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# MEETING WITH MR. RENÉ KELLER

*Continuing our trip across Switzerland, we pay a visit to Mr. René Keller, who only six months ago was the Swiss Ambassador in London. Now he is the head of one of the four divisions of the Political Department and in charge of Switzerland's relations with international organisations.*

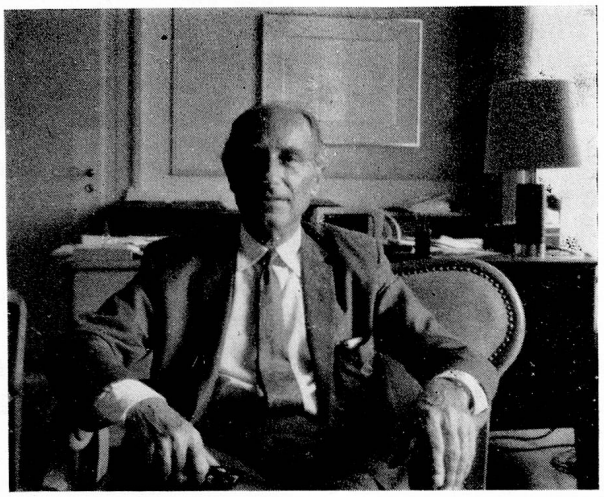
This division is situated in the right wing of the Federal Palace. Cross Federal Palace Square and follow the pompous, heavy-set right wing of the headquarters of the Swiss government, take the first entrance above a flight of stately stairs. A uniformed attendant will guide you to the first floor and knock at one of the first doors of a vast and stony corridor. The room is commodiously wallpapered in blue, the double doors communicating outside and with the neighbouring secretariat are thickly padded in leather and guarantee the secrecy of the proceedings within this sanctum of higher diplomacy. A thick tapestry with a rustic theme bequeathed by Mr. Micheli, former General Secretary of the Political Department, ornates a wall. The windows overlook the gardens to the south of the Federal Palace and the ravine of the Aar.

Mr. Keller was dictating a letter as I came in. Just returned from a Mediterranean cruising holiday, he was as coloured as Western diplomats can be. When the letter had been completed, his efficient middle-aged secretary retired to the neighbouring room and prepared us a cup of tea. We relaxed in plush leather arm chairs as Mr. Keller put me in the picture of what his new responsibilities were.

**Multilateral diplomacy**

The main difference in principle between the job of an ordinary Ambassador posted in a foreign land and the Head of the Division for International Organisations is that the latter practises *multilateral diplomacy*, as opposed to *bilateral* diplomacy. This means that his dialogue is engaged not with one partner, but with a multiplicity of partners representing a variety of interests.

The Division for International Organisations has five services. There is a service concerned with the relations of Switzerland with the United Nations, the Council of Europe and other standing international conferences. Two former "Londoners", Mr. Caspar Bodmer and Mr. Franz Muheim are both engaged on this side of the Division's activities. Secondly, there is a service concerned with international and national relief organisations such as Caritas and the Red Cross. Its man in charge is in a ticklish position because he must deal with particularly burning and emotionally charged problems. He can never please everybody and has to compromise between the restricted means allocated for relief and the immensity of the requirements of a host of highly-concerned relief organisations. The delicacy of this aspect of the Political Department's work is compounded by the uneasy conscience of all the responsible Swiss aware of the sufferings of the world.



A section of growing importance is that concerned with scientific co-operation. This section is in charge of relations with CERN and problems of space and environment. It is not in charge of the Council for Scientific Research, an attribution of the Federal Department of the Interior. The fact that this section is concerned with problems of pollution and the nascent inernational legislation in this field requires much from the person in charge in the way of technical understanding. He must be perpetually "au fait" on topical and important subjects. There is, furthermore a cultural service and a semi-independent secretariat, linked to the Division, in charge of relations with UNESCO.

