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NOUVELLE SOCIETE HELVETIQUE.

Dr. H. W. Egli's report on the
"Conference of the Swiss Abroad."

A considerable number of members of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique assembled on Tuesday, September 23rd, at the Vienna Café, Baker Street, N.W.1, to hear the report of the President, on the Conference of the Swiss abroad (Auslandschweizertag) which was held in Berne on September 5th—7th, 1947.

We might recall here, that some time ago the Society decided to send a Delegation to the above mentioned Meeting, and in order to give their mission an official character, various Swiss Societies were consulted and the names of two delegates were proposed in the persons of Dr. H. W. Egli, President of the N.S.H., and Mr. A. Renou, a member of the Council, to which, later on a 3rd member was added, namely Mr. A. F. Suter, a former President of the N.S.H.

These Gentlemen met with the approval of the Colony, and they were instructed to put before the Meeting in Berne the wishes of the Swiss in Great Britain. No concrete proposals were made, and it was left to the Delegation to explain and enlarge on the various subjects which were to be mentioned.

We are glad to say that the London Delegation very ably expounded the wishes of the Colony and they received a fair and sympathetic hearing.

If some of the wishes expressed on behalf of the Colony did not find an immediate acceptance by the Federal Authorities, it is certainly not the fault of our delegates.

They have returned from the Conference with the assurance that the questions mentioned will be carefully studied from all angles, and it rests with the Swiss in Great Britain to see that these will not be put on the shelf.

Dr. H. W. Egli, speaking on the Conference, said :

"The first Journée des Suisses à l'étranger I had the honour to attend as President of the London group of the N.S.H. and representative of the London Colony impressed me very much, more by the possibilities that such gatherings open up than by the actual use made of them this year. There were about 200 delegates from all over the world and something like another 100—150 representatives of the Swiss authorities and the various organisations interested in the fate of the Swiss abroad. It was quite obvious that much importance is attached to these conferences by the authorities and the public in Switzerland, the latter being informed very extensively about the proceedings through the newspapers, most of whom were represented. These Journées are the opportunity for the Swiss Colonies abroad to voice their grievances, wishes, opinions and suggestions about any question and all questions that interest them. The Journées have quite rightly been likened to the "Question Hour" in Parliament where every question of interest can be raised and must be answered by the responsible authorities. In fact it was a little too much like that institution in the British Parliament, because as in "Question Hour" there was no possibility of actual discussion following, the answers given by the Government speakers. It is to be hoped that this criticism may be heeded by the organisers of the next Journée who should reserve much more time for discussing the official answers to the questions raised.

The conference lasted only three half-days, two of which were devoted to the special problems of the *Swiss Colonies in Germany, France and Italy*. This left only one half-day for the more generally interesting questions raised by our delegation and some of the other Colonies. We are not complaining about the time devoted to the special problems of these Colonies. No doubt they are exceedingly important questions to them and it was right and proper that they could raise them at the Journée. The question of *compensation for the losses suffered due to war damage* in these countries played a particularly important rôle at the conference. The speech of Federal Councillor Petitpierre consequently concerned itself mainly with this question. It is to be hoped that his very full statement will put an end to these endless discussions on a theme which has engendered much bitterness. In short M. Petitpierre declared that the Swiss abroad had no legal claim whatever against the Federal Government or the Homeland for compensation for war damage suffered abroad. The best that could be achieved is equal treatment along with the nationals of the countries concerned. The Swiss Parliament had voted a credit of Fr. 75,000,000 for voluntary assistance to repatriated Swiss in helping them over their difficulties and assisting them in restarting businesses of their own. Beyond this assistance Switzerland could not go. This firm reply was addressed in particular to a rather bellicose organisation of repatriated Swiss from Germany parading under the very un-Swiss name of "Kampfverband Schweizerischer Auslandgläubiger." Many representatives from other Colonies felt that the questions of particular interest to the repatriated Swiss, particularly those returned from Germany, should be treated separately from those of the Swiss abroad. Such a separation would offer the great advantage of leaving more time for the discussion of questions of more general interest.

One question raised by the Colonies in the countries next to Switzerland might attain some equally urgent interest for our Colony: that of *financial exchange facilities*. In view of the ban on travelling abroad reimposed in this country it is to be hoped that the possibility of enabling our compatriots to visit their Homeland from this country will not be overlooked in any arrangements made by our authorities in this field. We record with some interest that the Swiss Colony in Italy demanded rather forcefully to be consulted in trade negotiations and regarding the appointment of Consuls. Such consultation is already practised in our Colony through the Council for the Study of Swiss Problems, so far as this seems useful.

In the general discussion a number of questions of great importance or interest to our Colony were raised. Very full answers and explanations were given by the most competent Government spokesmen who welcomed the opportunity of contact with the Colonies. Dr. Jezler, Chief of the Police Division in the Department of Justice, gave a full account of the

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motives and intentions regarding the revision of the law of citizenship concerning *dual nationality*. A draft-bill is being prepared on the basis of an expert's report. It will be up to us, the Swiss abroad, to scrutinize the bill when available and to make our views and wishes known in Berne. This would be welcomed by the Government and if it is done in good time our views expressed will no doubt receive the fullest consideration. Our plea for a considerate treatment of the question has been received with much sympathy. Our impression is reassuring that no very drastic change of the law is intended that might entail great injustice to some of us.

