

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: - (1970)
Heft: 1605

Artikel: Are diplomats really necessary?
Autor: Iselin, Jürg
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-691701>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 14.12.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Swiss Observer

FOUNDED IN 1919 BY PAUL F. BOEHRINGER.

The Official Organ of the Swiss Colony in Great Britain

Vol. 56 No. 1605

FRIDAY, 27th NOVEMBER, 1970

ARE DIPLOMATS REALLY NECESSARY?

Dr. Jürg Iselin speaks at the City Swiss Club

1. Introduction

Are diplomats really necessary? Do they have any real function apart from filling up royal enclosures in striped pants and top hats, holding cocktail glasses and daintily hanging on to the end of a cucumber sandwich, and getting prepared for a kidnap?

The humorist George Mikes speaks of them as a "necessary luxury" and offers, in his own way, a convincing defence of "diplomatic uselessness". His plea is: keep the whole set-up—ambassadors, consuls, even counsellors enjoying diplomatic privileges—because they are unnecessary. *"Individuals enjoy certain luxuries; so do families, communities, towns, nations. Why should humanity, as such, be deprived of its only mad and reckless luxury: diplomatic missions all over the globe?"*

Hardly any other profession has generated so many anecdotes and witticisms in the course of centuries as the diplomatic service. While Lord Palmerston's (1784-1865) view was that *"Dining is the life and soul of diplomacy"*, the American poet Robert Frost (born 1875) sees the diplomat *"as a man who always remembers a woman's birthday but never remembers her age"*. Isaac Goldberg (American critic: 1887-1938) is less flattering when he says: *"Diplomacy is to do and say the nastiest thing in the nicest way"*, and so was the Italian statesman Benno di Cavour (1810-1861), who remarked: *"I have discovered the art of fooling diplomats; I speak the truth and they never believe me."*

Another malicious comment on diplomacy came from the British diplomat Sir Henry Wotton, who served King James the First (1603-1625). When Sir Henry was spending a few days in Augsburg, on his way to Venice, in the house of a friend, he wrote in Latin in the visitors' book, as a joke: *"Legatus est vir bonus peregre missus ad mentiendum Republica causae"* (A diplomat is an honourable man who is sent abroad to TELL LIES FOR THE GOOD OF HIS COUNTRY.) Because a spiteful contemporary dis-

covered this entry in the visitors' book eight years later and reported it to King James, Wotton's promising career came to an abrupt end.

As someone "who should know" (as the invitation says) I am now going to attempt to vindicate the honour of the diplomatic profession to which I have belonged for the last 25 years and which is so often subject to severe criticism. I hope to be able, by recalling a few of my experiences during my years of service in the Federal Political Department in Berne and in diplomatic

posts abroad, to show that diplomacy even nowadays is not a mere luxury but often quite useful. If, as a censorious Basler, I indulge in self-mockery from time to time, I can only hope that I shall not suffer the same fate as that poor British colleague I have just mentioned.

After all, put your hand on your heart: *Who* is really indispensable? Or think of it: if we started getting rid of all things we do not absolutely need, what would be left of this world?

THE SWISS OBSERVER AND ITS FUTURE

At a recently held meeting the Advisory Council of "The Swiss Observer" had, amongst other problems, to go into the paper's financial position and found it to be grim indeed. So grim in fact that an urgent appeal for support has become necessary.

"The Swiss Observer" is, to put it bluntly, struggling for its very survival. Constantly rising costs, coupled with an alarming drop in revenue, mainly advertising, have brought about a situation in which the accounts for the financial year ended on June 30th, 1970 have shown a net loss of £568/9/3.

"The Swiss Observer" has, ever since it was founded 50 years ago by Mr. Oscar F. Boehringer's late father, lived on Boehringer generosity. Its accounts have, at times, shown small gains and at times losses. But they have never shown a loss as heavy as the one just mentioned. Part of the Boehringer generosity consists, incidentally, and has always consisted, in also providing an office, lighting, heating and the indispensable telephone for the Colony Organ's editor.

