinate the work of all the offices dealing with matters concerning the Swiss abroad.

The tasks, on the other hand, may change with time and circumstances and according to the development of the social, economic and political situation in Switzerland and the various host countries.

Interviewer:

What is the essence of the policy towards the Swiss Abroad?

Leippert:

That can be summed up in one sentence. It is the basic idea found in the Magna Carta of the Swiss abroad, that is to say, Article 45bis of the Federal Constitution. This states that the Confederation, taking account of the special situation of the Swiss living abroad, may enact regulations determining their rights and duties. Our fellow citizens abroad

live in different geographical, climatic, cultural, social, economic, political and legal conditions than we in Switzerland; account should be taken of these conditions in legislation, in administration and also in jurisdiction, within the limits of what is possible. This does not mean that the Swiss abroad should be privileged compared with the Swiss at home.

Interviewer:

Can you specify the individual tasks facing you?

Leippert:

The most important ones at the moment are the total revision of the Federal Constitution and of the constitutional articles concerning the Swiss abroad, the liberalization of the political rights of the Swiss abroad, and the revision of the civic rights legislation and of the voluntary Old Age Insurance and Disability Insurance schemes.

Interviewer:

Can you give examples where the situation of the Swiss abroad is to receive special consideration?

Leippert:

I shall be very pleased to, but I should like to be brief, since there is not much space at my disposal in the «Swiss Review». In the case of political rights, for example, we needed a special constitutional provision for our compatriots living abroad so as to be able to deviate, in implementing legislation, from the domicile prin-

ciple which normally applies in the Federal Constitution. To replace domicile, the law on the voting rights of the Swiss abroad introduced the so-called «sojourn principle». However, with the exception of officials and employees of the Confederation posted abroad, only those Swiss abroad who are actually staying in Switzerland at the time are thereby enabled to take part in federal elections and other federal ballots. Voting from abroad should be allowed so that all Swiss living abroad can exercise their voting rights. The preparatory work for a possible change in the current law is in progress. If all goes well, the Swiss abroad will be able to vote from abroad in a few years' time, probably by post. Bearing reciprocity in mind, however, this is possible only under the condition that the Federal Council is in a position to grant foreigners in Switzerland the same voting rights with respect of their home countries.

Interviewer:

Can you tell us about other problems?

Leippert:

An area where solutions adapted to the special circumstances of the Swiss abroad suggest themselves is the voluntary OAI and DI. Hitherto, principles governing the obligatory OAI/DI have to a great extent been applicable to this very useful institution. This gives rise to difficulties, especially on the contribution side: not only administrative ones affecting our em-

bassies and consulates, but also problems of the contribution burden borne by all those Swiss abroad living in countries with well developed social insurance systems to which they are compulsorily subject. Here, too, we must examine whether the principles of the obligatory OAI can henceforth be applied indiscriminately to the voluntarily insured Swiss abroad.

Finally, the civic rights legislation which, as you know, is now being revised, will have to find answers to similar questions. First, however, the alteration of the civic rights article in the Federal Constitution must be approved by the people and the cantons. One function of implementing the legislation which would have to be drafted if the results of the plebiscite were positive would be to establish criteria to prevent an undesirable increase in dual nationality arising from the acquisition of citizenship by the children of a Swiss woman married to their foreign father. The legislators would also have to decide whether, and on what conditions, the naturalization of the foreign spouse, irrespective of sex, could, if necessary, be facilitated. However, the referendum might be used against implementing this law. It will take therefore several years before the current revision of the civic rights legislation is complete.

None of these tasks can be performed in isolation and without the cooperation of all interested circles. The Federal Council and the federal administration therefore lay great stress on consulting, as far as possible, the cantonal governments and political parties, the institutions concerned, the societies and organizations etc. However, today more than ever before, the Swiss abroad and their organizations will need to contribute not only ideas but material support. This

has proved particularly true in the case of the Swiss schools abroad, where, for example, the contributions made by some Swiss colonies have left much to be desired. The old proverb «God helps those who help themselves» is now more relevant than ever. It has probably been best expressed in the unique mutual aid scheme of the Swiss abroad, the Solidarity Fund set up in 1958. The Confederation granted the Fund an unlimited deficit guarantee.

But that is not enough; as many Swiss abroad as possible must join if the Solidary Fund is to develop its full potential.

On that note I should like to end; may I express the hope that there will be excellent cooperation between the Swiss abroad and their organizations on the one hand and the offices of the Confederation, particularly the Service of the Swiss Abroad of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, on the other.

Federal Chancellery



Federal Chancellor Walter Buser
(Photo E. Rieben, Bern)

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Administrative Secretariat

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Service for Government Affairs

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Language and Translation Service

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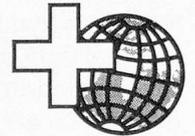
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Solidarity Fund of the Swiss abroad

Gutenbergstrasse 6, CH-3011 Berne



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