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A MISSION IN THE WORLD TODAY

Interview with Dr. Albert Weitnauer



"I have often wondered why Switzerland could not become a full member of the European Community. There is obviously Swiss neutrality, which clashes with the political objectives of the Community. But there is possibly something else: perhaps Switzerland is just too important a country to become – at least for the time being – simply a small member state of the European Community".

With 32 years in the service of the Confederation behind him, Dr. Albert Weitnauer, Swiss Ambassador in London since February 1971, has developed a strong sense of Switzerland's position in the world. As a keen historian and a negotiator for twelve years, Dr Weitnauer did not arrive at this belief lightly. He became Delegate for Trade Agreements in 1959 and was appointed Delegate to Special Missions in 1966, by which time he had already received the title of Ambassador. Up to 1971, Dr. Weitnauer, 56, negotiated various tariff and trade agreements as well as treaties on other matters, on behalf of Switzerland. This gave him a good insight into the working of the European Community and the atmosphere prevailing at the Brussels

headquarters. From this experience he derived a strong belief in the necessity for excellent neighbourly relations between Switzerland and the Common Market and also found that the Community was quite willing to respond to this necessity.

National Self-Expression Outside the E.E.C.

On the other hand, it was quite apparent to our present Ambassador in London that to sacrifice Switzerland's individuality to European unity, which so far exists only as an objective in the minds of certain European statesmen, would not be reasonable and, more than that, not in the best interests of Europe and the world as a whole. By staying outside the Community our country can play a more useful role in the international field, maximising the opportunities its traditional neutrality entails.

In remaining neutral, Switzerland is by no means alone. Dr. Weitnauer notes with pleasure that recent international developments, particularly the Helsinki Talks, have brought forth a new voice – that of neutral countries. Sweden,

Austria, Switzerland and, to some extent, Finland spoke as a new and distinct group. By remaining neutral and independent of the great power blocks, these countries could bring a vital contribution to the making of a secure and prosperous Europe.

Dr. Weitnauer believes that Switzerland has a mission in the world which she can accomplish only by preserving her ideals and defending an image of stability and trustworthiness. To this end, it is most important for Switzerland to remain strong, both morally and physically. "Strength inspires trust. The world being what it is, acknowledged strength must be the starting point of international negotiations".

Swiss negotiators are no easy nuts to crack. "Admittedly, we are sometimes not without pettiness. While the Germans would not quibble over a few million francs, we would tend to make this an issue. This is due perhaps to our lack of wide open spaces. Geography has some influence on mentalities, although the theory would be shaken by the fact that the French are as hard bargainers as we are". While the Swiss are particularly mindful of their interests, they are not "bad characters", says Dr. Weitnauer. "We are rather good at heart. Our tendency is first to say 'no' so as to have more time to think".

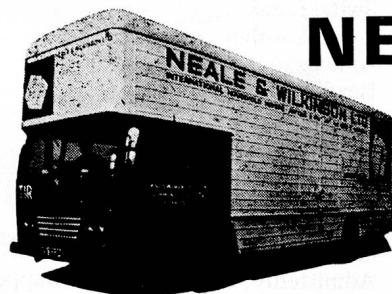
The Swiss are generally cautious yet also sometimes daring adventurers, as evidenced by the many colourful careers of Swiss nationals overseas. The urge which led so many Swiss to go abroad and nowadays to build factories in the most remote corners of the earth demonstrates an inclination to take risks. The Swiss embody both conservatism and an adventurous spirit which can only find expression in wide and unbounded spaces.

"This situation may account for the grumpy mood which the Swiss sometimes show. The smallness of their country

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could perhaps frustrate their innate power-drive. A foreign diplomat once told me that the Swiss were *frustrated imperialists*. I think he had a point".

With a law degree, a strong interest in history and the arts, and a desire to serve the State, Dr. Weitnauer entered the War-Economy Division of the Department of Economy when he was 24. Thirty years later he succeeded Mr. Rene Keller as Ambassador in London. "I didn't aim at the outset to become an Ambassador. This just came my way as my career unfolded", says Dr. Weitnauer, who was given the title of Ambassador in 1966 but whose London posting is his first as an accredited head of mission.

Are We "Aloof"?

