

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1962)

Heft: 1417

Artikel: The swiss abroad meet at Sion

Autor: [s.n.]

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-693208>

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The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER.

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Advisory Council: R. J. KELLER (Chairman), GOTTFRIED KELLER (Vice-Chairman), DR. E. M. BIRCHER, O. F. BOEHRINGER, J. EUSEBIO, A. KUNZ, A. STAUFFER, G. E. SUTER.

EDITED BY MRS. MARIANN MEIER WITH THE CO-OPERATION OF MEMBERS OF THE SWISS COLONY IN GREAT BRITAIN.

Telephone: CLERKENWELL 2321/2.

Published Twice Monthly at 23, LEONARD STREET, E.C.2.

Telegrams: FREPRINCO, LONDON.

Vol. 48. No. 1417

FRIDAY, 21st SEPTEMBER 1962

THE SWISS ABROAD MEET AT SION

I arrived at Sion, the proud capital of the Valais, early on a hot Friday Morning in August, sunstarved and a little fatigued. I left three days later, brimfull of sunshine and invigorated. It was not only the excellent weather, the generous hospitality, the mellow wines and gorgeous fruit — it was above all the stimulus that I received from the conference I was privileged to attend.

Fellow-countrymen from many parts of the world, some 450 of them, from as far apart as Greece and the Congo, Spain and USA, Egypt and Chile, met in the ancient town of La Valère and Le Tourbillon to hold their annual Assembly from 24th to 26th August 1962.

It has been said that this Assembly of the Swiss abroad was their parliament. That is not correct. The Organisation of the Swiss Abroad of the New Helvetic Society (ASO) has a membership of over 300 clubs and societies. The ASO is a private organisation, but very much in conformity with the Confederation. It is the voice of the Swiss abroad inside Switzerland. It is neutral, and this freedom is desirable as it prevents interference by the state and is less likely to be pulled into any one political direction.

The ASO is run by the ASK (Commission of the Swiss abroad) which is made up of representatives of the groups abroad and of members of the NHG (New Helvetic Society) in Switzerland. The annual meeting of the ASO is the Assembly, but the real parliament is the ASK, the Commission, which meets at least twice a year. It is the ASK which takes decisions and is consulted by authorities in Switzerland in questions concerning the Swiss abroad. Its Council looks after our interests, together with the permanent Secretariat (ASS) in Berne.

The groups abroad comprise all recognised Swiss organisations which are prepared to work in the ASO, are genuinely Swiss in character and accept the principles of the NHG. The recognised groups of a country elect their representatives at a presidents' meeting or similar gathering. The ASK decides how many members each country should have. At the moment, there are 15 members in Switzerland (representing the NHG and Swiss cultural and economic life), two dozen representatives from abroad and the same number of deputies who can attend all meetings but only vote if the representative is absent. This shows that the ASK is the real parliament of the Swiss abroad.

For many years, Mr. A. F. Suter and Dr. H. W. Egli and later Prof. J. Inebnit and Mrs. G. O. Davidson were members representing the Swiss of the U.K. At the last presidents' assembly on 3rd March 1962, new representatives were elected for three years, viz. Mr. A. Renou and Mrs. Mariann Meier (deputy) for the South, Dr. Mario Ludwig and Mr. J. P. Christen (deputy) for the North. As unforeseen circumstances prevented the two delegates, Mr. Christen and I attended the meeting of the ASK at Sion. At the assembly some other Swiss from GB were present, alas only a handful. This is a pity as it is a unique opportunity to meet important personalities in Swiss public life, members of the ASK and the NHG, but above all it is stimulating and rewarding to meet compatriots from other countries and to discuss mutual problems.

The ASK, the Commission, the true parliament of the Swiss abroad, met for an all-day meeting at 9 a.m. on Friday morning at the venerable Salle Supersaxo. Under the efficient presidency of Dr. G. Schürch, the business which to a large extent covered the items on the agenda of the assembly the next day, was dealt with smoothly and with expedition. A friendly communal luncheon made a welcome interruption.

At 8 p.m. Dr. Schürch formally opened the Assembly at the first plenary session at the Salle de la Matze. It consisted of a preliminary welcome to some of the Guests of Honour and was followed by three separate meetings. One was the delegates' meeting of the Solidarity Fund, the second dealt with questions of old age and invalidity insurance (AHV) and the third was a forum for general problems, such as Swiss schools, Swiss films and the possible inclusion of the Spanish and English languages for use at the Assembly.

The second plenary session was held on Saturday morning at the modern, beautifully-constructed and well-ventilated conference hall of the "Kollegium" where excellent simultaneous translation into French or German was available. Dr. Schürch gave an introduction on the aims and objects of the organisation (ASO), followed by Dr. E. R. Fröhlich with a report on the work of the Solidarity Fund, the outstanding institution created by the Swiss abroad themselves.

Councillor of State G. Despland, chairman of the organising committee of the National Exposition 1964 gave

an illuminating talk on the "EXPO". He was followed by Dr. M. A. Nicolet, a Swiss physicist of Pasadena, California, who re-opened the subject of military taxes.

Next on the agenda came the petition brought forward by the Swiss Colony in Italy, which, incidentally is the best organised of our Colonies abroad. It concerned the unfairness regarding the new law that Swiss abroad had to get permission like other nationals when wanting to buy land in Switzerland. A short introduction to the new educational project for young Swiss abroad followed.

