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THE ACTIVITIES OF THE WELFARE OFFICE FOR SWISS GIRLS IN 1960

by

MARIANN MEIER

At the beginning of 1960 the Welfare Office celebrated the first decade of its existence. There had been years of difficult and uphill work. Alarm had been felt for some time at the growing numbers of badly prepared and ill-equipped girls who came to grief during their stay in England. In the autumn of 1959 the President of the Welfare Office was asked by the Committee to write a detailed report for the press in Switzerland, informing girls and their parents about conditions in domestic and "au pair" employment in this country and warning them of the many dangers of life in a strange country.

This report was widely publicized in Switzerland, and it may be due to this publicity that the number of young Swiss girls coming to England as domestic employees dropped considerably in 1960. Domestic agencies complained that they had fewer girls for placing into families, the College of the Swiss Mercantile Society in London and other language schools had record attendances, and the Swiss Hostel for Girls in London showed a change in favour of long-term student residents. The number of requests for domestic help made to us by would-be employers in this country went up considerably and amounted to several telephone calls every day and dozens of applications by letter. On the other hand, it is quite possible that it has become more widely known in Switzerland that domestic employment in England is not what it used to be. But whatever the reason, there is a definite trend to visit language schools rather than to take up domestic work.

The picture we get from the Welfare Office statistics keeps well in line with this. Registrations went down to just under 1,400 and individual cases to 900, both representing a drop of a good 15% from the previous year. About one-eighth of the cases concerned girls and women known to us in previous years.

We should like to stress that our figures include girls and women who come to us for information and advice, and that it would be erroneous to think that every individual who applies to us is in serious trouble.

We refrain once more from giving detailed figures as regards place of origin, denomination and language. Our information is often only fragmentary and detailed figures would be misleading. According to our records, 78% of the registered girls and women came from the German- and 18% from the French-speaking part (the former a slight increase, the latter a small drop), 1% from the Romansh- and Italian-speaking regions, as well as 3% from other countries.

Related to the Cantons we get the following picture. As in previous years, the Canton of Berne was leading with 20% (18% last year) of the total registrations where the Canton is known at all. Again Zürich came second with 15%. Lucerne moved up to third place with 10%, followed by St. Gall with 8% and Aargau and Basle with 7% each. Next came Thurgau, Vaud and Geneva with 3½% each, Vaud and Geneva being the leading Cantons

from the French-speaking part. Fribourg remained in tenth place with 3%, followed by Appenzell, Glarus and Solothurn with 2½% each. Grisons, Valais and Schwyz had 2% each. Neuchâtel dropped to 1¾%, Unterwalden and Schaffhausen accounted for 1% each, and Tessin, Zug and Uri (the last as last year) brought up the rear with ¾% each.

As regards denominations, the picture remained the same as in 1959, viz., just over half the applicants were Protestant and just under half Roman Catholic, with only a few others.

In 1960 we assisted just over 50 girls and women with their return to Switzerland. Some were cases where the Home Office gave us a time limit, and we were then responsible for the girl's departure by that date. Though the 1959 figures dropped by a third, more of the repatriated girls were unmarried expectant mothers, in fact over half the total number. The others included physically or mentally sick girls and a few married women (some with children).

We cared for 8 mental and 10 hospital cases and have to report one fatal suicide attempt, one death and one still-born baby.

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As regards illegitimate babies, we have to record 29, a slight increase over last year. Most of these were born in Switzerland, as the Home Office only rarely grant permission to give birth here, even if the putative father is English. The youngest of these mothers was not quite 17, one of several who came to this country when already pregnant. We are grateful to the Welfare Organisations in Switzerland which provided suitable places where these young mothers could stay before and after the confinement. Very often the girl did not want her parents to know, but in most cases we were able to convince her that it would be in her and the child's interests if they knew, and facts usually justified this theory.

In addition to the expectant mothers, we had to deal with half a dozen babies born here. About half the children known to us, born either in Switzerland or in this country, have coloured fathers. In 1960 we looked after 53 resident cases, married and unmarried, who between them have over 50 children.

The problem of paternity continued to be a grave one. In the saddest cases the girls did not even know who the father was. Sometimes they were sure of his identity but had no way of getting in touch with him. Occasionally, a girl would not have anything to do with the father, and these mothers were perhaps the most courageous ones, preferring a difficult life on their own to an almost certain unhappy marriage. Seldom did the putative father acknowledge paternity. The law in this country is such that if mother and child are abroad, it is almost impossible to make the father accept responsibility. In 1960 we dealt with nearly a dozen paternity cases, and where we were

successful, the success was only short-lived, except in one case. We had to do with a dozen girls who got otherwise involved with men, and we were asked to make several enquiries regarding future husbands. We witnessed 3 marriages (two contracted for the sake of the baby). We assisted in two particularly complicated divorce cases, each of which occupied us for several weeks.