Now Mr. Oscar F. Boehringer, while still guaranteeing the paper's existence up to the end of the current financial year, i.e. up to the 30th June, 1971, has, for very understandable reasons, come to the conclusion that thereafter he cannot continue to do so. This means that after that date the paper must stand on its own feet or die.

These are stark facts. Early in the new year, at a date in January yet to be fixed, the Advisory Council will hold a special meeting to consider the publication's future and to see whether a way can be found to secure its survival.

In the meantime it has been found necessary to launch an appeal for support, the urgency of which can hardly be exaggerated. Such support can be given in various ways: by placing advertisements, by finding new subscribers, by sending in outright donations. It is ultimately up to "The Swiss Observer's" readers to decide whether after June 1971 our Colony's organ is to go on or is to share the fate of many British papers whose affairs had to be wound up during the last few years.

No doubt many readers of "The Swiss Observer" would, for sentimental reasons and because they feel that the paper serves a useful purpose, deeply regret its passing away. But its continued existence should not be taken for granted, as it simply cannot live on sentiment alone.

To conclude I can only repeat what I have already said: the outlook on the future is grim. If you value the paper and if you would like it to survive, then the time to support it is now. For its future and its chances of survival are now in the balance.

On behalf of the Advisory Council:
Gottfried Keller, Chairman.

The Swiss Observer

Published Twice Monthly at
63/67 TABERNACLE STREET
LONDON E.C.2
Tel.: 01-253 2321

Telegrams: Paperwyse Stock London

HON. PRESIDENT: Robert J. Keller
EDITOR: Pierre-Michel Beguin

Advisory Council:

Gottfried Keller (Chairman)
O. F. Boehringer, J.P., (Hon. Sec.)
F. Burri, J. Eusebio, Dr. C. Jagmetti
(Press Attache Swiss Emb.)
A. Kunz, C. Nater, R. M. Suess

PREPAID SUBSCRIPTION RATES
(POST FREE)

UNITED KINGDOM

24 issues £2. 8.0
12 issues £1. 5.0
6 issues £ 13.0

SWITZERLAND & Elsewhere

24 issues Frs. 25 — or £2.10.0
12 issues Frs. 13 — or £1. 6.0

Swiss subscriptions may be paid into

Postcheck-Konto Basle 40—5718

Editor's telephone 01-602 1378

2. How does one become a diplomat?

Whereas in 1925 there were only 15 Swiss envoys accredited in 25 countries, in 1969 Switzerland had 80 Ambassadors, 36 Consulates General, 50 Consulates and several Delegations to multilateral international bodies such as:

— Delegations in Berlin and at the OECD in Paris

— Observer's Offices at the U.N. headquarters in New York and at the U.N.-European Offices in Geneva

— a Mission to the European Communities in Brussels

— a Permanent Representative with the Council of Europe in Strasbourg.

For the performance of its extensive duties the Federal Political Department has a staff of about 1,600, of whom approximately one-third work at the headquarters in Berne.

The modern diplomat's ever-widening sphere of activity embraces political reporting, legal advice, economic and financial questions, social affairs, cultural affairs, press and information matters, international organisations, and finally, very important: consular affairs.

The big embassies (such as Washington, Paris and London), have special attachés. As you know, we in London have a military attaché and his assistant, and an expert specialising in commodity arrangements and agriculture.

Furthermore, scientific advisers are posted in Washington and Moscow. In Washington there is even one specialising in telecommunications by satellite.

This shows that nowadays a diplomat, just like a businessman or a banker, has to acquire and maintain an expert knowledge if he wishes to be able to cope with the increasingly difficult problems of our time. The impression which people once had of tradi-

tional diplomats as well bred, well educated, elegant "causeurs", if it was ever valid, is certainly outdated now. All that, of course, is necessary and it helps. A good general culture is still essential for any successful diplomat but it is not enough. Even diplomats have to specialise and become "technocrats" to some extent in order to grasp the technicalities of the problems they have to deal with. This applies especially to fields such as economics, finance, technology and European integration.

