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Swiss Abroad Congress Interlaken

This years' Congress was to be held in conjunction with the 200 year commemoration of the Aelpler and Trachtengest (Unspunnenfest). As you are probably all aware ten days before the event a large part of Switzerland was overtaken by disastrous floods. Interlaken was flooded out by the Luetschine River and the overflowing Lake Brienz bringing road and rail communications to a stand still.

Also flooded was the park where much of the activities were to take place forcing a cancellation of the Unspunnenfest much to the chagrin of Congress participants. It was not only the wet grounds, which with the returning fine weather dried out very quickly, but also the fact that many people involved in the massive clean-up operation were also participants in the festivities. In frantic consultations between the Swiss Abroad Secretariat and the Interlaken authorities the Congress was saved and a replacement programme set for Saturday and Sunday. During an address by the VP of the local Council, the Swiss Abroad management was thanked for keeping the Congress in Interlaken and the participants for raising more than CHF10,000 towards the damages.

By the time we arrived on Thursday morning there were few signs indicating that it was only a week since most of the streets had been turned into rivers. Below ground however, the situation was far from "under control". At the Casino - Kursaal where the first two days activities were taking place no air conditioning or ventilation was possible as all the machinery was very much out of action and would remain so for some weeks. This made attending meetings and some of the functions very hot under the collar as well as tiring.

Swiss Abroad Council Meeting

During the course of the day, two motions came under intensive discussion :

1. Bilaterals 11 following the EU enlargement by 10 new members. On 1 May 2004 the EU was enlarged by 10 new members. Switzerland, while not an EU member is very much involved under the so called : Bilaterals 1. These include Transit transport both on the ground and in the air, (it may be hard to believe, but from early morning until late at night there are constantly up to six aircraft cruising overhead leaving behind their vapour trails) public requirements, technical trade secrets, agriculture as well as the free movement of people. It had become necessary to extend

these measures to the new members or face possible retaliatory sanctions by the EU. Pressure made sure that the free movement of people became hotly debated. There was a distinct fear that the job-market would become flooded by people from the new members. A point already raised when the Referendum for the Bilaterals 1 was voted on but it never happened. The thinking within the Swiss Abroad Council once again proved to be somewhat more liberal than that of the "Inland Swiss". The Council voted 69 - 5 in favour. On 25 September the referendum was passed by 54.6% to 45.4%, in comparison a very small majority.

2. The cancellation of short wave radio by Radio Swiss International (SRG) continues to be a hot topic particularly in overseas countries, needing more explaining. It appears that some years ago farmers from around Beromuenster and Schwarzenburg, sites of powerful transmitters became aware that their cows did not perform as well as the national averages.

Investigations showed that ionised rays from the transmitters had a detrimental effect on their productivity. Together with financial constraints imposed by the Federal Government and the accorded right to the Swiss Radio Co (SRG) to make programming cuts where applicable - short wave radio became the victim. Only briefly discussed was a motion presented to the Federal Parliament by a Political Party that double citizenship should be discontinued - has been tossed by the Federal Council. 71% of the Swiss Abroad are double citizens.

Imagine the outcry if the motion had been upheld. Voting via Internet is still under investigation and will not be available before 2010. By the middle of this year registered voters from Abroad have now surpassed the 100,000 mark.

For Friday various workshops were organised. The most notable was Tourism : Is Switzerland still playing in the Champions League? The answer to this question is undoubtedly - YES. Switzerland is still among the ten top tourist destinations in the world. However, to stay there some innovative thinking will be needed. According to figures mentioned : The 10 mil. foreign visitors leave behind CHF 46 bil and produce 240,000 jobs. Another point of interest is the fact that the Aletschgletscher was recently named as one of the top ten European wonders! It is 23km long and up to 950m deep. Melted down it would provide

enough water a day for the entire world population for a period of six years!!!

On Saturday various alternative entertainments were set up in place of the cancelled Unspunnenfest. With fine weather forecast the limited number of tickets available to the Schilthorn were gone like hot cakes. Other alternatives were the Mystery Park and the open-air Tellspiele. As the play was about to reach its' climax a thunder storm broke. Thanks to the quick thinking of our leader to organise a bus for the return to our Hotels, we arrived there nice and dry. For the evening we chose the Jazz Dinner on one of the Passenger Boats on Lake Brienz. At slow speed we cruised 50m or so along the shore.

Coming to Brienz, the massive destruction wrought by the floods was brought home in a very stark way. It was not until early October before the rail traffic between Sarnen was reopened. Engelberg is said to be without rail connection until Xmas.

For Heidi and myself this was our fourth Congress and in spite of many failings imposed by the weather Gods, the best we have attended. Over the years we made many friends among Delegates from all corners of the planet. On Friday we were joined by Joe and Helen Staheli from Hamilton. Having personal friends with us made the Congress so much more friendly and indeed, worthwhile.

Heinz Leuenberger

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