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Visit of the
SWISS MINISTER
Monsieur WALTER THURNHEER
 to the
SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY
 on
WEDNESDAY, MAY 15th, 1940.



In these days of feverish excitement, when almost every hour brings forth new developments, which threaten the fundamental principles of our whole civilisation one feels the urge, more than ever, to foregather amongst friends; through personal contact one often gains that fortitude and peace of mind which is so necessary to us all in order to carry on our daily task. It is not a bit of good to keep aloof from everyone, moaning what a dreadful place this world of ours has become; by doing so we only make ourselves, and others miserable. Let us put on a smiling face, even if the heart aches, remember that faint heartedness has never yet conquered or achieved anything.

Last week's gathering, which, I am sure, made a great impression on all those who were present, achieved its success by its simplicity; the Council and Committee of the Swiss Mercantile Society wisely abstained from making the visit of the Swiss Minister a "Gala" affair: it would not have been right to do so, neither do I think Monsieur Thurnheer would have wished it.

In order that the Minister should have an opportunity to meet some of the more important members of the Society personally, a little dinner at Pagani's was arranged which started punctually at 7 o'clock. There were no speeches, it was what one may call a small homely dinner party. The Minister, on his arrival, shook hands with everyone present after having been introduced by the President.

The following were present:

Monsieur W. Preiswerk, Chef de la division spéciale, Swiss Legation, Monsieur A. Girardet, Counsellor of Legation, Monsieur R. Hunziker, Attaché, Monsieur Paul Hilfiker, Vice-Consul, Mr. J. J. Boos, President, Mr. W. Meier, Vice-President, Mr. A. Steinmann, Member of the Council, late President, Honorary Member, Mr. L. W. Krucker, Vice-President, Member of the Council, Mr. A. Stahelin, Member of

the Council, late President, Honorary Member, Mr. P. F. Boehringer, late President, Honorary Member, Mr. A. Stauffer, late President, Honorary Member, Mr. Ch. Chapuis, Member of the Council, Honorary Member, Mr. Louis Chapuis, Veteran, Mr. W. Gamper, Honorary Member, Mr. J. J. Pfaendler, Member of the Council, Honorary Member, Mr. G. Jenne, Member of the Council, Mr. O. Grob, Member of the Council, Mr. P. Mathys, Member of the House Committee, Mr. R. Senn, Member of the General Purposes Committee, Mr. E. Hardmeier, Member of the Council, Mr. J. J. Schneider, Secretary, Mr. M. Heilinger, Member of the General Purposes Committee, Mr. W. Burren, Press Reporter, Mr. W. Gattiker, Veteran, Mr. C. Mayr, Mr. O. Luterbacher, Member.

On the conclusion of the dinner the party adjourned to the Headquarters of the Society at Swiss House, where a large gathering of members awaited the arrival of the Minister, and some of his collaborators.

The journey was made either by car or on foot; not being in the happy position of owning one of these useful vehicles, I wended my way to Fitzroy Square on foot in the company of two friends of mine, one of whom is perhaps — apart from the President, of course — one of the most outstanding personalities in the Society, namely our old and trusted friend Mr. A. C. Stahelin; he must have walked hundreds of times to Fitzroy Square during the last 16 years, and I would have thought that he would know every inch of the way; not a bit of it, much to my surprise and consternation he almost took me into the vicinity of the Zoo (I don't know whether he tried to get rid of me) before we ultimately landed at Swiss House, all hot and bothered.

After a short visit to the various rooms at Swiss House, under the guidance of Mr. J. J. Boos, the monthly meeting started at 8.30. The Agenda was a short one, perhaps the most outstanding item was the

sincere tribute which Mr. Stahelin paid to our President, who has worked incessantly during the last few months to keep the Society going in spite of almost unsurmountable difficulties.

This well deserved address was heartily cheered by everybody present and I hardly could distinguish whether it was the President or his charming wife, who was present, who blushed more.

Mr. J. J. Boos, President, then officially welcomed the Minister on behalf of the Council, Committee and the Members, expressing his thanks and appreciation to him for having honoured the Society by visiting the Headquarters of the S.M.S.