Our plea, advanced on the basis of the discussions held at the Open Meetings of the N.S.H., for a *modernisation of the practice of the military tax* has also been received with understanding. A change of the law and regulations regarding military tax is contemplated and here again the Federal Authorities will be only too pleased to take full account of the views of our Colonies, provided they are voiced in good time when the draft bills become available. The same may be said regarding the *Old Age Insurance* in which the Swiss abroad may also participate. This new Insurance Law has been worked out with insufficient consultation with the Swiss abroad, although their interests are directly affected. Not only is every Swiss abroad entitled to participate in the Insurance scheme, but those working for employers in Switzerland and remunerated by them are obliged to participate. Much interest attaches, therefore, to the orders and regulations to be issued for the practical application of the Insurance Scheme. We have put forward a determined request to be consulted in this matter, a request to which the authorities will no doubt accede.

I had the honour to plead not only in the name of the London Colony but also the large Swiss Colony in France for some *share in the political life of the Homeland* being granted to the Swiss abroad. This share might take the form of participating in all votes regarding Federal Laws or it might even extend to the election of our own National and State Councillors. I put these suggestions forward not so much in the form of demands but rather as a request for consideration. The main justification for this request lay in the

fact that by giving us some active share in Swiss politics our interest for the Homeland and our occupation with Swiss problems be kept more actively alive than by any other means. Our suggestions were received with much interest and understanding. The Federal Chancellor himself, Dr. Leimgruber, gave a very sympathetic reply in the form of a survey of the constitutional position as it exists. We hope at a later date to present a fuller report on Dr. Leimgruber's statement. We have felt encouraged to pursue this matter further as occasion arises.

By far the most important of the special problems of the Swiss Colonies, the *maintenance of "a spiritual bridge"* between the Homeland and the Colonies, also received a fairly wide discussion. The "Secrétariat des Suisses à l'Etranger" and various other organisations in Switzerland do a lot in this field, about which far too little is known in our Colony. They are anxious and have the means to do much more if only they receive proper encouragement and active help from the Colonies in the shape of positive suggestions and requests of a practical nature. The renewal of arrangements for *holidays for the children* is assured. They can be received in an Alpine children's home for eight weeks, everything paid from the Swiss frontier. A proposal I put forward to establish a *permanent boarding school* for English-speaking children in Switzerland, where the same curriculum as here would be followed under English teachers, supplemented only by special courses on Swiss themes, aroused great interest. One gentleman who has travelled extensively among the Swiss in South- and North-America assured me that a scheme like that would have a tremendous

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appeal to Swiss parents in both these Continents. The same should, of course, apply to the entire British Empire. I have undertaken to elaborate this idea more fully for the consideration of the organisations and circles concerned, which I hope to do in contact with parents of all classes and also with other Swiss Colonies.

I was happy to inform the Conference that *a book about Switzerland written specially for the age-group of 12-14 in English*, the work of a prominent lady of our Colony, Mrs. Meier, would shortly be published in London. Such books, I suggested, should be available for all age-groups in English and Spanish as well as the national languages, and distributed free of charge to the children of our colonies. Certain other books about our country have been published in Spanish, but not in English. I pleaded for this omission to be made good as soon as possible. A scheme of training special *itinerant teachers* to teach children of our colonies in one place after another is in process of realisation. I suggested, however, that this would hardly be of effective use in a Colony like ours where distances are too great to bring enough children together for such courses. Instead, I considered it more useful to send out first-class lecturers capable of talking interestingly in English about Swiss problems and Switzerland to adult audiences, with a view to provide foreign-born wives and grown-up children with the best possible introduction to their far-off homeland, while at the same time giving all of us an opportunity to refresh our fading memories. This plea, I feel, will not remain unheard.

Generally speaking, we have come away from the

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Conference with an encouraging impression. There is every good will in Switzerland towards our Colonies, *every desire to consider our problems*, to meet our needs. There is more than merely good will. There are various organisations and funds for this very purpose. If not enough use is made of them or the wrong use, we have only ourselves to blame. We must make our views and needs known at the proper place and in good time, and we must if possible speak unitedly for the Colony and in co-ordination with other Colonies. At home they are waiting for a clear lead, in the Colonies a clear lead would be welcomed. Perhaps the London Colony is called upon to provide this lead through the initiative of the oldest N.S.H.-group abroad and with the support from the other societies who have endorsed the choice of delegates to the Conference. We will try.

Although the opportunities to speak were so limited, Mr. A. Renou, my fellow-delegate for the Colony found the right moment to remind the Conference that the material problems raised by certain elements were not the only ones of interest to us; that the Swiss abroad are not some kind of poor relations but proud and useful members of the family; that we wish to give as much as we may be given. His lively intervention in an otherwise dull debate produced by far the biggest applause. A big honour was bestowed on Mr. A. F. Suter, my predecessor as President of the N.S.H., and through him on our Colony by being invited to speak on behalf of all Swiss Colonies at the Murten-Memorial. He did so most successfully, voicing our ever living pride in being Swiss, our love and devotion to the homeland, our gratitude to those who have helped Switzerland through two world-catastrophes."

Loud applause greeted the speaker on the conclusion of his *exposé*.

Mr. F. E. C. Ferraris, on behalf of the members present, thanked the delegation and particularly Dr. H. W. Egli for the way in which they had fulfilled their mission.

Before the Meeting ended, Mr. A. Tall showed two fine films taken in Switzerland, and which were much enjoyed.

Close of the Meeting, 10 o'clock.