The cultural role of the Division for International Organisation complements that of the Department of the Interior (which has an eye on the work of the Pro Helvetia Foundation). The Division acts in conjunction with Pro Helvetia for cultural events staged by Swiss Embassies. It was concerned, for example, with the recent Hödler-Böcklin exhibition at the Hayward Gallery.

**The organisation of manpower**

You will be surprised to know that a Division with so many activities has a staff of only 53, including secretarial staff and 29 diplomats. Mr. Keller said that this reflected a demand for administrative economy and efficiency. But, by being so thin on the ground everyone in his Division, and indeed in the whole Political Department, had to work hard. When he was in London, Mr. Keller was at the apex of a staff pyramid of over 70. He now has less staff under him in Berne although he is one one of the top four jobs that Swiss diplomacy can offer.

The Political Department has a staff of 320. If one includes all diplomatic and consular staff abroad, then the figure rises to about 1,700. These 320 people are employed in the various divisions of the Department. These are the Political Division, the Juridical Division, the Division for International Affairs and the Administrative Division. There is a fifth, independent service not bearing the name of a "Division". It is the delegation to technical co-operation, currently directed by a former "Londoner", Mr. Marcuard.

The structure of the Political Department has been changed on many occasions. Mr. Keller explained to me that the present organisation, dated from 1946. Before this time and during the war the Department had various attributions (such as immigration, alien interests and home affairs) which have since been passed on to the Federal Chancery and other Departments. There have been minor changes since 1946. The Secretariat was created in 1954 and two years ago the Protocol and Information services of the Political Division were incorporated in the head of the Department's own secretariat while the Juridical Service was promoted to a Division.

**Daily routine**

Our conversation had lasted for an hour. It was sweltering hot outside and we had drunk many a cup of tea, replenished regularly by Mr. Keller's obliging secretary. I asked him how his occupation compared with the London post. Its most salient features were: More work and practically no

representative activities.

Mr. Keller is at his office at 7.30 in the morning and leaves it at about the same time at night. He begins his day by running through the Press. He then sees to his mail and surveys the affairs of the day with his collaborators. At nine he regularly meets Mr. Pierre Graber, our Foreign Minister together with the other heads of divisions and they run through the situation facing the Political Department. Much of Mr. Keller's activities are then taken up by meetings and discussions.

He gets visits from parliamentarians, journalists, secretaries of charitable organisations and other people wishing to be heard. Mr. Keller considers that one of his most important tasks is to "be informed and inform". I asked him whether he could clearly delimit an area of decision and authority. He couldn't because, as he explained, his work was intimately linked to the life of Parliament. The main scope for decision lay in giving favourable or unfavourable annotations to demands for funds addressed to him and submitted to the Department of Finance. But the job consisted not so much in taking decisions as in being the arm of the country's governing machinery in a particular direction. Mr. Keller said that he nonetheless enjoyed far more "power" than as Ambassador in London. What was particularly thrilling about the job was the possibility it afforded of "feeling the pulse beat of the country".

Mr. Keller lives alone in a studio during the week, and hurries to catch the 6.30 express to Geneva on Friday evenings to enjoy two full days as a family man. He is so tied up in work that he has not even so far managed to go to the cinema. There are relatively few social activities going on and diplomats working at "base" aren't paid to entertain. When the smallish diplomatic circuit in Berne has been run through, there is little more to do than to go to bed. Federal officials lead staid existences.

Mr. Keller finds that the quality of diplomatic society is somewhat lower in Berne than in London—a circumstance easy to understand, since the best people are sent to the most important capitals. The offices of the Political Department are not even endowed with a canteen and officials have a choice of eating in one of the many tasty restaurants of downtown Berne, or doing their own cooking. Mr. Keller has opted for the latter solution! He admits that under the circumsances his diet is of a frugal and ready nature, spaghettis and steak coming every second day. But, as I can testify to all those who remember Mr. and Mrs. Keller with great affection from their stay in London, he shows no signs of malnutrition.

*(PMB)*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