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A SWISS HOTELIER IN LONDON

A modern building rising from Hamilton Square in Mayfair. A sheltered entry topped by a Canadian and Swiss flag where taxis and limousines come and go. A liveried doorman who rushes to open the door of your car. A wide glass entry leading to a spacious lobby. A reception counter with its array of glistening keys to the right. A Regency table where a lady takes care of reservations to the left. Plush leather armchairs spaced out on the vast ground floor of the building. A hall illuminated by candelabra of shining metal.

You are at the "Inn on the Park" Hotel.

The Manager of this four-star establishment is a Swiss. With possibly one exception, Mr. Eugene Wagner is the only Swiss national actually in charge of a hotel of this importance in London. The times have obviously changed, as many people still remember the days when there was hardly a first-class hotel management which didn't have Swiss at the top. At 42, Mr. Wagner has every reason to be content with the steady rise of his career. Having begun at sixteen in the kitchens of the Buffet at Basle Station, Mr. Wagner made the grade in record time, finding himself a post as manager of the "Prince of Wales" only fourteen years later. He recognises that things went well for him, yet also likes to point out that in view of all the effort that it has meant, fourteen years was not such a short span of time.

I met Mr. Wagner in his ground floor office which overlooks a pavement where pedestrians are unaware that they can be observed. The office is adjacent to a shop, embodied in the hotel, which sells art objects.

Over a cup of coffee, Mr. Wagner recalled that after three years of work in the restaurant services, the kitchen and the bar of the Bahnhof Buffet in Basle, he enrolled at the Hotel-keeping School of Lausanne. His studies there were completed with a training period at the "Excelsior" in Montreux. That was in 1950. For the following five years, Mr. Wagner worked successively at the Palace Hotel of Lucerne, the Palace Hotel at Wengen, the Cresta Palace at Celerina, the Winter Palace at Gstaad, the Savoy in London and the Richemond in Geneva. This impressive list definitely shows that Mr. Wagner was choosy about his employers—and wisely so. At these classy establishments, he learnt all the strings of his trade, serving as waiter, auditor, control clerk, receptionist and cashier.

It was towards the end of this period that he married a Frenchwoman, also in the hotel trade. They had two children.

His stay at the Savoy made him realise all the promising opportunities

open to trained hotel personnel in London. He therefore decided, after a stint at the Richemond Hotel in Geneva, to return and work in London. From 1955 to 1959 he was in charge of reception and then head control at the Kensington Palace Hotel. He then moved over to the group control of Associated Hotels Ltd., where he remained until 1961. That same year, aged only 31, he obtained his first job as Manager, and was put in charge of the Prince of Wales Hotel. During the four years spent there, he modernised the building and increased the number of beds from 350 to 500.

In answer to an advertisement in a trade magazine, he was picked for the job of planning, opening and managing the "Reina Isabel" Hotel at Las Palmas, in the Canary Islands. The groundwork of the building had been accomplished. It was Mr. Wagner's task to include the fittings, decorations and gadgets. He was to manage two other hotels belonging to the same company, Hotel Canarias S.A., itself part of the British & Commonwealth group of companies. These were the "Hotel Gran Canaria" and the "Hotel Cairasco", both in Las Palmas.

Mr. Wagner and his family enjoyed the sun and the cosy atmosphere of these dream islands for nearly four years. The inconvenience of having to send their children to boarding school prompted Mr. Wagner and his wife to return to harsher climes, and in November 1968, he was back in London, master-minding the luxury of the "Inn on the Park", the skeleton of which had already been completed. This hotel, a gem of Four Seasons Hotels Ltd., Toronto, was opened in February 1970.

From the outset, it proved a great success. During its first year of operation, it recorded an 83.5 per cent occupation factor. The following year it had already beaten the London record, by achieving an occupation factor of 93.4 per cent.

What are the main factors of this success?

It can't apparently be the cheapness of rooms at the "Inn". At £13 a single room and £18 a double one, its prices place it in the "Dorchester", "Connaught" and "Barclays" category. Luxury rooms cost upward of £23 a day, suites going up to £65. A most important element of "Inn on the Park's" successful business is the regularity of its clientele. Mr. Wagner reckons that, two years after its inauguration, about 80 per cent of the hotel's patrons are regular customers, people that had stayed there on one or more previous occasions.

This fact points to the kind of customers that are catered for: they

are mostly business people. A vast part of the hotel's business is in fact conducted with industrial and airline companies, banks and conventions, which regularly reserve rooms at Hamilton Place. The reverse of this is in fact the average number of nights is limited, limited in fact to two nights per customer on average.

