

Conference of the Swiss abroad

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CONFERENCE OF THE SWISS ABROAD.**Interlaken, 24-26 June, 1948.**


This year's *Journée des Suisses à l'étranger* was anticipated by two months in order to enable the participants to share in the official celebration of the Centenary of our Constitution and to attend the *Fête Fédérale de chant* and other festivities, all coinciding at the end of June. This had the disadvantage that family men could not work the *Journée* in with their holidays, the children's vacation generally starting one month later. However, those who were privileged to attend the *Journée* and the various festivities do not regret it. The Conference itself proved of great interest and value, and the subsequent festivities were a unique experience for all. First we had the pleasure of hearing Swiss tunes, songs and yodels in the style of the American-Swiss from Ohio. The addition of just that much of American drive and swing to our homely tunes was enjoyed as much by the Swiss from Switzerland as by the Swiss from abroad. We could only wish that next time happy compatriots from Ohio may find time and inclination to perform also in London. On Saturday afternoon we attended the season's first performance of Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* in the open air theatre at Interlaken. The very clumsiness of the amateur performers gave Schiller's rendering of our national drama a more intensely Swiss flavour, moving many spectators from all corners of the earth to tears.

On Sunday afternoon we witnessed a beautifully arranged procession of costumes from all Cantons, passing in historic succession according to the entry into the Confederation. Later on the same day we attended the second official Centenary celebration with Federal Councillors and Bernese magistrates making patriotic speeches, interspersed by massed choir songs. Finally in the evening we witnessed a performance of "*Jahr der Besinnung*", a symbolic play specially written for the occasion with a message so appropriate to our time: a warning to be contented with hard work and clean living, and to remain united!

The Conference of the Swiss Abroad can be said to have been held under this very sign of fraternal unity. The delegation from Great Britain was in a position, once again, as last year, to play a leading part aiming at furthering the sense of unity among all Swiss, those abroad and at home. It was a good omen for us that this year for the first time since long ago we succeeded to mobilise a really representative and comprehensive selection of delegates from our entire colony. The N.S.H. had sent, apart from its President Dr. H. W. Egli, the hon. Vice-President Mr. A. F. Suter and Madame Suter, Mr. and Mrs. G. J. Keller and Mr. and Mrs. C. Chessex. The City Swiss Club nominated Mr. H. Pfirter and Mr. G. Keller, who was thus at Interlaken for the two societies. The Swiss Mercantile Society sent Mr. and Mrs. G. Jenne, the *Unione Ticinese* Mr. J. Eusebio, the Swiss Club Birmingham its president Mr. and Mrs. O. Wüest, the Swiss Club Leeds its hon. secretary Mr. A. Hagenbach and Vice-Consul Mr. J. Huber was there in an official capacity as well as on behalf of the Swiss Club Manchester. Bradford also had nominated a representative who however was prevented from attending.

Having prepared ourselves for the Conference by a *Journée des Suisses en Angleterre* and by the drafting of a definite proposal to unite all Swiss colonies in one

comprehensive organisation, we were bound to be listened to with interest. A German translation of our draft resolution together with the reasons had been circulated to the members of the Commission for the Swiss Abroad and discussed by them the previous day. The President of the Conference Dr. H. P. Zschokke, who is President also of the whole "*Auslandschweizerwerk*" of the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique*, conveyed to the meeting the readiness of the Commission to study the proposals with all sympathy from the point of view of their realisation. Dr. Egli's plea for the formation of a comprehensive Organisation of the Swiss abroad met with the warmest interest on the part of the delegations from other colonies. Assurances were given that more detailed proposals to be worked out by ourselves in the course of the winter would receive ready attention and probably wholehearted support. Thus it is up to us to complete the task undertaken here with the support of practically all Swiss societies. Detailed proposals in the form of a draft constitution will be elaborated and submitted first to the *Secrétariat des Suisses à l'étranger* and then by circular to all Swiss colonies, in time, it is hoped, for enabling the next *Journée* to accept and constitute the new Organisation, which will represent the completion of the "*Auslandschweizerwerk*" by adding to the existing organisation at home the necessary counterpart formed by the Swiss abroad.




