

Swiss presence in Algeria and Morocco

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SWISS PRESENCE IN ALGERIA AND MOROCCO

In the following we report on a recent journey in Morocco and Algeria and find that "things aren't what they used to be" for the remaining Swiss community.

Morocco and Algeria have both welcomed thousands or prospering Swiss families. This was before these countries became independent respectively in 1956 and 1962. Today, the remaining Swiss families there have the same story to tell and consider that there is no future for themselves and their children under the present Moroccan and Algerian regimes.

The importance of Swiss presence in Algerian history is borne out by many historical facts. One recalls, for example, that Henry Dunant's career as the Founder of the Red Cross originated directly from his misfortunes in Algeria. Having been despoiled by French Colons for being too generous with the native labour force, he set out to meet the Emperor Napoleon, who was at the battlefield of Solferino in Italy. Dunant's deep shock at witnessing the atrocities of that battle was the beginning of the Red Cross saga. Another pointer to the importance of the role played by the Swiss in Algeria was the fact that the war of independence began in 1954, with a revolt by labourers working for Genevese landowners in the Setif area. Today there is still a "Patisserie Genevoise" in the centre of Algiers, and also an "Hotel de Genève". Neither are of course run by Swiss nationals any longer. On the outskirts of Algiers, there is a large hospital: a shield carrying the Bernese Bear is displayed on the walls of its administrative block.

TWO SWISS SOCIETIES LEFT

Signs of former Swiss presence can also be seen in Morocco. In Casablanca there is an "Hotel de Lausanne", which appears to be very well managed, and a large bookshop run by the "Editions Rencontres", an important Lausanne publishing firm. There must be other signs of Swiss activity which the hurried tourist can't immediately see as there are still a few Swiss managing or owning factories, transport companies and export-import firms. Most of them are waiting to be Moroccanized at any moment, as I was told by Mr. Pierre Bossy, President of the Swiss Benevolent Society of Casablanca. He said that the business climate in which our compatriots were working there had become unbearable.

Before independence, there were about 3,600 Swiss in Morocco. Today, there are barely four to five hundred, the majority of them concentrated in Casablanca, which is the commercial and industrial centre of the Cherifian Kingdom. Whereas the Swiss societies of Rabat (the political capital) and other cities have disappeared, Casablanca still

has a *Cercle Suisse* gathering Swiss businessmen at lunch every month, and a highly active Swiss Benevolent Society (called *Société Helvétique de Bienfaisance, Maroc*). Its President explained that not all the Swiss of Morocco had managed to make a comfortable nugget in profitable enterprises during the Protectorate. There were many poor Swiss widows surviving on meagre pensions, or elderly persons unable to return home who required support from the more fortunate section of the Swiss community of Casablanca. The problems faced by the "*Société Helvétique de Bienfaisance*" were the same as those of the Swiss Benevolent Society in London. Although the Society doesn't enjoy a Fund (as in London), it receives yearly contributions from members of the Colony and occasional legacies. With the proceeds of a Tombola at the Colony's main annual function, it just about manages to keep a balanced budget.

NO FUTURE FOR YOUNG RESIDENTS

The Swiss who have had their businesses nationalised or handed over to Moroccans have left the country. Others have done likewise either because they saw no professional future for themselves, or for their children. It is fair to say that, with one man in two unemployed and a surfeit of Moroccan students, sons of Swiss families have not the slightest future in the country, particularly if the father's affairs have been confiscated. The families that remain have either escaped the net of Moroccanisation, or are of retirement age and unable by currency restrictions to transfer their property abroad.

Present regulations only allow one to repatriate 100,000 Dirhams (£10,000) a sum which will not bring one very far nowadays. The only solution left to the Swiss who have prospered and retired in Casablanca is to take long trips abroad, and enjoy Moroccan sun for the rest of the year.

However iniquitous Moroccan currency regulations may seem to be, they are less stringent than in Algeria, where it is not possible to take out even small sums of money. The tourist fills a currency form stating his holdings in currency and valuable objects in detail as he enters the country. Every time he exchanges his foreign currency or travellers cheques, this is stamped on the form, which he must produce when leaving the country. The Algerian customs therefore know exactly what the tourist has spent. Should he have with him money not accounted for in the form, they will confiscate it. They will only convert to negotiable French francs those Algerian Dinars which were bought in the country and not used.

THE MONEY MUST STAY IN

Swiss Embassy officials, whose earnings come from abroad, may not take a Dinar out of the country and must rely on a foreign account for any holiday or trip outside Algeria. Algiers has a Swiss Benevolent Society. It is however not in a position to help youngsters who eventually get into financial straits (this is one of the most frequent tasks of the London Benevolent Society) as this money could not be taken out of the country.