Switzerland pays particular attention to the training of her young diplomats. In the archives of the Federal Political Department there is a letter dating from 1914 in which a Swiss envoy informs the Federal Council that he has engaged his son in the Legation as a commercial attaché and is, of course, counting on the government's agreement. But the days are past when the possession of a title, adequate financial means and an influential uncle meant the automatic opening of doors to a diplomatic career.

Admission to the diplomatic service is now conditional and requires a successful entrance examination, a probationary training period of two years and a final examination.

Any Swiss man or woman who has completed a university education, who is under the age of 30, who also has a good knowledge of two foreign languages and is fit enough to live in the tropics is allowed to take the entrance exam, which is held every year. The suitability of a candidate is established by means of this oral and a written entrance exam which lasts several days and covers *general education, Swiss and world history, economics, Swiss constitutional law, international law and languages*.

The incorruptibility of the nine-man examining board, usually composed of representatives of the universities and Administration, is illustrated by the fact that the sons of serving ambassadors have sometimes been rejected.

Anyone who surmounts this first hurdle must spend nine months as a "diplomatic trainee" in the various divisions of the headquarters in Berne, nine months as an attaché at a European Embassy and then a winter semester at the Institute of Higher International Studies in Geneva. Then the diplomatic cadet has to show that his professional knowledge is adequate in a sort of final inspection, after which he is promoted to Third Secretary. He is now at the beginning of a career which may eventually lead him up to the rank of Ambassador.

Although diplomacy is still one of the most interesting professions, certain difficulties are encountered in the recruitment of suitable cadets in Switzerland. Recently, there have been about 10 new recruits each year, while more would actually be required to prepare for the exigencies of modern

diplomacy. Incidentally, a consequence of the recent hijacking affairs was an urgent request made in Switzerland for the modernisation of the Swiss diplomatic apparatus. The current economic boom seems to be mainly responsible for the lack of candidates, because it offers many prospects to gifted young people in private business, many of which are more rewarding financially. But a great number of those who might have been interested are also deterred by the inevitable darker sides of the profession: periodic transfers from country to country and continent, sometimes to places with unhealthy climates, presenting difficulties over the children's schooling and causing the separation of the family, and so on. **What does a diplomat do abroad?**

I mentioned that my first post abroad, having started my diplomatic career in 1945 at the Political Department in Berne (Rekrutenschule), was New Delhi/India, where I served from 1950-53.

India had become an independent state in 1948 and Switzerland was among the first countries with which India concluded a treaty of friendship and establishment.

One of my manifold assignments (the then Delegation consisted of Minister Däniker, a commercial counselor, myself as attaché, a Head of chancery, 3 secretaries and local staff) was to look after the experts for Technical Co-operation. In the beginning they were mainly stationed in Nepal, a country which my wife and I had the opportunity of visiting in the chartered plane of one of the Swiss Himalaya expeditions.

Development Aid

We are now on the threshold of the second decade of the U.N.'s development work, but, unfortunately, the economic and social gulf between the rich industrial nations and the poor countries of the Third World is growing wider all the time. The cold war between East and West is being noticeably overshadowed by a contrast between the northern and the southern hemisphere which contains the seeds of an ominous conflict. The whole world is interdependent today and Switzerland, which is decidedly a world trading nation and has the third biggest per capita income in the world, cannot ignore these serious problems. So development aid forms an essential part of Swiss foreign and economic policy.

United Nations

I was posted in New York from 1956-59 as Deputy of the Permanent Swiss Observer to the U.N. You will recall that when the United Nations Organisation, successor of the League of Nations, was established just before the close of World War Two, Switzerland had to decide whether she should apply for admission. Apart from the U.N.'s rather negative attitude regarding the compatibility of neutrality with its Charter, Switzerland feared that her

status of permanent neutrality might one day be affected by the obligation binding on Members of the U.N. to accept and apply decisions of the Security Council in conformity with article 25 of the Charter; this implied an obligation on Member States to carry out non-military enforcement measures and even military measures under the terms of article 41. The decision that it would be better if Switzerland stayed out of the U.N. was backed by our unfortunate experience with economic sanctions during the conflict in Ethiopia, at a time when we belonged to the League of Nations.