The President said "I wish we could have shown you and our guests, Swiss House as we knew it at its best, when between 200-300 happy young Swiss students were attending our Day-School." — He, at this stage, also extended a hearty welcome to Monsieur W. Preiswerk, Chef de la Division Spéciale, Swiss Legation, Monsieur A. Girardet, Counsellor of Legation, Monsieur R. Hunziker, Attaché and Monsieur P. Hilfiker, Vice-Consul.

"Our relations," Mr. Boos said, "between the Minister and the Legation have always been of the most closest and cordial. We have still to-day as our Honorary President, Monsieur C. R. Paravicini, our late Minister, and as our Honorary President of the Education Committee, Monsieur Henri Martin, Swiss Minister, who both did so much in the building up and furtherance of our College. With gratitude we also remember the happy collaboration of Messieurs de Bourg and Rezzonico, when they were at the Legation in London."

The speaker expressed the hope that the Minister and his collaborators would extend their support in the same generous manner, as their predecessors did, in spite of a necessary curtailment of the main activities of the Society. In order to acquaint the Minister and his collaborators with the work of the S.M.S. he gave a precise resumé, saying:

"The S.K.V., whose largest foreign section we are, is an institution which is undoubtedly known to you all. I would just mention that it embraces 115 branches with a membership of about 45,000; our London Members share in the social welfare activities of the Central Society in regard to old age and Invalidity Insurance, Employment Dept., etc., our relations with Headquarters have been at all times most cordial, only last year the London Section received a signal honour when one of our most prominent members, Mr. A. C. Stahelin, was elected an Honorary Member of the S.K.V.

The London Section was founded in 1888 and until 1921-22 our efforts were mainly centred on social and educational work. The year 1920 showed the peak number of members, but soon the influx of Swiss commercial employees was restricted or almost prohibited and the activities of our Society received a setback. Undaunted by this reverse, the Society with the help of the Swiss Authorities, private donors and guarantors both here and at home raised a fund which enabled a Day-College with about 120 Students to be opened in 1922 in Henrietta Street, moving into Swiss House in December 1926 where both College and Society have found a home ever since. At one time over 300 students attended day classes, the average attendance for 1926-

1931 was well over 200, and some 10,000 young students of both sexes have passed through the various classes during the years from 1922-1939.

The S.M.S. College was soon acknowledged as the best language institution for Swiss in London; no wonder we proudly can record a number of important visitors from our homeland, such as Monsieur G. Motta, and Monsieur Schulthess, both former Presidents of the Swiss Confederation, as well as a large number of influential people in the political, commercial and educational sphere.

Many a past S.M.S. student to-day occupies a position of trust and influence at home and abroad, which is surely a splendid testimony to the efficient teaching which they received through our Society.

The outbreak of the war in September last came as a great shock to us, and consequently we had to face heavy liabilities, and now, more than ever, the Council requires not only the full support from Members and Donors, but also from our Authorities here and at home. Although the S.M.S. is an incorporated Company, according to British Company Law (this was chiefly done to safeguard our members) all Council and Committee Members give their time and services free."

Mr. Boos then spoke of the future, mentioning that the Council and the Committee of the Society are determined to carry on, in spite of heavy odds against them. He mentioned, amongst applause, that the Society will support all patriotic and social functions in the Colony. On the Educational side every effort would be made to live up to the high traditions which were maintained over half a century, the same would apply to the Employment Dept. which was for the last thirty years so ably managed by Mr. Pfaendler.

The President then acquainted the Meeting with the efforts which have been made in subletting the premises at Fitzroy Square, saying that so far they have been unsuccessful. He asked the Minister to support his efforts made to the Swiss Authorities to get a certain relief of the heavy burden which lies on the shoulders of the Society. He concluded his lucid exposé by saying:

"Monsieur le Ministre, I have been somewhat at length to bring our history as well as our difficulties before you. I felt that it is my duty to tell you, as our new chief, of our successes, trials and difficulties, and I feel sure that you will do everything in your power to help us, in view, that the S.M.S. has for years been one of the most active Societies in our Colony; our members have always been loyal citizens, who have faithfully done their duties, and when the call came in September last, rallied enthusiastically round the banner, left their positions and families to do their duty to our beloved homeland.

