

Assembly of the Swiss abroad in Solothurn

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ASSEMBLY OF THE SWISS ABROAD IN SOLOTHURN

Solothurn is known as "Ambassadors' City", and its many historic buildings testify to the important part the town played in the past. There is a saying that its name originated from the Celtic Goddess Salos, and indeed there are many Celtic relics in several of the Solothurn museums. It had already some considerable importance in Roman times, and the town continued to distinguish itself through the centuries. Many of the historic buildings are well preserved or have been beautifully restored. A better background for this year's Assembly of the Swiss Abroad could hardly be imagined, and in spite of some rain on the first day, the whole week-end was an unqualified success.

On Friday, 27th August, the Commission of the Swiss Abroad made an early start with their meeting which Dr. G. Schürch, President of the ASO (organisation for the Swiss living outside Switzerland), opened at 8.30 a.m. at the historic Hotel Krone not far from the famous St. Ursus Cathedral in the old town of Solothurn. After a busy morning, the members met for lunch which was followed by a delegates' meeting of the Solidarity Fund. A Press Conference was thrown in for good measure later in the afternoon, and at 8 p.m. the first Plenary Session was held at the Hotel Krone. Dr. Schürch opened the forty-third Assembly (in forty-seven years) and welcomed representatives of the Canton and Municipality of Solothurn, of the federal authorities and many organisations interested in the well-being of the Swiss abroad. He gave two items of news, one that the Message to Parliament from the Federal Council had been published and the other that a solution had been found to the knotty problem concerning permission for the purchase of land, which affects the Swiss abroad like any foreigners wishing to acquire property in Switzerland. It is likely that soon no permission will be needed by the Swiss abroad as the legal stumbling block is in the process of being removed. The President then went on to enlarge on the contribution men and women of Solothurn had made to the cause of the "Auslandsschweizertum". It was 90 years since the death of Werner Munzinger of Abyssinia and Sudan fame, 75 years since Franz Buchser, organ builder and painter, died, and 25 years since Federal Councillor Obrecht passed away. Other Solothurn men who had played a great part in the Nouvelle Société Helvétique and its "Auslandsschweizerwerk", were Dr. W. Hammer, Dr. Koch and "the father of the Swiss abroad", Prof. Arnold Laett.

The welcome from the Solothurn authorities was combined with an interesting historic survey. This was followed by a message from the Central President of the N.S.H., Monsieur Théo Chopard, who was unfortunately prevented from attending the Assembly owing to ill-health. He appealed for common efforts and action and warned

against scattering of our energies. Monsieur Maurice Jaccard who is in charge of affairs concerning the Swiss abroad at the Federal Political Department, then informed the audience (in French and German) on the new Constitutional Article. The Parliamentary Commissions would be set up now, then the priority of the Chambers would be decided — one Council to debate the matter in the autumn, the other next spring, and that all being well, the plebiscite could be held in a year's time.

That brought the first session to an end, and four separate meetings were then held at which various matters were discussed, such as activities of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad, Old Age and Invalidity Insurance, Military Tax, Constitutional Article and permission for the purchase of land. The representatives who would want to speak on the main subject the next day, gathered to co-ordinate their efforts.

Saturday was a fine day, and the 400 participants at the Assembly were in a festive mood as they gathered for the main Plenary Session in the old "Landhaus" on the edge of the river Aare. For centuries, the building had been the centre of Aare navigation and something like a trade and cultural centre of the town. In 1955, the house was gutted by fire, but it was cleverly renovated and turned into a most attractive conference hall, a pleasant and dignified venue for this year's Assembly.

Dr. Schürch welcomed authorities, and "Auslandsschweizer", guests of honour and diplomats who had come from many parts of the world, from most European countries, from Algiers, the Congo and South Africa, from U.S.A. and Latin America, from Israel, Vietnam and New South Wales. Very few were the visitors from Great Britain, which was all the more regrettable as the Swiss have always played an important part in the United Kingdom, and "the Image of Switzerland in the World" (this year's theme) has been particularly strong in Great Britain. To this testified the representative on the Commission, Mrs. Mariann Meier, who was one of several speakers on the main subject. The only other woman taking part in the discussion was also from England, Mrs. G. Davidson, Liverpool, who put the point of view of the often neglected provincial communities, and finally, there was Prof. J. Inebnit from Leeds who repeated his plea for an international service centre in Switzerland. Monsieur de Fischer and Monsieur and Madame Tosio were also present.

The theme "the Image of Switzerland in the World" had been discussed in many Swiss communities abroad, and over fifty answers had been received to the questionnaire sent out by the Secretariat (five from Great Britain). Dr. Mueller, Director of the Secretariat, gave a survey of the illuminating comments and statements as revealed in the answers. Dr. E. R. Froelich, President of the Solidarity

Fund, described the part the Fund played in the "Praesenz der Schweiz" in the world. Ambassador Micheli, Secretary-General of the Federal Political Department, addressed the audience on "The Tasks of the Diplomatic and Consular Missions", and this was followed by the speakers from Sweden, Belgium, Great Britain (as mentioned above), Germany, France, Austria, Colombia and U.S.A. The discussion was resumed after lunch, and amongst those taking part were Maître Poulin and Monsieur l'Ambassadeur Soldati, both of Paris and talking on the problem of the Swiss farmers in France who had to become French in order to buy their farms. The Press Officer of the Swiss Shortwave Service gave a brief talk on the importance of this particular means of informing the Swiss abroad about happenings at home. The Rev. G. Rohner brought a message of goodwill from the Swiss Evangelical Church Federation and the R.C. Secretariat for "Auslandschweizerseelsorge". He revealed the latest development in co-operation by which the Federal Political Department has agreed that Swiss Consulates should give addresses of new arrivals to the local Swiss Churches.

