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Peter Deutschle: Celebrating 25 Years of Service as Honorary Consul

Many of you know or have had direct dealings with Peter Deutschle, the Honorary Consul for Switzerland in New Zealand until the end of December 2018. Over his 25 years of service Peter represented Switzerland and the Swiss community with great dedication and diligence. Importantly, he supported countless Swiss nationals both local and from abroad, with ready advice and a safety net in their hour of need. He also maintained close relations with the Swiss Embassy in Wellington and successive Swiss Ambassadors, local government representatives and many Swiss businesses based in New Zealand. Less known is the fact that he is the graphic designer for the very magazine you are reading right now.

The Swiss Society of New Zealand takes this opportunity to thank Peter Deutschle deeply for his committed service to the Swiss community and wishes him the very best for his forthcoming years of freedom.

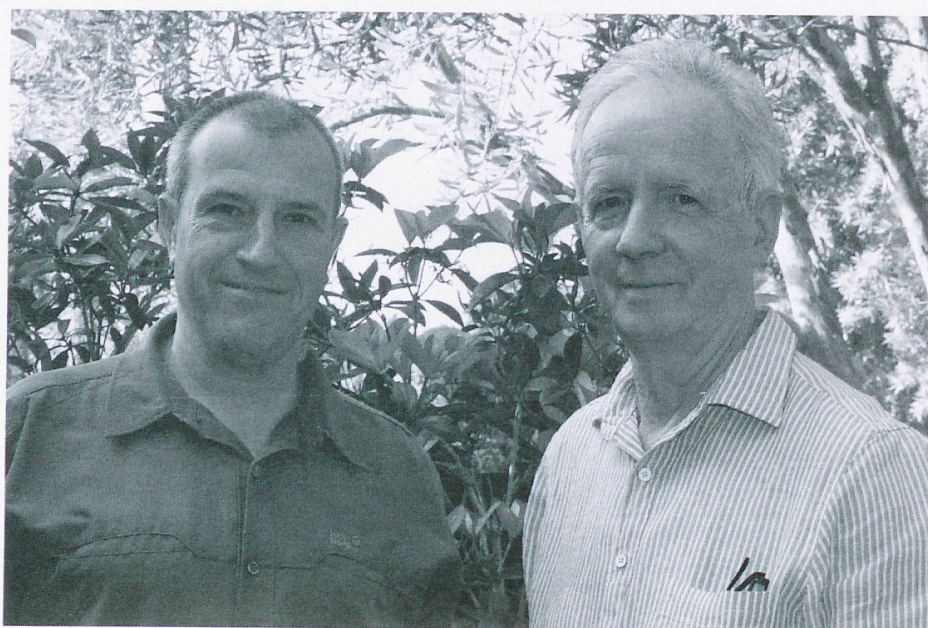
We thought this celebration calls for finding out a bit more about Peter Deutschle himself and his role as Honorary Consul. Thankfully Peter readily obliged and shared with us some of his knowledge and noteworthy memories, in his own hand.

Susie Wood

SW: Can you tell us about your life?

I was born in 1948 in the town of Appenzell, the youngest of four siblings. My father had a business in metal construction and plumbing. Looking back I realise that I had a wonderful childhood. Life was simple and we had a lot of freedom to roam. Summer days seemed endless and during the holidays our parents usually saw us only for breakfast, lunch and dinner. They never had to worry too much about us. Everybody knew everybody and the triumvirate of priest, policeman and teacher (still respected those days) kept an eye on village life.

Primary school was followed by secondary school run by Capuchin monks. They offered an excellent, broad-based and varied education. We had to be at school at seven in the morning and returned home after seven in the evening, six days a week. I was a reasonably good student but certainly no Einstein. I struggled with French, but loved history and geography. I could not see myself in academia and prepared myself to become a banker.



The incoming Honorary Consul Adrian Blaser (l) and the departing Honorary Consul Peter Deutschle (r)

During my last school year my father organised a summer job at the local printing firm. The smell of the print shop, the noise of the machines and the "secret" language used in the industry made me sign up to become what was then called a "Jünger Gutenbergs" (disciple of Gutenberg). After a four year apprenticeship as a compositor/typographer, I completed an additional apprenticeship as a photo lithographer. At the same time I also enrolled for a two-year Diploma course in Commerce with AKAD. A brilliant teacher during my apprenticeship always told us to "saddle two horses" in terms of education and this proved to be visionary advice.

With education and the initial military service completed, it was time to see the world. I went to England first to acquire a basic knowledge of English. In September 1972, I left Switzerland with the intention to travel around the world. I travelled overland through Eastern Europe, the Middle East and as far as Nepal. Then onwards through South East Asia and Australia, with New Zealand as the final destination 10 months later. I arrived with 15 dollars in my pocket. I didn't know a soul and there was no job waiting for me. However, within one day, everything fell into place. I had a job that paid \$74.50 a week, I found a flat I shared with a New Zealander and even a family from my hometown in Switzerland, who welcomed me like a lost son. I stayed for two years during which time I learnt Spanish. With that accomplished and some savings, I went to Central and South America, where I travelled for 12 months.

At the end of 1976 I returned to Switzerland. Broke, again, and with no job prospects. This was also the time of the oil crisis, when most companies were working short hours. However, help was at hand by way of my old employer in Auckland. He paid my flight back to New Zealand and engaged me as production manager. Three years later I made the decision to either return back to Switzerland or start my own company. On the 1st of December 1980, I opened the doors of Spectra Graphics, a company that is still operating today.

In 1985, I married my wife Penny who is a nurse by profession. After having done the heavy work of raising four children (Andrew, Oliver, Rosie and Tessa), she is now working again as a nurse in old age care.