The main subject for discussion at the Assembly fell under two headings a) a special article in the Swiss Constitution for the Swiss abroad and b) political rights for the Swiss abroad. Dr. Schürch gave a brilliant exposé on the former and Dr. J. Halbheer, the director of the ASS (Secretariat) informed the assembly in an equally excellent report on the latter.

After the morning session I attended a luncheon and discussion arranged by the Swiss Evangelical Church (Pfarrer G. Rohner and Pasteur C. Reverdin). This was a very lively meeting at which various problems were discussed by delegates from several countries (nearly all the Swiss participants from G.B. attended!) in the presence of a representative of OSEC (Office Suisse d'Expansion Commerciale) and the BIGA (Federal Office for Industry, Trade and Labour), as well as the head of the R.C. Church Missions abroad. The wish was expressed that at a future Assembly such a meeting should be arranged on a wider scale, a real ecumenical venture.

After lunch, the discussion on the main subject was continued, but it was extremely short, seeing that there was broad approval of what the ASK had done and general recognition that our interests were obviously in good hands.

The Central President of the NHG in Switzerland, Mr. Théo Chopard, then addressed the Assembly. He was only one of many prominent guests. There were representatives of the Government and Parliament, both Federal and Valaisan, members of the Churches and the Police, various Federal Departments, the Army (the chief of the women's military service, Miss Andrée Weitzel, was present, too, who, as the President pointed out was in the same position as we Swiss abroad — she had no vote!) There were near enough two dozen Swiss Ambassadors, among them Monsieur and Madame Daeniker, half as many Consuls-General and a number of Consuls, some from remote parts of the globe. Various organisations had sent fraternal delegates, and press and radio were well represented. Incidentally, I was requested to give an interview for Radio Berne on the Swiss Hostel for Girls, the Welfare Office and "The Swiss Observer".

The chief speaker of the afternoon was Federal Councillor Willy Spühler, head of the Department of Postal Services and Railways. During his address he was flanked by two Swiss guards in picturesque old uniforms, who stood motionless throughout the delivery. With the Federal Councillor's remarkable and well received speech the third plenary session came to an end and with it the working part of a well organised conference.

At 6 o'clock the authorities of the Canton of Valais and the Town of Sion gave a reception at La Majorie, a romantic lawn-covered terrace on top of an ancient building partly carved from the rocks high above the town. The Chief of Police of the Canton of Valais, Councillor of State Oscar Schnyder, gave a spirited welcome, well

supported by plenty of golden Valaisan wine and the strains of a brass band. The weather which had remained perfect all day was changing its mood and a thunder storm threatened. But fortunately the black clouds gradually dispersed and by dusk the sky was clear and smooth and velvety again. We climbed the hundreds of steps hewn into natural rock up to the saddle between the two hills, the ruins of Le Tourbillon and the church-fortress of La Valère, Sion's landmarks. A more beautiful natural stage would be difficult to find for the striking light-sound spectacle "Son et Lumière — Sion in the light of its stars". For an hour we sat entranced, as page after page of the turbulent local history was turned. The artistic text by Maurice Zermatten, the gripping music composed by Georges Haenni, the trained voices of great actors, the masterly technical use of light and sound effects and the splendid impressive setting provided an unforgettable experience.

The long day ended with a banquet at La Matze, a drawn-out meal interrupted by delightful songs by the "Chanson du Rhône" whom we remember from their London appearance at the Fête Suisse a few years ago. Dancing started only after midnight — a more startling contrast than between "Son et Lumière" earlier in the evening and the Twist à la mode it is impossible to imagine!

Sunday was another brilliant day. It started with special services at the Catholic and Protestant Churches. At 10 a.m. we set out full of expectation on a surprise trip to the Upper Valais. Fourteen postal motor coaches took the party on the outing, and the drive was magnificent. We passed Visp and St. Niklaus and drove on to Grächen with its imposing panorama on the mountain-side balcony at an altitude of 5,305 feet. Though the village has the lowest rainfall in Switzerland its vegetation is lush. Before we went on to our pic-nic, the local Commune President welcomed us most eloquently and our arrival, as well as our departure two hours later, was marked by rousing music by the local brass band resplendent in smart uniforms.

We drove down the hairpin bends into the Rhône Valley and to Brigue where we were received once more most hospitably at the newly renovated Stockalper Palace. The Town President National Councillor Kaempfen expressed the authorities' welcome in three of our national languages. Then the President of the ASO formally closed the Assembly. As it customary, these gatherings of the "Fifth part of Switzerland" finish with the singing of the National Anthem. Never have I heard the new hymn, the old "Swiss Psalm" sung with more feeling and fervour.

And so a wonderfully animating meeting came to a close. No momentous decisions were taken, no spectacular resolutions passed, no history making motions tabled. But it was an invaluable chance to exchange ideas, to make new contacts and meet old friends, to discuss our problems — and how insignificant some of them look when compared with those of others!

Mariann.

The speech by the Federal Councillor and reports on the main topics of discussion, Solidarity Fund, AHV, Petition by the Swiss in Italy, etc., will appear later in this issue and the next ones.