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THOUGHTS ON THE FORTIETH BIRTHDAY OF THE "SWISS OBSERVER"

By Dr. A. LATT, ZURICH

Life was easy and pleasant for the Swiss living in England during the Victorian Age and its brilliant afterglow, the Edwardian Period. There was work for all who came over in the traditional occupations as valets and nurses, waiters and cooks, hotel porters, secretaries, and managers. Others prospered equally well as watchmakers, traders, mechanics, bank clerks, and foreign correspondents, teachers, and artists. They were generally liked as reliable and competent workers, and proverbially thrifty, honest and persevering.

Political England had given Switzerland numerous tangible proofs of friendship. At the beginning of the 19th century she had helped us to shake off French domination, as she again protected us against foreign interference during the War of the Sonderbund and the Neuchâtel Affair. English writers had long been enthusiastic about the heroic little country: Wordsworth, Scott, Byron, Shelley, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, and scores of contributors to the "Alpine Journal", Leslie Stephen in his "Playground of Europe", Harold Spender in his "Praise of Switzerland" and James Bryce in his "Modern Democracies".

The First World War changed all this most tragically. A large and influential section of the British press in fulfilment of its patriotic duty of giving loyal support to the National War effort, and being watchful against treacherous enemies, took up a strongly anti-alien attitude. It was well fed with stories of spies and traitors, names and models for whom the writers found it convenient to borrow from the neutrals (a race of "war-profiteers who will not fight, whilst our heroes are shedding their blood in defence of freedom"). Many of the worst "heroes" of this sort of fiction being labelled as Swiss, many a man in the street began to doubt the loyalty of the Swiss who were so numerous in English hotels. The German Swiss in particular were suspected of being able to serve as spies for the Kaiser. The changing tone and attitude of the British press filled with alarm the Swiss Colony in England and the Swiss people and their authorities at home. When the tension was at its worst, in summer 1916, one of the founders of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique (1914), Professor George Bonnard, of Lausanne, gave a lecture in London on

the aims and purposes of the new patriotic society which had done splendid work in removing misunderstandings between the Swiss of various linguistic regions. Never had "the Swiss Point of View" been more forcibly expressed than by that former Ausland-schweizer from Russia, Carl Spitteler, the poet. He seemed to speak out what every Swiss in England felt, too. And more than 260 present at Prof. Bonnard's lecture decided at once to join the N.S.H. and constitute the London Group. Its main purpose was to strengthen the ties of national brotherhood inside the Swiss Colony, and to re-establish the old Anglo-Swiss friendship, by means of better mutual information of the press in both countries. This second purpose had been particularly stressed by Mr. Jean Baer, who was at once elected President of the N.S.H. London Group. Mr. César Compart, of the "Secours Mutuels", became Hon. Secretary, and Mr. H. Joss, of the "Swiss Institute", was appointed as Treasurer.

On 1st April 1917 I took up my work at 28 Red Lion Square, as the N.S.H. "Permanent Secretary". The Colony wanted first of all reliable information about things at home. That meant lectures and discussions once or twice a month. The Central Committee at home, on the other hand, wanted me to give first preference to the journalistic side of my mission, to write or translate articles for the English press in defence of Switzerland, on her neutrality, the work of the Geneva Red Cross Committee, the British interned, etc. Provided with excellent introductions from Lord Bryce, Lord Burnham, Mr. J. A. Spender, Mr. C. P. Scott, Mr. John Buchan (later Lord Tweedsmuir) we soon won back the old friendships, just at the moment when the certainty of final victory appeared on the horizon, when America joined the Allies. The good work done by the London Group was highly praised by the Legation (Minister Carlin and Counsellor of Legation Chs. Paravicini) and recommended by the Central Committee of the N.S.H. as an example to other colonies. Five new groups were founded by us in Great Britain, others in France, Italy, Egypt, and South America.

