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Swiss Abroad Council Meeting Crans-montana

President Georg Stucky opened the meeting by extending special greetings to the various guests of honour, notably to Her Excellency Maria Eugenia Brizuela de Avila, Minister of Foreign Affairs from El Salvador. Like so many of us, the minister has double citizenship - her grandfather hailed from La Chaux-des-Breuleux (Canton du Jura). In her address to the meeting she thanked everyone concerned for the wonderful hospitality she was partaking of and expressed the wish that the good relations between the two countries would continue unabated and, on the international scene, for the basic principles of peace, democracy, human rights and tolerance to remain unabated.

Quorum

With 65 delegates out of 100 being present a quorum was established and the meeting able to conduct its business.

Argentina Swiss

Among the more notable matters on the Agenda was the plight of the Argentina Swiss (I've reported on this problem in a previous report). The Swiss community of 15,000 - due to the political-economic and social collapse of the country - has been put into a precarious financial situation. Bank accounts are frozen, unemployment and devaluation are rampant, bringing about financial hardship to many, making it impossible to meet their dues to the voluntary AHV/IV. A return to Switzerland - for most of them a foreign country - is not only wasteful but also very costly. At the end of the discussions a resolution was drawn up and approved. It reads : We view the plight of the Swiss Community in Argentina with great concern. Devaluation, loss of income and unemployment makes it impossible to continue paying their dues to the Swiss social insurance AHV/IV. As a result of this crisis the Swiss Abroad Council demands that people who cannot pay their dues for no fault of their own, are not excluded from the scheme.

The Swiss Abroad Social support organisation is not meeting its obligations. As a result many compatriots are forced to return home to Switzerland to seek help. The SAC demands that social support be made available in Argentina itself, where help is more effective, and cheaper.

At the end of the morning's deliberations, a delegate spontaneously opened a fund with a CHF 1,000.00 donation challenging other delegates to follow suit (at this point I've no info as to how much money was raised).

Swiss Abroad Voting Patterns

Last year the OSA commissioned a research programme into the Swiss Abroad habits and patterns, the results of which were presented to the meeting and make interesting reading. A majority of compatriots are middle of the road, rather than left or right. With regard to foreign affairs matters, we seem to be more liberal than the "Inland Swiss". 70% say they are well informed about life in Switzerland and a staggering 90% feel that the country has a good reputation abroad (anyone wishing for a copy of this report, in German, please let me know).

Voting

This subject will continue to come up for some time yet. At this point, the powers that be are still evaluating the option of e-voting. The Minister of Foreign Affairs Calmy-Ray has signalled her support. Of the, at present, better than expected figure of 82,682 registered voters, 73% are hooked up to the internet.

Congress

There were just under 400 participants. The theme for the Plenary Sessions was primarily focused on: Switzerland as an international financial centre. Various bankers spoke of the continuing need to retain the bank secrecy laws. In order to remain viable, the finance sector must retain this secrecy while at the same time continue to build on solidarity, competence and internationality (it is important to note that just a few days before our return, the recent EU demands to scrap the secrecy laws, has now very surprisingly, if indeed not mysteriously, turned into support!).

As for the Rest ...

Late July we were more than happy to leave a rather cold Waikato behind us, but we hadn't counted on coming into an "overheated" European summer. Only a last minute storm bringing some relief to parched pastures made it possible to light up the many August 1 bonfires and let off the fireworks.

Then the mercury soared and soared again. Temperatures rose to 38-39°C, the highest measured was a whopping 41.5°C. In the cities, among the concrete and asphalt 44°-55°C was quite common. As a result of the very dry conditions, many smaller rivers and most creeks dried up. Often it was not possible to fish them out in time, leaving many aquatic creatures stranded, resulting in some cases, in a putrid stench. Then there was the real reason for us making this "pilgrimage" back to the old country ... the 350 jubilee of the beheading of Niklaus Leuenberger, a rather famous ancestor of our family. Nik's home county was Ruderswil (BE) as is ours, 50 years ago I was in seasonal employment less than 40km away, but could not even get a couple of hours off work! Now nearly 20,000km away, well ... we just had to make the effort. The celebrations in Ruderswil, over three weeks, were very interesting. It all started off with an historical presentation at the local church about Nik's involvement in the "Burgerkrieg", presented by a local historian with whose father I went to school. The "Mannerchor" and Musikgesellschaft supported the event magnificently, ending with a cousin and I being named as at least two of the present Ruderswil-Leuenberger clan. A week later a cortege was organised involving some 1200 people as well as 100 animals, depicting life as it must have been 350 years ago. A "Landsgemeinde" rounded up the celebrations. This was an encounter between the rural and urban sectors in today's environment. The rural scene was presented by Mrs Barbara Kehrli, farmer and Mayor of Gadmen (Haslital) and, well ... who else than Moritz Leuenberger, Minister of Transport in the Federal Government to represent the city slickers, after all Moritz Leuenberger too belongs to the Leuenberger clan. It is important to state here that due to the destruction of many county documents in the late 17th century, including birth records, it is impossible to say exactly whether we are descendants of Nik or his older brother. The only certainty is that we do descend from one or the other!

*Yours
Heinz Leuenberger*