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Reflections on the gathering at St. Gall

REPORT BY ONE OF THE UK DELEGATES

To attend committee and commission meetings sounds rather dull. But the work done in St. Gall by the representatives of the Swiss community in Great Britain was anything but boring. When one deals actively with problems facing Swiss residents abroad, one becomes very much aware of the responsibility as a delegate and begins to appreciate the privilege to work on behalf of one's compatriots.

The UK delegates, Dr. H.R. Bolliger (North), Mrs Mariann Meier (South) and her deputy Father P. Bossard, were amongst the 60 members of the **Commission of the Swiss Abroad** assembled for its bi-annual meeting at the Commune Council Hall of St. Gall's Waaghaus. The meeting began at 8.30 a.m. and lasted till 1.30 p.m., with a short coffee break. The heat was considerable both in and out of doors.

The President of the Organisation and Chairman of the Commission, Councillor of States Dr. Louis Guisan, welcomed representatives from all parts of the globe and a number of inland members.

A good many important points were treated. Under the 8th revision of the Swiss Old-Age and invalidity insurance, it was reported that a first study group for Swiss abroad was going into various questions affecting them, such as Swiss women married to foreigners, etc. The Director of the Secretariat, Mr. M. Ney, and his deputy, Mr. L. Paillard, represent the Commission of the Swiss Abroad.

The problem of Swiss repatriated from overseas has not yet been solved. On the other hand, the period for Swiss resident abroad after which no more

military exemption tax has to be paid, has been further shortened. (See "Switzerland Day by Day").

The new law regarding social welfare for *Auslandschweizer* has been passed by both Chambers. And it will come into force as from 1st January next, except in France and Germany.

Some progress was reported regarding sickness insurance. A special group for repatriated Swiss has been set up, and some insurance companies already have departments solely for Swiss from Abroad.

The report on the Swiss schools abroad has had its desired effect. New regulations and improved subsidies have been considered by the Confederation.

New delegates were elected for Portugal and Argentina, and a few changes in the rules and regulations governing the Commission's work were proposed by the Commission to the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique* for ratification.

Regarding the withholding tax (*Verrechnungssteuer*), the answer to the Commission's request to study possible special treatment for Swiss abroad has been negative. The Commission's approach had been made at a time of financial stress. So for the time being, waiting was indicated.

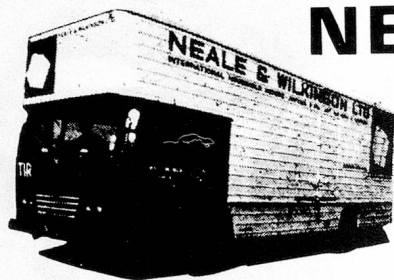
The main subject on the agenda was political rights for the Swiss abroad. Fifty pages of reporting and draft legislation had been sent to delegates for careful study. The delegate for GB North as well as several other speakers once again voiced their opposition against political rights for Swiss citizens living away from home, mainly on the grounds that it would create two groups of

Auslandschweizer, those near the homeland who could afford time and fares to attend federal plebiscites and those whom would be barred from voting through distance, lack of time and money. The delegate for GB South, whilst according every respect to the detailed report by the special commission set up by the Government, criticised it for not taking into account any of the objections voiced at last year's Assembly devoted to the subject. Whilst agreeing that the wheel must not be turned back, it would nevertheless be misleading if the Swiss at home believed that all *Auslandschweizer* wanted political rights. The report was accepted by a large majority.

Next year's meetings of the various umbrella organisations abroad were listed so as to prevent clashes. The next meeting of the Commission was fixed for 9th March in Berne. The Assembly for all Swiss abroad will take place in Neuchatel from 23rd to 25th August 1974. The theme will be "Swiss abroad and social insurance".

Information

As member of the Commission on Information set up a few years ago and consisting of representatives of the Federal Political Department, the Secretariat, journalists and other information experts, I attended two meetings, one by the said Commission and another by editors and responsible people for Swiss publications already dealing with the co-ordination of news and information through the new "review" sent by the Federal Political Department in conjunction with the



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Secretariat and existing Swiss periodicals abroad. Consul F. Adams also attended the meeting.

This "review" (in GB: "Swiss Observer" special issues four times *per annum*) was the main subject at the first of the two meetings. The scheme is already well established in French, German- and Italian-speaking countries and promises to work well also in the English-speaking parts once teething troubles are over. The "review" was considered a typically Helvetic solution, federalism at world level, making use of what exists, but creating co-ordination.

One of the great achievements by Swiss abroad for Swiss abroad is the *Solidarity Fund*. As a member of the Fund's Council I attended its meeting in St. Gall and as a Council member and individual member of the Co-operative, I took part, (with only one other member from Great Britain!) in the Annual General Meeting. The Fund is making progress, finances are sound in spite of some exchange losses. But nevertheless, not nearly enough Swiss abroad have joined it, especially in countries where the risk of losing one's livelihood through political strife, nationalisation or war are negligible. A new structure of the Fund has been worked out, allowing for interest on contributions made. It is hoped that, together with entirely new propaganda methods, this will convince Swiss abroad that to join is a must. It

may be interesting that so far already 4.5m francs has been paid out in compensation to over 400 members. The meeting elected a new President, Dr. Schillig, in succession to Ambassador Kappeler whose services were duly appreciated.

So far I should call my report "duty". But apart from all the work put into long meetings, it was mere enjoyment. There is something rather special in meeting compatriots from all parts of the world who share the same problems to a large extent, even though there are also marked differences, and who have one thing in common, the love of their country. This year's theme "Activities of the Swiss Institutions abroad" showed more than at any other time how varied and manifold these activities are, and how much unselfish work and loyal devotion goes into it. It was right that the public at home should once be told just how much is done in the interest of Switzerland, and that the Swiss abroad do not only make demands.

The appeal made by the President of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique that the individual has it in his own hand to help change the world, tallied remarkably with the forceful exhortation by the two Ministers at the ecumenical service and the final passages in Federal Councillor Furgler's address. He said that democracy cannot live through silence, only through debate. The Swiss democratic structure is

open to constant change and correction. For this to continue, the individual must take part, must carry some of the responsibility. Without that, both in one's private life and one's life as a citizen, there is no real freedom.

The Swiss who met in St. Gall, left with new hopes and courage to carry on their tasks as "Ambassadors" of Switzerland in the interest of their compatriots, for the sake of their homeland and last, but not least, towards better international understanding.

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Cervelas strike

The *Comité Central de la Fédération Romande des Consommatrices* have called off a nation-wide boycott of ham and cervelas in protest of their insufficient quality. The Executive of this consumer organisation explained that it was not worth continuing the boycott as their demands had not been met by the manufacturers. They all the same warned of the continued bad quality of the prepared meat. The Organisation had called for a stiffening of controls and new cantonal standards on meat. The relevant cantonal authorities said that they could not look into the matter before several months.

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