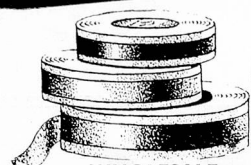
When peace was made and communications became free and normal again many members of the London Group found the main task had been accomplished. Several of the societies which had all been represented



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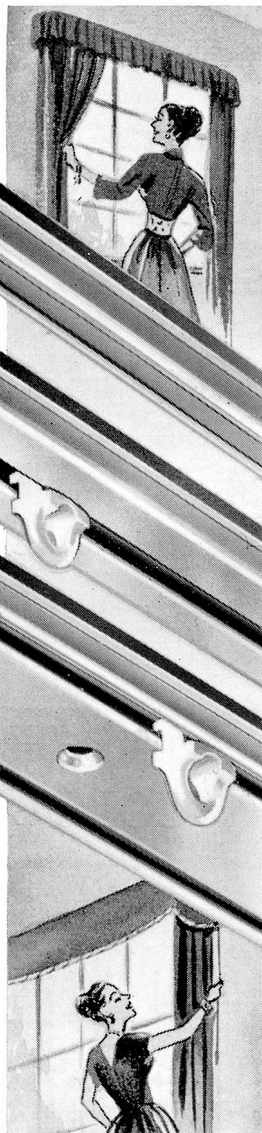
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on the Council of the Group, withdrew in order to regain full liberty of action. The faithful ones asked themselves how they could best secure the advantages won in the years of stress and render new services to the Swiss abroad. Quite a number of new ventures were tried out in 1919. The Central Committee established its own Press Service at Berne, its own Secrétariat des Suisses à l'étranger et Geneva, with M. Robert de Traz as its first Secretary. Eugène Monod of the Vevey Group founded the "ECHO SUISSE" as the central review of all the groups abroad. The Swiss Samples Fair at Basle instituted the annual "Journée des Suisses de l'étranger", and economic commissions and chambers of commerce were founded in various colonies (including London).

It was then that a few influential members of the N.S.H. and of the City Swiss Club gathered round Mr. Boehringer of the Frederick Printing Company and launched the project of a new paper for the whole Swiss Colony in England, since Mr. Scheidegger's very small "Grütli" had never been able to win sufficient influence and financial backing. All this Mr. Boehringer could provide. When he asked me to become the first editor of the "Swiss Observer" I gladly agreed to do the work for nothing, since it was in the line of my contract with the N.S.H. Almost at the same time I was asked by Consul Cameron at Basle to become London Editor of the "Anglo-Swiss Review", the official organ of the British Chamber of Commerce in Switzerland. In accepting the new job I had, of course, to give up the S.O. I could do so with a good conscience, since my committee and all the early supporters and collaborators were agreed that the new editor proposed by Mr. Boehringer — our friend Mr. A. Stauffer — was just the right man in the right place and at the right moment. From the first day he impressed the paper with his own characteristic personality, and for thirty years he has now been the watchful observer, the gentle critic and the untiring promoter of the manifold deserving activities of our Swiss Community in Great Britain. It was certainly not an easy job to attend thousands of social gatherings, interviews, receptions, parties, festivals, and — alas! — hundreds of leave-takings and burials, and to find the suitable words in all circumstances. As one who still reads the S.O. as carefully as the N.Z.Z., I want to thank Mr. Stauffer on this happy day of remembrance for keeping us so well informed that those who have been back home 20 or 30 years can feel in close touch with the other readers, old and young, as if we were still members of the London Swiss Colony. When I last met him, Mr. Stauffer confessed that at times he had been thinking of retiring at an early date in order to enjoy a more quiet life. I told him that would all be wrong, and that I was sure all his friends and readers would protest. Not only that. I feel sure he himself would soon regret such a step. It would be like deserting what has been the very purpose of his life. He must not give it up, in spite of its daily packet of worries. We all would be very sorry to miss his friendly comments. I feel sure I am speaking in the name of practically all his friends and readers when I say: "Thank you, Mr. Stauffer, for all you have given us in these 30 years. Like Oliver Twist we all 'ask for more' — for another ten years — since we all would like to be spared so long and be able to come to celebrate with you the Golden Jubilee of the 'Swiss Observer' and its faithful Editor. Three cheers for him!"