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# NEWS FROM THE COLONY

## LITERARY EVENING

On Tuesday, 1st February, a literary evening was held in the hall of the Residence of the new Embassy. It must have been one of the first functions to be held in the hall, which will doubtless be called to serve the Colony on many occasions in future. On that evening, about forty compatriots were invited to listen to a Swiss writer, Mr. Jörg Steiner, who read excerpts from his own work. Jörg Steiner, aged 41, is a former primary school teacher in Biel, where he lives. After completing his teacher training, he worked for a time in a school for the mentally handicapped and became particularly interested in autistic children. In 1955, he set up a publishing house, Vorstadtpresse, whose policy was to foster unknown talents. But the venture was short-lived and ended five years later.

Apart from collaborating with the Basle Theatre, Jörg Steiner has been engaged since 1971 in writing the film script "*Pele nein Bruder*", which he described as a "testimony for the defence of a dreamer".

Having been introduced by Dr. Birrer, Cultural Attaché, Mr. Steiner began by reading a few selections of *Schwarze Kasten*, poetic fragments published in 1965. They were simple and finely chiselled prose poems on very earthy subjects indeed. The themes chosen were: Description of a Cement Factory (with a minimum of adjectives) in two or three sentences; Tenants looking at their landlord's cat; rain seen on a wet street from a cosy flat; a group of angry football supporters; impression on the inside of a parish church; a school. Various aspects of everyday life wrapped up in a paragraph. These prose poems tended to make the audience nod and smile, yet they had perhaps the best literary sound of the evening.

Their purpose, it seemed, was to underline and punctuate the everyday events of life. They were a static reflection and a series of statements on objects and people. The poet was pointing a projector on ordinary things to give them new being.

This was also the inspiration behind two selections read from "*Auf dem Berge Sinai sitzt der Schneider Kikrikri*", a collection of short stories.

The first story read to us told of the diary kept by a good but rather bickerish Swiss mother, who makes a record of her worries and irritation while her son is on holiday in San Francisco. He doesn't send letters regularly and mother is irritated. A homely but realistic theme. The subject and colours of the occasional post card received by the good lady receive

much comment as they play such an important role in her limited existence.

There is no action and no plot to speak about. Such short stories must be understood, it seems, as a still life. Steiner wants to portray life without the support of a story. That is why his prose is nothing more than a succession of statements on situations, rather than events. Asked whether this short story was autobiographical, Jörg Steiner said that there was always an element of personal experience in the work of a writer, but that this particular short story had not referred to his mother. She had in fact, disliked it profoundly.

The second story that was read to us was about an American exchange student staying for a holiday with a Swiss family with a teenage girl and with plenty of preconceived ideas on Americans. Its rather extraordinary title "*Auf dem Berge Sinai sitzt der Schneider Kikrikri*", is that of the whole collection of short stories, contained in a hard-cover tome of about 130 pages, published by Luchterhand-Verlag and selling in Switzerland for 19.50 francs.

Like the previous story, this one has a rather slender plot. Jörg Steiner who says he doesn't like to be "labelled" but considers himself nevertheless as a writer, is in our view a poet. His choppy and static narrative, with somewhat futile statements cropping up every second sentence, is highly evocative. These statements, in the way they stand out, suggestively bring out the truth of the setting of the story, in this case, American youth and the preconceptions of a simple middle-class Swiss family. It is a somewhat naive "Grandma Moses" way of depicting simple aspects of everyday existence.

Jörg Steiner appeared to procure more pleasure to the many young people in attendance than to their elders. One or two people wrote him off as a "putter", surviving on an ephemeral literary trend. However, Steiner's sympathetic looks and his recognised success at home indicates that he is genuine. Moreover, he admitted at Question Time that he found the act of writing difficult and that he never sat at his writing desk without a pinch of anxiety.

Many interesting questions were put to him when he had finished reading his second narrative. Typical questions were: Do you like Hartmann? Are your stories inspired by fairy tales? Why does the character of the Mother appear in so many of them? Do you like Debussy? Has your work got a social purpose, do your stories carry a message? Are they critical of

authoritarian education? Do you find it difficult to overcome the differences between Swiss-German, your mother tongue, and German, the language in which you express yourself professionally? How do you adapt to the television medium? Where do you stand in the current unrest between the conservative and dissident wings of the Swiss Society of Authors?

As one can see, questions were not lacking and the answers were as interesting as the reading session. The intellectual part of the evening, was followed by sociability and drinks, and concluded with the reading of a political poem used by the author to back the anti-Schwarzenbach campaign.

Jörg Steiner was a few days later to set out on a tour of British universities to give readings of his works. His itinerary included Magee University College in Londonderry, where he was due to speak on Monday, 14th February. Our thoughts be with him . . .

(PMB)

## S.M.S. ANNUAL DINNER AND BALL

The Swiss Mercantile Society held its Annual Dinner and Ball in the Orchid Suite of the Dorchester Hotel on Saturday, 5th February. After a half-hour reception, to which we were welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Jaccard, President of the S.M.S., and by Dr. A. Weitnauer, Honorary President, we moved in the bluish and dimly-lit Orchid Suite to look for our seats among the eleven round tables ordered across the hall.

Grace was said by Father Paul Bossard. The meal was at least as good as anything I have experienced in two years of functions at the Dorchester Hotel. We began with a smoked trout (a première, as far as I was concerned) and enjoyed a meaty "Carré d'Agneau" (also a première) at the main course.

Speeches, introduced after the Toast to the Queen and to Switzerland were short and brisk. The Speakers were Mr. A. Jaccard, Dr. A. Weitnauer and Mr. A. Kunz. The President of the S.M.S. welcomed us all in a fitting address making explicit mention of several prominent guests, such as our Ambassador, Mr. Albert Kunz, Mr. C. H. Brugmann and Mr. F. Adams from the Embassy, Mrs. M. Meier, Mr. Walter Burren, Mr. Raymond Chapuis and Mr. Oscar Grob, all compatriots playing eminent roles in the Swiss Colony. Mr. Jaccard referred to the invaluable services rendered by the Swiss National Tourist Office in lending films for S.M.S. monthly meetings. He told us of the forthcoming retirement of Mr. C. Slade, Vice-Principal