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Stolen gold and Jewish assets: a commission set up

A nine-person commission of experts will examine the role of the Swiss financial centre during the Second World War. Following the unanimous approval of the respective federal decree by the National Council and the Council of States (see Swiss Review 6/96) the Federal Council has now appointed the members of this commission. Jean-François Bergier, professor at the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, will be in the chair, and it will include eight historians and a lawyer. Four members will be from abroad, which underlines the international dimension of the matters at issue.

In presenting the group of experts and its mandate, the Federal Council attached great importance to the commission's independence. It will itself be responsible for distributing duties and

working out its procedures. According to the Federal Council, its report is intended "to create clarity on the extent

and fate of assets which have remained unclaimed, as well as on stolen gold and flight money." ■

Length of study: wide differences

Not only do university studies in Switzerland begin comparatively late, but they also last rather a long time. Today's students spend an average of 10.4 semesters at university, although this figure varies greatly from university to university and from faculty to faculty. The length of studies up to a first degree is generally high in social sciences and the arts, whereas the time is shorter for law and economics. Theology, natural sciences and medicine come in between. ■

Taking average figures for 1983 to 1995, the shortest study period was in economics at the University of Lausanne (6.5 semesters), whereas the longest was arts at the University of Berne (16.5 semesters). With the exceptions of the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and the University of St. Gall, studies in German-speaking Switzerland last substantially longer than in the French-speaking part, which experts attribute to the fact that courses are more structured in the latter. ■

Lower Unterwalden abolishes its Landsgemeinde

Without any fuss, Lower Unterwalden has quietly got rid of its Landsgemeinde – or open-air parliament. Almost unnoticed by the rest of Switzerland, on December 1, 1996, the voters of this half-canton abolished the Landsgemeinde by a proportion of 7 to 3 and replaced it – at the polls – with ballot democracy, thus bringing a 600-year old tradition to an end. This

decision seems logical in the light of the social changes of the last few years, particularly declining interest in politics leading to lower participation and the increasing number of commuters from outside. In 1994, a specially convened Landsgemeinde had already decided that important elections should be carried out by ballot. ■

The rather low voter participation of 47% showed that even in Lower Unterwalden discussions about the Landsgemeinde did not generate that much interest. Landsgemeinden will still be held in both Appenzell half-cantons, as well as in Glarus and Upper Unterwalden. ■



This picture belongs to the past. The Lower Unterwalden Landsgemeinde has served its purpose.

Switzerland, a land of emigrants?

Never have so many Swiss citizens travelled abroad, for private or business reasons, as in 1995. The number of Swiss trainees who were abroad during that year also increased, and only three times in the last fifteen years have so many Swiss informed their municipalities that they will take up residence abroad as in 1995. The Emigration and Trainee Section of the Federal Office for Industry and Labour receives up to 30,000 enquiries per year from people considering leaving the country. Does this mean that Switzerland is once again becoming a land of emigrants?

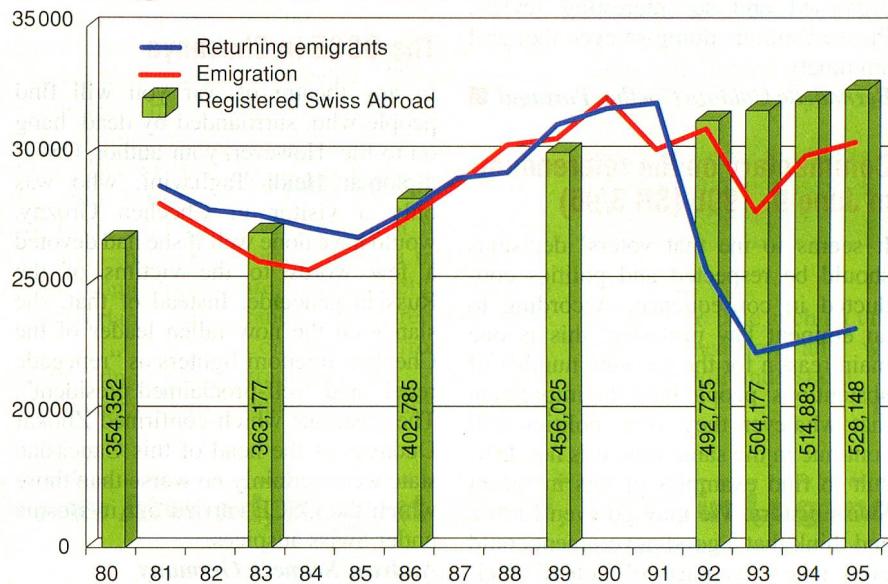
The few statistics available do not give a clear answer. Between 1981 and 1995, figures of between 25,251 and 31,888 were recorded for Swiss nationals becoming resident abroad. Over the same period, between 22,083 and 31,673 returned. Up to 1991, emigrants and returnees were roughly in balance, but since 1992 the emigrant figures are much higher (see chart). However, these figures do not tell us anything about where people emigrate to and how long for.

Unfortunately, the statistics collected annually by the Federal Department for Foreign Affairs about those registered as Swiss Abroad do not help us further, since they provide us only with a yearly

comparison of the total number per consular area. Between 1980 and 1995, the total number of those registered rose from 354,232 to 528,148. During the same period taken as a whole, however, the number of those leaving the country exceeded those returning by about 17,500. The substantial increase beyond

this is accounted for mainly by the revision of the Nationality Law, which gave Swiss nationality to the children of women who were formerly Swiss and the easier naturalisation procedure for spouses of Swiss Abroad (see also Official News). ■

Emigration, returning emigrants and numbers of registered Swiss Abroad¹, 1980–1995



¹ Until 1992, collected only every three years.

(CHART: BURI. Sources: Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, Federal Statistics Office)

People



Barbara Haering Binder is the new general secretary of the Social Democratic Party. Born in 1953 in Montreal and a graduate in natural sciences from the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, she has represented Zurich in the National Council since 1990. She replaces André Daguet, who is moving over to manage the Smuv trades union.

The new president of the Independent Appeals Tribunal for Radio and Television (UBI) is **Denis Barrelet**. This French-speaking journalist works as a parliamentary correspondent and teaches communications law at the universities of Fribourg and Neuchâtel. The UBI hears appeals against Swiss radio and television programmes.

He enjoys high respect in both north and south America as a geographer and natural scientist. A mountain in Costa Rica carries his name, as does the most important national park in Venezuela. Now the Canton Vaud municipality of Bex has honoured its son, **Henri-François Pittier** (1857–1950) – long forgotten in his own country – with a monument and a garden.

In the person of **Judith Stamm**, a woman will occupy the highest post in Switzerland for the fourth time. The 63-year old member for Lucerne has been elected president of the National Council, which she joined in 1983. The president of the Council of States for 1997 will be Edouard Delalay, aged 60, from Valais. Both are members of the Christian Democratic Party. ■



Point of view

"We Swiss are very good in stability but very weak in flexibility. In consequence, our former success has made us blind to the future, and prosperity has made us lazy. Nothing moves any more."

Tim Guldmann, Swiss OSCE mediator in Chechnya

Donations to charity continue unabated

In spite of the continued recession, the Swiss population's delight in contributing to charity goes on. This year money received by the main Swiss charities in the framework of special Christmas appeals is even higher than it was last year. More money is being given to those in need inside the country, and less to those abroad. ■

Texts: René Lenzin
Photos: Keystone