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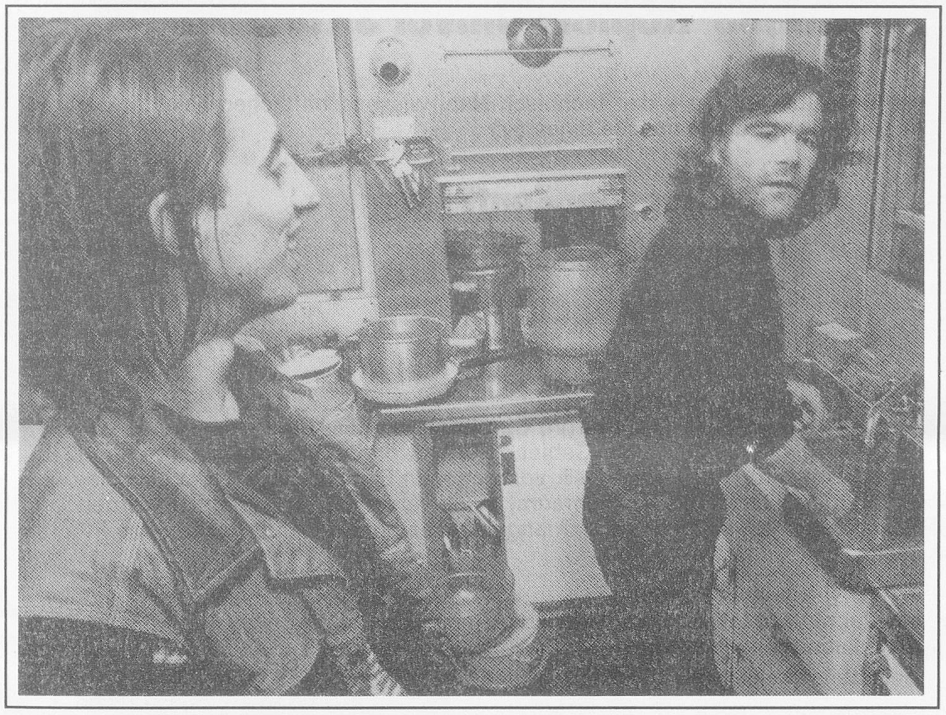
FROM OFFICES TO FLATS

Geneva suffers from an over-supply of office space. In fact, empty office space amounts to around 250,000 square meters or the equivalent of 25 football fields. On the other hand, there is a chronic shortage of apartments, a situation which has existed now for the past 50 years. So the Geneva authorities introduced a new law allowing landlords to change their empty offices into temporary apartments with the proviso that the apartments could be turned back into offices should the demand for commercial premises increase again.

The idea was to provide quick relief on the housing front, to give owners of empty offices an extra income on their otherwise unproductive properties and yet allow them, in good time, to re-enter the commercial market where revenue is of course much higher than for apartments. In total it was expected that this measure might put another 150-200 apartments on the market. But to the local authorities' dismay, only one single application for such a conversion was lodged. Most landlords preferred to keep their empty offices as they were, finding that a conversion to apartments plus an eventual re-conversion to office space would cost them more than what they could expect to earn from the rental of the apartments. Apart from the fact that many commercial buildings are unsuitable for conversion, the costs of installing kitchens, toilets and bathrooms and ripping them out again later on was simply prohibitive. So the well meant scheme to provide Geneva with more apartments simply did not get off the ground at all.

In the meantime, to assist those less fortunate citizens who simply cannot find or cannot afford the rental of a flat, a series of old buses and old railway carriages have been converted into some sort of temporary dwellings. So far, these shelters have mainly become temporary homes for out-of-work single men, the down-and-outs who have lost contact with their families and had nowhere else to go. But now more and more women turn up who find themselves in the same situation too. An additional worry is that these people, pushed to the fringe of society, need more and more time to re-enter the mainstream, thus putting an extra strain on those temporary shelters. For these people it would make no difference, even if all 250,000 square meters of empty office space were converted into flats, they could not afford the rental anyway.



Inside of an old railway carriage converted into a temporary flat where the society's "outcasts" can live and perhaps dream of a very problematic better future.

MORE FOREIGNERS

Switzerland has now 1.32 million foreigners in permanent residency, an increase of 38,000 over the year before. Foreigners represent now almost 19% of the total population of Switzerland. This is rather astonishing when you hear so many Swiss people complaining about difficulties in finding jobs. Or does this simply mean that the Swiss need so many foreigners to handle all the jobs which the Swiss no longer want to do themselves? Whatever it may be, there is an initiative under foot which, if accepted by the voters, will force the government to ensure that the foreigners living in Switzerland do not exceed 18% of the total population.

CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations to our Swiss Society Secretary/Treasurer, Carmen Fitzi-Gordon for her graduation as Master of Business Administration in International Management which took place on February 16, 1996.

Carmen Fitzi-Gordon at her graduation in front of the church St. Mary's in the Cathedral, Parnell, Auckland.

BOOKS

How much money do people spend on books? Here is your answer. (amount of money spent per person and per year)

Norway NZ$217.00 Germany NZ$197.00 Austria NZ$182.00 USA NZ$171.00 **Switzerland NZ$158.00** Japan NZ$142.00 France NZ$120.00 Italy NZ$81.00

Obviously, the Norwegians must be spending far more time indoors (especially in winter) than the Italians as their consumption of books is almost three times as high as that of their southern counterparts.

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