Fortunately *Court and Police* cases declined again (from 26 to 16). Seven of our girls were in prison, six for infringing aliens regulations, one accused of smuggling. Our *home and hospital visits* (including prison) amounted to 120. Though this figure is down over last year, it must be considered as quite remarkable in view of the acute shortage of staff. The time spent travelling was, as previously, quite considerable. For a few weeks we had a car available, which was a great help with our long-distance travels.

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About 120 girls approached us because of *difficulties in their jobs*, sometimes due to their own unsuitability as domestic help or even their unwillingness to work, but more often caused by too heavy demands on their time and energy. When a change of employment seemed indicated, we usually referred the girl to Miss R. Hengstler at the Anglo-Swiss Employment Bureau in London, with whom we kept the same friendly relations as before. It should be mentioned here that not all the difficulties we were asked to solve occurred in domestic or "au pair" jobs — we were approached by a number of nurses, commercial employees and hairdressers.

We received 270 various *requests for information*, a large proportion of which came from Switzerland. In spite of wide-spread publicity to the contrary, we were still looked upon as a domestic agency. Any enquiries for jobs coming from Switzerland we passed on to the employment agencies of the "Freundinnen Junger Mädchen" and the "Katholischer Mädchenschutzverein".

We also undertook over 60 *domestic post enquiries*, most of them with the assistance of the "British Vigilance Association".

Once again a number of requests for *meeting girls on arrival* had to be declined because of too short notice. Many were passed on to the "International Travellers' Aid Association". Because of lack of office staff, we could meet only about two dozen girls ourselves, though about 170 in all were met at railway stations and air terminals. This figure is down over last year (250), but there was a marked increase in girls arriving by charter flights, a practice we do not encourage, as arrangements on arrival of the girls are frequently unsatisfactory. We have no record of the number of girls arriving by charter plane who were refused permission to land at airports. But the charter flights may account for the smaller number of girls sent back by the immigration authorities at Folkestone, where Mrs. M. H. Ellis once again took care of girls who were refused landing on arrival at the coast. Thanks to the efforts made by Mrs. Ellis, assisted by the Embassy, arrangements are now much more satisfactory both at Calais and Boulogne, where girls sent back were often left stranded for lack of money. We are greatly indebted to Mrs. Ellis for her work.

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The most serious problem in 1960 was *staff*. We finished 1959 with no successor in view to Miss Beerli, the former Welfare Secretary. On 31st January, both Welfare

Secretary and student trainee left, and the office was faced with complete closing down. Fortunately, the President put her time at the disposal of the organisation and volunteered to run the office for the time being. The Committee gratefully accepted her offer. Miss H. Sieber, from Zürich, started as student trainee towards the middle of February, and she has shown herself a very able and competent assistant whose excellent knowledge of London and the English language are a great asset in our work. Unfortunately, the few applications received from trained welfare workers proved unsuitable, mainly on account of our inability to pay the high salaries demanded. I, therefore, had to remain in charge of administration for the whole year, and during Miss Sieber's holidays again ran the office single-handed. We were able to call upon a few occasional helpers, and for two months we enjoyed the services of Miss R. Kistler, a capable welfare secretary who worked with us as student trainee. The Committee is grateful to the staff and the ladies who gave their services so unstintingly in the interests of our compatriots.

It was provident that numbers went down in 1960, but even so there would have been enough work for two full-time employees, as at times it was difficult to cope adequately with the work. When I took over, the administration was reorganised, and for the first time in the history of the Welfare Office, regular office hours for the staff were kept, and any overtime and duties at unusual hours were immediately compensated by extra free time, as is customary for welfare workers in Switzerland.

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As in previous years, the Welfare Office received *valuable help* from the Swiss Ambassador and Madame Daeniker, our Honorary President. The Committee appreciates their continued support and would also like to express thanks to other members of the diplomatic and consular departments of the Embassy for their assistance. At the instigation of the President, a meeting was held at the beginning of the year at which the Ambassador and some of his collaborators discussed problems of the Welfare Office with the President, the then Honorary Treasurer Mr. Zimmermann, and the retiring Welfare Secretary. The discussion was most helpful and cleared the air. It was agreed that some duties concerning legal and educational matters, which had been carried out by the Welfare Office previously but which were considered outside their scope, should be passed on to the Embassy. The Welfare Office appreciates the readiness with which the Ambassador agreed not only to having such a meeting, but also to a better-defined distribution of duties. The collaboration between Embassy and Welfare Office was thus put on an even more satisfactory footing. New and closer contacts were established with the Consulate in Manchester which were found to be very valuable.



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