A good note is the hotel's central position in Mayfair, London's most elegant area. This is coupled with an absence of noise thanks to the hotel being screened from the din of Park Lane by a row of buildings. Customers are further isolated from noise in that they need never open their windows, the optimal temperature being constantly supplied by an air conditioning system. They moreover enjoy a direct telephone link with the outside, and, naturally, a television set in every room. Add to this a gastronomic restaurant, "The Vintage Room", and dancing for all ages with a five-man band. These are also open to non-residents.

The "Inn on the Park", which has about 230 rooms (including those of the luxury suites) has a staff of 380 employees. This is a particularly small number of rooms/staff ratio for a hotel of this class. With barely more than 50 extra rooms, the "Dorchester" employs 800 persons.

Questioned on his "management philosophy", Mr. Wagner told me that he understood his job in a rather traditional way. It was important to keep an eye on everything and supervise staff in every department. With experience and flair, one could fairly well pin down anything that wasn't running smoothly. The policy of keeping personal contact with staff could not however be applied to customers. There were too many of them staying for too short a time. The days of personal attention to the Great and Mighty, as practised by the Seilers and

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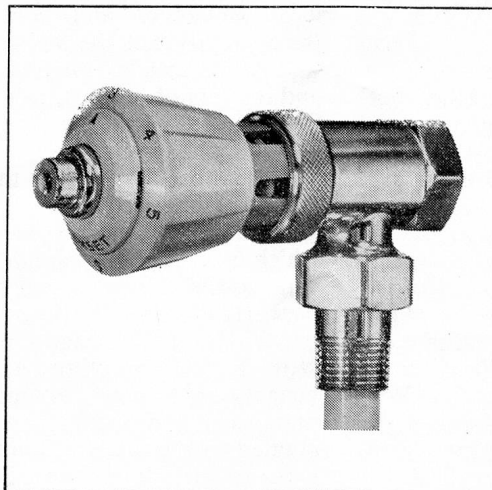
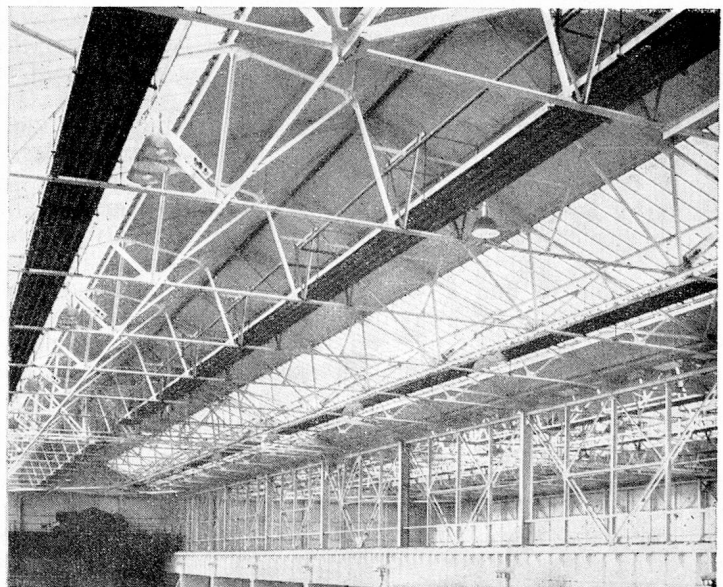
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the Bons, are over.

Mr. Wagner is well aware of the new trends of management training. These generally stress the importance of specialisation. Economics graduates, certified accountants, qualified programmers, business managers all have their particular niche in the running of a large hotel.

According to an emerging American pattern, management is to depend on the sum of a number of distinct specialisations, and no longer on an "all-rounder". Mr. Wagner admits that it is not necessary to have mopped floors and struggled through a long upward journey to manage a hotel. It is possible to teach management to

university students who are now trained in the fields which together build up the competence required by the management of large modern hotels. It won't be necessary in future to wait fourteen years. Mr. Wagner openly welcomes this trend—which is certainly a sporting attitude.

(PMB)

NEWS FROM THE COLONY

DELEGATES FROM SWISS COMMUNITIES ABROAD AT WORK IN BERNE

The Commission of the Swiss Abroad held their spring meeting in the federal capital on 11th March under the chairmanship of the President, Councillor of States Dr. Louis Guisan. Members had come from all parts of the world, and as usual for the March meeting, it was held at the *Palais Fédéral*. Great Britain was represented by Mrs. Mariann Meier (South) and Dr. H. R. Bolliger (North). The first item of importance was the Annual Report for 1971 which was accepted, including the accounts which showed a deficit owing to ever expanding activities. Fortunately, the collection made on the Swiss National Day this year will be for the benefit of the Swiss abroad, and the Organisation will be able to get what is hoped to be a record sum.

