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# The Swiss Observer

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# COMMENT

## AU PAIRS – NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR THE HOUSEMAID

The fast growth of the au-pair institution has been brought about during the sixties by several converging factors such as the loosening of family ties, growing individual independence, easier travel facilities and the importance of the English language. These and other factors have made the journey from Switzerland to Britain both easier and tempting.

An au pair is essentially a guest receiving board and lodging, pocket-money currently averaging £5 a week in exchange for household help. All that is required to have a girl come over from the Continent is a letter certifying that they are to live as au pairs in a family. No stamps, no contributions have to be paid for this particularly adaptable type of labour. On the other hand, one must pay taxes for a char-woman called to dust the floor twice a week.

Most girls who take up "employment" as au pairs are without professional qualifications. They come from simple backgrounds and more often than not from rural areas. This fact alone makes them more vulnerable to the possible dangers of living far from home in a city like London. Although the population of Swiss au pair girls in London has remained more or less stationary (at about 4,000) during the past years, more and more of them actually come to the capital because their average stay has dropped considerably. While au pairs used to remain for a year or more with their British host families, now the duration of their stay sometimes doesn't exceed a couple of months. There are more arrivals and departures, and therefore more work for au pair agencies and consulates.

An au pair is a cheap substitute for a housemaid. Since the days of housemaids are over, there is a strong temptation to keep alive the illusion that au pair girls are housemaids, which they are not, and make them do the work expected of maids, nannies and cooks.

The treatment given to au pair girls used to vary so much that it was impossible to describe au pair work. Some girls were allowed to go to a school

of English after an easy morning's work and offered holidays with their host families, while others were compelled to do permanent overtime with washing-up, cleaning-up and handling unruly children. Au pairs have occasionally been driven to irresponsible behaviour, such as dishonesty or ill-treatment of the children in their care. Tactless "employers" combined with the enormity of London – and the many problems for which the less stable girls were not prepared – have occasionally led to dealings with mental homes and the law. The au pair institution has brought many hardships to guest teenagers (although, to be fair, the families that invite them usually offer them a lot). Although the status of au pairs is not defined by law, Home Office directives specify that they must not work for more than 30 hours a week. It is also specified in a booklet which is readily available at immigration departments that boys can't be employed as au pairs. Any young Swiss entering Britain without a working permit may not obtain remunerated work in this country. Non Common Market au pair boys are therefore forbidden. Although it is easy enough for a student or apprentice to find a loop-hole, he will be told to leave Britain at very short notice should he be found in the employ of a family.

According to a recent article in the *Guardian*, there is a growing fashion for au pair boys. The Swedes, closely followed by the Swiss, the Italians and the Portuguese are supposed to be the most apprized. By allowing a free movement of labour, the Common Market could give a further impetus to this trend, which is after all in keeping with the growing equality and likeness of the two sexes.

Au pair boys present many advantages over girls: they are prepared to perform manual work such as gardening, they can drive, offer protection, show fewer personal problems and will not be exposed to unwanted pregnancies. It remains to be seen whether they are as good at swathing babies. It appears that only experienced fathers – and by no means all – are prepared to undertake this rather clinical task. Some boy au pairs have misgivings about pushing a pram as this is a trifle too offensive to their male self-image.

P.M.B.

# HOME NEWS

## Dismal support for a "strong army"

A petition launched all over Switzerland in favour of a "Strong Army" was backed by only 245,338 signatures. The army officers who organised this demonstration said that its results had not come up to their expectation. Two previous petitions of a similar kind had won far greater support. A petition to preserve the Cavalry and the use of the horse in the Army was supported by 430,000 Swiss, including Socialists opposed to military service. Another petition staged to defend – of all things – the use of chiropractic (healing of diseases by manipulation of the spine) found no less than 400,000 signatures of support. These results show that the concept of military service is losing its popularity among the Swiss people. The promoters of the petition expressed surprise when they discovered that the name of Mr. Rudolf Gnaegi, Head of the Military Department had not been seen on the lists, whereas other former members of the Government, such as Messrs Weber, Schaffner and Wahlen had signed the petition.

## Cleaning the Alps

Faced with a growing garbage-disposal problem, the Swiss Alpine Club has announced a determined drive to equip its 160 mountain huts with adequate facilities. The larger huts will in addition be equipped with small incinerators whereas the others will be relieved of their disposal problems by helicopters. The announcement has been welcomed by the many mountaineers who viewed with growing alarm ice crevices, gaps between boulders and torrents being used for the disposal of tins and biscuit boxes. It is estimated that about 150 tons of waste are thus thrown away every year in the neighbourhood of mountain huts. This will in future be destroyed on the spot, or evacuated to the valleys by helicopter.

## Steady stream of applications for political asylum

361 applications for political asylum have been submitted to the federal authorities during the first six months of this year. Nearly all these requests come from people having left the countries of eastern Europe, mainly Hungary (130 applications), Czechoslovakia (59), Poland (39) and Romania (34). Applications were received from 44 countries. There were fewer of them than during the same period last year (405). A total of 1,053 applications were registered in 1972, 967 of which were accepted.