I can assure you, Monsieur le Ministre, that we shall do our utmost, to help you in your responsible mission. You have come to this country during a most difficult time. May God bless your labour and your work for the benefit of our dear Country and the happy relationship of this Great Empire, where so many of us have found a second home."

Great and long applause greeted the address which was so ably given by the President of the Society.

Mr. Meier, Vice-President of the Society then had a number of pictures thrown on the screen, depicting

various events of interest in the life of the College, and for some fleeting moments everyone forgot the worries with which we are all confronted at the present time, when one saw all the happy and smiling faces of our young compatriots.

The show which was commented upon in a humorous manner by Mr. Meier, was concluded by a film, showing the visit of the Mayor and Lady Mayoress of St. Pancras to the College previous to the outbreak of the war. The arrival at Swiss House of some of the "celebrities" of the Society caused much hilarity and frankly I must confess that when I saw myself mounting the steps at the entrance door I was amazed at the "bulk," I have never before realised what enormous dimensions I have achieved, it was an eye opener to me, and something will have to be done soon.

When the light was switched on again, Mr. Boos mentioned that the Minister would like to say a few words.

Monsieur Thurnheer received a tremendous ovation on rising from his seat. He explained that he would have liked to address the members of the Society on this auspicious occasion in a more lengthy way, but owing to circumstances he would have to confine himself to a few words. He said:

Mr. Boos has just delivered an excellent address explaining briefly the foundation, the history and the aims of the Swiss Mercantile Society in London. He told of all the difficulties until your Society achieved the successful standing you had at the outbreak of this war. I heard with great satisfaction that you wish to continue your work. You are right. Every useful institution in this country should try to go on even if it is on a smaller scale.

By doing so you live up to the spirit of the founders of your Society and you also live up to the spirit of our great educator Pestalozzi. He was never discouraged and just when Switzerland had suffered severely by the war he in his unflinching faith in what was good and right did some of his very best and finest work.

Mr. Chairman, I am for the first time a visitor of your Institute. I thought I might be a little bit of a stranger here but when I look at the list of the Honorary Members published in your last report, I find that I am connected through four of its Honorary Members with your Institute. I worked under two of them, first the Federal Councillor Calonder and second Minister Paravicini while he was in Bern. I learned much from them. The third I know is Minister Martin, we have both gone through the same experience as Consul General in Canada, and finally I find Mr. Gamper who was a cadet when I was First Lieutenant in his corps in Basle.

As Swiss Minister in Japan I worked for the creation of a Chair in Switzerland for Japanese and Chinese languages. Who supported me in this endeavour? The President of the Swiss Mercantile Society in Zurich.

Mr. Chairman, my memory in connection with the Swiss Mercantile Society goes back to my

earliest childhood. My late father was amongst the founders and lifelong friends and supporters of the Kaufmännischer Verein in Baden. I am proud to follow in his footsteps by offering you my support.

I have already been active for it. Some time ago the Legation got into contact with the Home Office with the intention of helping you to carry on and I am very glad to be able to announce to-night that this office has authorised me to inform you that the British Government agree to the re-opening of the Swiss Mercantile School in London, of course on a somewhat smaller scale. The students should not exceed the maximum of one hundred at any one time.

With this good news for which no doubt you all are thankful to the British Government I wish to finish my speech.

The Minister's speech was cheered by all those present.

A little musical interlude then followed in which the soloists were Mr. von Bergen and Mr. Senn.

The Meeting concluded shortly after 10 o'clock with the singing of our National Anthem. —

"To carry on" is the parole of the S.M.S., the Swiss Minister has approved of it, and has encouraged it, it is also the determined will of our people at home to go on with their daily task, whilst an unsatiable War God stretches out his greedy arms crushing all those who dare to stop his march, leaving behind nothing but tears and misery.

A kindly providence has up till now spared our homeland from aggression, but the danger remains. With heavy hearts we look into the future, but also with confidence, with the knowledge that our people will meet the foe from whichever side he comes with courage, and that bravery in the field which through many a hard fought battle has gained us our independence which we mean to keep, and for which we are willing to lay our lives down. May God protect this our land, but if it is willed otherwise, the spirit which inspired our soldiers at St. Jakob an der Birs, Sempach and Morgarten will find its glorious resurrection.

ST.

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