The well-known journalist Dr. Lorenz Stucki summed up the discussion in a most interesting and highly critical *exposé*, supporting the speakers from abroad in much of their criticism. After a short interval, Federal Councillor Schaffner, Minister for Economic Affairs, gave an address on some of the difficulties Switzerland is facing, and thus the Plenary Session came to a close, with everyone feeling satisfied that good work had been done and ready to contribute to the improvement of the image of Switzerland in the world.

In the venerable "Steiner Saal" of the old Council Hall, the authorities of Solothurn gave a reception at 6 o'clock, and it was a beautiful evening when, at the end of it, the guests left, mellowed by white wine, and animated by companionship. The old squares, the peaceful lanes with their cobblestone paving, the fountains, ancient walls, gates and towers — they looked picturesque and dignified, and it was easy to believe that Solothurn, next to Trier, is the oldest town this side of the Rhine.

Back we went to the "Landhaus" in the evening, and the 400 guests sat down to a wholesome and efficiently served dinner. The Solothurn Male Choir entertained the party with some excellent singing, and there were a few speeches, mainly humorous and to the point, particularly by Dr. Jakob Mueller, President of the Council of States, and a Commune Councillor of Solothurn. A former President of the "Auslandschweizerorganisation", Dr. H. P. Tschokke, gave a witty address, and Dr. Schürch extended a special welcome to two veteran Swiss from Vienna and Spain, 85 and 95 respectively. Finally, the Secretary-General of the ASS, Monsieur René Bovey, made his farewell speech, for he will be leaving the Secretariat at the end of the year. The evening was then given over to dancing, and a right jolly party it was, lasting well into the early hours of Sunday morning.

However, most of the participants were at Solothurn station soon after 9 o'clock, whence a special train ran for Oberdorf. From there, the chairlift conveyed the party up to the Weissenstein, the famous Jura mountain from which 176 alpine peaks may be seen in favourable meteorological conditions. Whilst we were only able to guess the mountain chain in the haze and the cloud, the weather was nevertheless sunny and warm, and the lakes and rivers of the lowlands could be clearly distinguished. We watched a "Schwinget" and admired the sturdy fellows putting the shot — the "Weissenstein stone", weighing 66 kg.! There was a yodelling choir, an alphorn

blower and even a young herdsman tossing the flag. We enjoyed the chicken and wine picnic out of doors, and gradually, we made our way downward and returned to Solothurn, now bathed in brilliant sunshine. At the "Red Tower" we gathered for a last get-together, and the 43rd Assembly was at an end.

When the train drew out of the station, we hummed the catchy tune of the Solothurner Song "... s'isch immer äso gsy". I remembered the line "Christen, Heiden, Katholiken", and I replaced them in my mind with "Daenen, Ungarn, Italiener", but Swiss all first and foremost — "... s'isch immer, immer äso gsy". Thank you, Solothurn, and all those who made this year's Assembly such a memorable one.

MM

THE MATTMARK CATASTROPHE

The Allalin Glacier which caused the awful avalanche on 30th August, is one of ten glaciers which was expanding in 196/63. Its source is the Saaser-Visp which flooded badly several times during the past centuries. The glacier begins at the Rimpfischhorn and the Strahlhorn and ends at the Mattmark Lake, at an altitude of 2,100m. The Mattmark power works were founded in 1959, and they produce something like 580 mio. kwh. per annum.

Unexpectedly, huge masses of ice and rock broke off about a kilometre above the camp and came hurtling down on 30th August, destroying about one-fifth of all machinery and equipment (the damage is estimated at 8 mio. francs). The tragedy is, that nearly one hundred workers and engineers were buried by the avalanche, 20 Swiss, the others foreigners. Rescue work went on with utmost difficulty owing to the threat of new ice falls from the overhanging glacier. Explosives dropped by the Glacier Pilot Geiger and bombardment with mine-throwers and mortars of the Swiss Army failed to dislodge the threatening glacier blocks. Mountain guides kept watch on the glacier, whilst work went on. Bad weather hindered operations, and only on Sunday, 5th September, the sun came out. By the time, the "Swiss Observer" went to press, only twenty-six bodies had been found, and it was estimated that it would take several weeks before the ice and rocks could be shifted. Glaciologists and other experts inspected the glacier constantly, and after a week, it looked as if it had become settled.

Mourning in Switzerland and the countries most affected, i.e. Italy and Spain, is widespread. Collections for the bereaved families (55 of them Italian) are being made, and cantonal authorities have granted liberal sums. Insurance compensation has already been paid out, and the Confederation has promised help. Volunteers offered assistance, also from other countries. The Red Cross, and other organisations helped in dealing with the many relatives who arrived in the Valais. Army and Police were on duty.

It was stated that the power works already in operation had not been affected, and that the lake had not suffered.

The celebrations arranged for 3rd October to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the admission of the Valais into the Confederation, have been postponed.

On 9th September, a Funeral Service took place at the Church of Saas-Grund. The President of the Confederation addressed the large congregation of relatives and friends of the dead, as well as authorities and employers.

Last minute news is of very bad weather conditions and renewed changes in the glacier. Work had to be suspended.

[A.T.S.]