SW: How did your appointment as Honorary Consul come about?

At the end of 1992, I had a visit by the then Ambassador Michael von Schenk who came to interview me. A couple of months later, Peter Graf (Deputy Head of Mission) approached me wanting to know if I was prepared to represent Switzerland as Honorary Consul. Naturally, I wanted to know what it involved and what was expected of me. After some serious soul searching and a discussion with my wife, I confirmed that I was prepared to offer my services. My motivation to accept was based on the belief (nurtured already as a young man growing up in a democratic environment) that we all have a civic duty to serve. It was also a thank you for the wonderful

childhood and excellent education I received from my country of birth.

Last but not least, I was also motivated by an event that happened during my trip through South America. I was in Argentina when there was a military coup. Being at the wrong place at the wrong time, I ended up in a prison for three days. It was the Honorary Consul of Germany who got me out of jail. After my release and with no apologies given by the army, I went to visit the Consul to express my gratitude. When I asked him if I owed him anything, his answer was "to pay forward", meaning to help other people in future difficult situations.

At the beginning of 1994, I was appointed Honorary Consul for Switzerland, following in the footsteps of Arthur Müller. I believe there were about four potential candidates considered. How I was chosen I do not know and I guess I will never know. Since then, I have served under five Ambassadors and one Chargé d'Affaires. In a nutshell, it has been a very interesting, fulfilling, thankful and at times difficult role. I have had the privilege to meet many people who have inspired me, strengthened my belief in humanity and also challenged me. I have seen misery and despair amongst compatriots; thankfully only on rare occasions. I have enjoyed meeting many of you and tried to help whenever I could. One of my most enjoyable tasks was to meet up with the retired Swiss living in New Zealand who needed "Lebensbestätigung" (confirmation that they are alive) in order to receive the pension from Switzerland. They all have fascinating stories to tell.

SW: What is involved in the work of an Honorary Consul?

An Honorary Consul is in essence a representative of the Swiss Embassy. Some of the key tasks include:

- Establish and maintain a relationship with local government and Members of Parliament
- Promote Switzerland, its companies and representatives
- Establish and maintain a relationship with Swiss companies that are represented in town
- Maintain contact with the chamber of commerce and business organisations, attend their events and network
- Provide local knowledge and establish connections for visiting representatives of Swiss companies
- Inform the Swiss Embassy about

cultural and business events that may be of interest

- Take part in activities of the Swiss community whenever possible
- Inform the Swiss Embassy about compatriots who live in poverty or are vulnerable
- Look after visiting Swiss nationals in time of need
- Represent Swiss tourism
- Give presentations about Switzerland when requested, e.g. political system, economy, tourism, education (Rotary, Lions, RSA, schools etc.)

SW: What were your highlights and lowlights?

When I look back it is very clear that my highlights are probably those events which involved helping people during difficult times. I had to arrange funerals, dealt with serious accidents requiring liaison with concerned parents who came to visit, undertook multiple visits to jails and psychiatric clinics, and was involved with a number of thefts and a court case.

The worst time I experienced in all my years as Honorary Consul was during the America's Cup in 2004, when Alinghi won the cup. I was abused and threatened on several occasions. My office was illegally entered by television crews.

SW: Do you have any noteworthy anecdotes to share?

There are many, but I just would like to talk about one event which may give a bit on an insight of what an Honorary Consul may get involved in.

A professor from the University of Zurich was invited to give a speech in Christchurch. He arrived early to do a bit of sightseeing and walk the Milford track. On his first day he rented a car and headed North. He parked his car at Ahipara at the bottom of 90 mile beach, changed into his running gear and headed up the beach. On his return, he found the car broken in, with absolutely everything in his possession taken. The police phoned me around 4 pm. Having been briefed, I asked the police to lend the man some money for petrol and food. While he was heading back to Auckland, I liaised with the Embassy in Wellington and tracked down his picture and personal information on the University website. I organised accommodation for the night and a flight to Wellington for the next morning. It was close to

midnight when he arrived at my place. We contacted his office to arrange a money transfer to Wellington and notes for the presentation he was to give in Christchurch after finishing the Milford Track. I dropped him off at the hotel at around 1 am and took him to the airport again at 7 am. In Wellington, he just had enough time to visit the Embassy to organise a replacement passport and some clothing and boots, before flying to Christchurch and driving to Te Anau that same day. His walk was booked for the following morning. There are many other examples, however most of these must remain confidential.

SW: Has the role of the Honorary Consul changed over the years?

The workload of an Honorary Consul has changed over the years, as is to be expected. When I started, the internet was really in its infancy. Communication was more difficult and cumbersome. I used to receive requests by New Zealand business people who needed to get in touch with Swiss companies. For this purpose, I had big books containing addresses and other information. I often acted as a kind of Poste Restante, receiving mail for Swiss tourists travelling through New Zealand. I also received a lot of requests for information and tips regarding immigration to New Zealand.

The internet and cheap phone calls have changed all that. The majority of people are very grateful but there are always some who question me when I tell them that I cannot help them because it is outside my jurisdiction. The response can be: "Well, what do you do then? What are you there for?"

In Closing

It is 25 years since I was appointed as Consul. The time is right to hand over my role to a younger man. Adrian Blaser, whom many of you know, is a great choice. I have every confidence in him that he will perform his duties with great care and commitment.

This leaves me to record my great gratitude to the team at the Embassy – past and present. They are very hard working and committed representatives of the government and the people of Switzerland.

Last but not least, a big thank you goes to my dear wife Penny who has supported me throughout all the years with great patience and encouragement.

Peter Deutschle