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It was our delegation again that pleaded most urgently for an extension of the whole work for the Swiss Abroad, stressing its importance from the point of view of enabling all of us to be better ambassadors of our country by giving us continuously the most up-to-date information on Switzerland and Switzerland's problems, by the written and the spoken word and by the universal language of the animated film. Much was done already, for which we have every reason to be grateful, but much more could and should be done by way of providing films, lecturers, concerts, etc. This plea was received with much attention by the authorities in question, the more so as our delegation also pleaded for financial contributions being made also by the colonies towards the costs, possibly on the basis of the Manchester proposal for a Centenary Fund.

We were gratified to hear an account of the progress made to-date regarding our last year's request for some political rights of the Swiss abroad. The idea has met with understanding, as has already been reported in the Swiss Observer. The National Council has invited the Government to study the question of allowing us to vote in federal matters at least on the occasions when we are in Switzerland, with a view to legislation. This invitation had the form of a "motion" which will attain obligatory effect when the States Council also agrees to it. This may be expected confidently. Thus it seems possible that the first positive fruit of our initiative of last year may be gathered in already within a year or two. So far we have made record time with our proposal, as we were assured at Interlaken. This is most encouraging.

Also the hoary question of the military tax is progressing. Our plea to abolish the tax on expectations is acted upon in the proposals of the Government for reforming the military tax. We pressed further for the modernisation of the tax with suitable exemptions for family responsibilities according to modern practice of the income taxation. This also may be considered seriously, but unfortunately there is a definite intention to double the rate of taxation, from 1.5 to 3 per cent. This is justified by the very high debt incurred for the defence of Switzerland during the war.

Dr. Zschokke, voiced the considered opinion of most members of the "Auslandschweizerwerk" that the military tax should be abolished for the Swiss abroad as it does more harm than it brings in cash. We received an assurance that we will be duly consulted when legislation is under way. It will be for us, for

the new Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, to take up the question and give expression to our united opinion in this matter.

The question of reimbursement for the tax deducted at source on dividends and interest on securities held in Switzerland is receiving much attention by the authorities at the behest of the "Auslandschweizerwerk". In principle the Government declines the suggestion of reimbursing the Swiss abroad. But the possibility of deduction from the military tax is being studied sympathetically. Relief also has been given to Swiss in Sweden by the conclusion of an agreement on double taxation. Similar negotiations with America are intended. We hope that the case of England may also receive early attention.

A careful *exposé* was given on the Old Age and Dependants Assurance in Switzerland insofar as it is applicable to the Swiss abroad. Having been consulted beforehand, the colonies are treated most handsomely in the special rules recently issued. A claim for old age pensions in hard Swiss francs can be established by any of us joining voluntarily. So long as transfer into francs is not possible the premiums due can be accumulated as a debt to be deducted from the insurance claims! This munificence sounds almost like a fairy tale, but it is true. The whole scheme is of such vital interest to all Swiss abroad, especially those in countries with less than hard currencies, that the facts should be made known by all means to all concerned.

The high light of the Conference was, of course, provided by Monsieur M. Petitpierre, Head of our Political Department. His excellent speech has already been published in full in the Swiss Observer. But the main points he raised might be usefully reiterated. M. Petitpierre credits the Swiss abroad with three main tasks: to retain the outstanding Swiss qualities of integrity, a sense of responsibility and hard work; to explain Switzerland to other countries, and to advise and teach Switzerland to understand other countries. As a token of his high esteem for the Swiss abroad, M. Petitpierre has appointed Consul Arnold Wenner, as liaison officer at Berne, to help the Swiss abroad in their contacts with Federal authorities and other Swiss institutions. His address is: Bureau für Auslandschweizer, Politisches Departement, Bern. We have spoken to him at length. We feel sure that this experiment will prove highly successful. Thank you, Monsieur Petitpierre, for your imaginative initiative.

Helveticus.

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