The belief that Switzerland, a neutral state, could render greater services to the promotion of international peace and security as a non-member of the U.N. has not prevented her from being associated very closely with the work of this Organisation. Let me just give you a brief outline:

As early as 1948 Switzerland had established an autonomous mission headed by a Permanent Observer accredited to the U.N. Secretariat in New York. Although the Permanent Observer had no clearly defined status, in practice his contacts with the U.N. Headquarters were the same as those of permanent representatives. The Observer's mission consisted in keeping the Swiss Government informed of the U.N.'s activities as well as representing Switzerland in all the organisations and specialised agencies of which she is a member. At present, the Observer is assisted in the fulfilment of these duties by four diplomats and four chancery officials.

Several Swiss citizens have occupied important posts in the U.N. itself

(U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees: A. Lindt, F. Schnyder) or the specialised agencies (GATT: O. Long).

Daily Life

The headquarters in Berne are divided into five main departments and a General Secretariat. The head of the whole outfit is of course the Foreign Minister of the moment, but the standing director of the Political Department is the General Secretary. He is also in charge of the Division for Political Affairs. The other four divisions are the Juridical Service, the Division for International Organisations, the Division for Administrative Matters and the Department for Technical Co-operation.

The embassy in London is one of the more important Swiss embassies. It has a staff of 52 people, 16 of which have diplomatic or consular titles. The diplomatic part has sections for culture and information, for press and documentation, for legal and social matters, for international organisation and protocol and for trade. They employ 6 diplomats and 12 secretaries and collaborators. The consulate's main department is the Chancery, responsible for passports, registration, taxation and day to day legal problems, then come the smaller sub-divisions, namely, the Visa service, the Book-keeping, the Old Age Pension department, the Administration, the Communications Office, the Archives and the Courier service. There is besides this a Military Attaché, who is also accredited in Holland, and of course, an Ambassador and his Deputy, each assisted by a secretary.

I will conclude by giving a few brief examples of the daily—and often

peculiar—tasks of our Embassy:

A young Englishman who wants to start off on a charity march with a pushable iron bedstead(!) enquires whether pushing a bed on Swiss autobahns is permitted by road traffic laws.

Telephone call at 4 a.m., (taken by the night-watchman) from a Swiss who explains that he had been boozing until half past midnight in the Swiss Centre, had then "comforted" a drunken lady in Soho, following which, a few hours before his departure for Switzerland, he had discovered that his wallet was lighter by several ten-pound notes and several hundred Swiss francs. Urgent request for a loan! Quick and discreet help by an Embassy official.

Visited by a travel agent on behalf of 50 people forming a travel party forming the retinue of an Arab sheikh of the Persian Gulf. They go regularly to Geneva, where the Sheikh reserves for himself and his entourage several floors of one of the most expensive hotels. Some of his party are his relatives (sons and daughters of various wives) with diplomatic passports, and some are attendants with ordinary passports. But since the El Al attack at Kloten Airport regulations on the issue of Swiss entry visas to Arabs have been tightened up (several copies of a form must be completed and forwarded to Berne with a photograph attached and this latter condition is fraught with difficulty in the case of Arab women, as they are not allowed to be photographed).

I hope that these examples of the activity of an Embassy—if nothing else—will have convinced you of the necessity and usefulness of the Swiss diplomacy!



SWISS BANK CORPORATION

(a Company limited by shares, incorporated in Switzerland)

Principal London Office

99 GRESHAM STREET,
P.O. Box No. 114,
LONDON EC2P 2BR
Tel. 01-606 4000

West End Branch

SWISS CENTRE,
1 NEW COVENTRY STREET,
LONDON W1V 8BR
Tel. 01-734 0767

(Savings Account facilities available)

SOCIÉTÉ DE BANQUE SUISSE

SCHWEIZERISCHER BANKVEREIN

SOCIETÀ DI BANCA SVIZZERA

Offices throughout Switzerland
in New York and San Francisco