The Algiers Benevolent Society is the only remaining Swiss Society in Algeria. Its Secretary is Mr. Albert Mehr, formerly of London, where he was Secretary of the Swiss Rifle Association. He still subscribes to the *Swiss Observer* — a benevolent gesture and was lucky enough to find a small villa for himself and his family in the lush residential area overlooking Algiers and which still transpires the sweetness of life under the French. Many of these large villas have been converted into Embassies, or house Embassy officials at exorbitant prices.

THE PROBLEM OF COMPENSATIONS

The Swiss Benevolent Society of Algiers have a house of their own above Algiers and meetings are held there every week. This usually involves being together among Swiss, and also seeing films sent from Switzerland. On special occasions, such as the 1st August, well over a hundred Swiss converge on Algiers's Swiss

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House for festivities honoured by the presence of the Ambassador. There are about four hundred Swiss left in Algeria, a little over half of them in the Algiers area. Before independence, there were over 1,600 Swiss in Algeria. They have practically all gone as anyone who possessed anything had his property taken away from him. The Swiss who have been despoiled in Algeria have formed a highly active and vocal association whose leaders can be seen in action at the yearly Assemblies of the Swiss abroad. In fact, the question of compensating these families is one of the outstanding problems between the Swiss and Algerian governments. It is doubtful that the Swiss who have lost land, equipment and factories in Algeria will ever be adequately compensated. Most of them seem to have recovered splendidly in Europe and far away from material hardship.

EMBASSY COVERS AMERICAN MISSION

Since we've mentioned a Swiss House in Algiers, we should recall that the Swiss of Casablanca also have a Local of their own. A word should be said

about our country's official representation in these cities. The Swiss Embassy in Algiers stands on the waterfront, overlooking the port, on a boulevard which used to be called "Le Ferrière" before independence, but which now has an unpronounceable Arab name. The buildings on this famed Algiers street are lacquer white and are ornated with slightly baroque castings and wrought iron balconies lending them elegance and late 19th century charm. Unfortunately, Algerian families have taken over these buildings formerly inhabited by upper middle-class French of mainly Alsatian origin, and linen hangs from every balcony. The impression would be the same if the population of Whitechapel settled down in Mayfair. Although the Swiss Embassy used to handle, or rather "cover" the interests of several other countries who had broken off their diplomatic relations with Algeria, this is only true today of the U.S. However, this role doesn't mean that the Embassy actually handles the problems of American nationals or businesses, but that it covers "under its wings" the activities and presence of an official American delegation in Algiers which no longer ranks as

an Embassy. It is rare that the Swiss Embassy is called to discuss problems relating to Americans in difficulty with the U.S. representatives in Algiers.

Nominally handling American affairs certainly doesn't require additional staff. Switzerland has no consulate in Algiers and consular matters are handled by the Embassy's chancery. If my memory is correct, its staff is limited to the Ambassador, his First Counsellor, a Head of Chancery, three Chancery officials and three secretaries. As in so many other countries, the Embassy undertakes to foster Swiss Colony life and one of its members, at present Mr. Mehr, acts as Secretary to the Swiss Benevolent Society.

TWO KINDS OF SWISS

The Swiss Consulate in Casablanca is situated on the 8th floor of a white building overlooking the "Avenue Hassan 11", one of the main arteries of this 1.5 million inhabitant metropolis. The lift (made by Otis) occasionally refuses to function and one can spend several anguished minutes before being saved either by the distant attendant, if he hears your distress ring, or someone using the lift from outside. Visitors to the Consulate are very politely greeted by an usher wearing a fez. The view from the waiting room gives one a glimpse of the size of this modern but rather dry city which cannot be said to represent Morocco at all.

Turning back to the Swiss of Algeria, we were told that the few Swiss still in that country could be separated in two categories: The old residents that have decided to stay on and young professional people, mainly engineers, working on government projects under contract with Swiss firms. These young people are mainly concentrated in the Oran and Constantine areas and stay for limited periods. They are not interested in meeting Swiss people and in taking part in Swiss activities. The pattern observed in London is thus repeated in Algiers. I was also told that trainees, engineers or Embassy staff had better marry before they accept assignments in Algeria. There is very little to do in this country (the *Cinémathèque* appears to be the only place sheltering culture in the capital). Socialism hasn't made the country more attractive to its visitors. Breeding children and the joys of domestic life thus seem to be the most worthwhile proposition for those who want to enjoy life in a country where it is impossible to find potatoes or cheese, where cars cost 260 per cent of their price ex-works and where Radio programmes seem to consist exclusively of news programmes and interminable broadcasts of plaintive and monotonous Arab wails (i.e. music). A good tip to all those who plan to remain in Algeria for some time: Take a good radio set so as to catch Beromunster, or the Swiss Short Wave Services. The Swiss over there find that their transistor is their mental lifeline.

P.M.B.



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