At the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad at Brunnen last August, the Commission was given the task of working out a solution to the advantage of the Swiss abroad with regard to the *withholding* tax, the "Verrechnungssteuer" which causes so much annoyance amongst Swiss who have some investments in their homeland, but don't pay tax there. The problem is a complicated one, and extensive investigations made by the Secretariat showed only too clearly that there is no reasonable or practical suggestion which could be followed. There is also the question of Swiss banking secrecy and the complicated workings of computer calculations, and it would be almost impossible to find a way by which Swiss nationals living away from Switzerland could be treated differently from foreigners having investments in Switzerland.

On 16th October, 1966, the Swiss electorate voted in favour of a Constitutional Article 45^{bis} concerning the "Fifth Switzerland". With its acceptance the Confederation was empowered amongst other things, to issue regulations regarding *social welfare* of compatriots abroad. A first draft was discussed by the Commission in Berne, which was found satisfactory in its general provisions and which complies essentially with the proposals accepted

by the Conference of Cantonal Welfare Directors. Above all, the new proposals will eliminate any disparities at present affecting Swiss in need according to their Cantons of origin. They will also expediate help and assistance. The Commission made a few suggestions which will be passed on to the authorities concerned.

Another field in which the Confederation is empowered to act by the special article is that of *political rights*. The possibility is now much nearer that Swiss living outside their homeland may be able to take part in federal plebiscites provided they have been in Switzerland for at least a fortnight. The Swiss in Great Britain, as opposed to those living in France and Germany and other countries bordering on Switzerland, have never been agitating for votes for Swiss Abroad. When the Nouvelle Société Helvétique (London Group) discussed this question at one of their meetings in 1970, there was only a very small minority in favour. The majority considered that we already had a say through the Commission of the Swiss Abroad, and that it would be wrong to be able to vote on matters when we paid no taxes. The opinion was also expressed that to have party politics in the Swiss communities in this country was undesirable. Nevertheless, the majority of the delegates on the Commission of the Swiss Abroad are in favour and they welcome the studies now being made by the authorities.

Another important item dealt with at the all-day meeting in March was the coming *Jubily Assembly in Berne* in the last week in August. As it is the 50th gathering of this kind, both the Secretariat and the Municipality of Berne make every effort to organise special events and to ensure an even greater success than usual. There will be art exhibitions by Swiss artists living abroad and a number of special musical events in which *Auslandschweizer* take part, especially a gala performance on Saturday, 26th August, of Mozart's "Magic Flute" at the Berne Municipal Theatre. On Wednesday (23rd) there will be a large-scale mock battle at the "Sand" near Schoenbuehl, on Thursday all day, a rifle shooting competition for all Swiss abroad, men and women. The same

evening is the official opening, followed by meetings and concerts, etc. The Commission of the Swiss Abroad will have a meeting on Friday morning, and various other groups will have discussions, question time, etc. In the evening there will be a popular street festival in the old-world town of Berne. The plenary meeting will take place at the Kursaal all day Saturday. Its theme will be "Political Rights and Duties of the Swiss Abroad". The President of the Confederation, Federal Councillor Nello Celio, will address the gathering.

An ecumenical service will be held in Berne Cathedral, followed by an outing to Interlaken, where the afternoon will be spent at a folklore festival in the Kursaal and Kurpark.

All Swiss from abroad are cordially invited to attend and they should apply as soon as possible to:

Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad,
Alpenstrasse 26,
3000 Berne,
Switzerland.

Prior to the meeting of the ASK, three other group meetings were held, the *Ausschuss* (executive Committee), the special Commission on Information and the Council of the Solidarity Fund.

For some time now, a scheme has been in operation in France and other French-speaking countries to use the existing Swiss colony paper four times a year as carrier of official information and news from Switzerland, from the local embassies and consulates and the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad, as well as of articles on Swiss problems and matters of interest, to all registered Swiss in any of the countries concerned. The commission on information has been studying this problem for a number of years, and now it looks as if a way has been found by which all Swiss abroad can be reached. The scheme is also working in the Netherlands and in Scandinavia, and it has been launched in Germany. Now, for the first time, a foreign language comes into it, namely English, and ways and means are now being studied by the Federal authorities concerned including the Embassy in London, "The Swiss Observer" Council and the Federation of Swiss Soci-