After working for five years at the War-Economy Division, he entered the Division of Commerce of the Department of Public Economy, within whose ranks he rose to the post of Delegate for Trade Agreements and Special Mission. He spent 25 years defending Swiss economic interests against the outside world, six of them in London and Washington. By an accident of history, the Division of Commerce, which nominally still belongs to the Political Department (i.e. Ministry of Foreign Affairs), was dissociated from it in 1917 in order to overburden the then Head of the Political Department. This temporary measure has remained in force ever since.

As a negotiator, Dr. Weitnauer became aware of the vital importance of economic matters in modern diplomacy, and he learnt that nations fought for their own interests above everything else.

Observers of Swiss policy cannot be blamed if they feel that Switzerland is more aloof than other countries. Dr. Weitnauer admits that Swiss circumspection is sometimes excessive, as in the case of our not joining the International Monetary Fund, but he has a ready answer for those who think that Switzerland was playing a lone hand during the recent monetary troubles.

Why did the Swiss National Bank not support the dollar last January and thus contribute to making the international monetary system work? To this question, Dr. Weitnauer answered that the National Bank had received forward knowledge of an impending tide of floating dollars and, after absorbing a few hundred million of them, had no choice but to withhold its support of the American currency. But the Germans did agree to buy dollars. "They did so because possibly they were over-reaching themselves in the defence of objective in which we also believe", he said. Asked why the Swiss did not, like most European countries, link their currency to the E.E.C. float, Dr. Weitnauer replied: "The Swiss didn't tie the franc to the new common E.E.C. margins because this went against her domestic interest under present monetary circumstances. The Swedes joined in the float because it was worthwhile for them. The British, the Italians and the Irish didn't join in because this would have been against their interests too. Countries primarily motivated by their own interests and negotiations consist in finding the best compromise".

Another point on which I questioned Dr. Weitnauer was why the Swiss people had been asked to ratify the Switzerland-E.E.C. free trade agreement, which has no institutional consequences whatever. He said that the referendum was held because it had been promised. He stressed that these promises should not be taken lightly as the Swiss — like the British — were one of the most politically-developed peoples in the world.

Historical Study Group

Several study groups were set up during the E.E.C.'s formative years to recommend possible options to the Swiss Government. One of them with the untranslatable name of "Historische Standortsbestimmung" met for the first time in 1961 under the chairmanship of

Dr. Weitnauer. The group still meets today under the same chairman, while most of the others have disappeared. It sits twice yearly for the whole day. Records of its proceedings are carefully drafted and minutes are circulated as valuable documents among political decision-makers. Each meeting is devoted to a definite theme. The group includes many leading intellectuals and politicians, such as Olivier Reverdin, Councillor of States and former President of the Council of Europe. Jacques Freymond, Dean of the Faculty of International Studies in Geneva, Francois Landgraf, Director of the *Gazette de Lausanne*, and the former Federal Councillors Weber and Wahlen.

What were the main aspects of the diplomatic profession today? The job of Ambassador has changed rapidly and lost its former image, says Dr. Weitnauer. Most inter-state matters of any importance are settled by governments or ministries concerned. Ambassadors are left with the role of informing and advising their governments. Apart from that, the task of representation is of great importance to their activities. As Dr. Weitnauer sees it, one of the most significant functions of a Swiss Ambassador in London is to help promote the Swiss image in Britain.

The Delights of London

"It is really very agreeable to be Swiss Ambassador in London because Switzerland and the Swiss are so very popular in Britain. One has a feeling of meeting only friends of our country. However, I am not quite sure whether, in the long run, the average Briton's idea of Switzerland is altogether realistic. To him it is sometimes just mountains, skiing, good hotels, watch and cheese-making and banking".

The Ambassador feels that, since Switzerland is in actual fact a very varied country with manifold aspects which might all become important in the Swiss-British relationship, it is imperative to bring home the reality of Switzerland to our British friends. That is why he attaches a great weight to having contacts with people in all walks of life in his host country. Particular emphasis is being laid in this respect on the cultural role of the Embassy. Even its gleaming new building was, in itself, an "Ambassador" of Switzerland.

Another essential aspect of the Ambassador's work is to write reports. Headquarters in Berne rely on these for their information and understanding of world events. Thus an Ambassador is also called upon to perform as a kind of journalist. "We are not quite as fast as journalists but we occasionally receive information which they have no access. Admittedly, this does not happen very frequently".

Last but not least, the Ambassador must see that the Embassy and its 70-strong staff is running smoothly. As far as Dr. Weitnauer is concerned, the London position represents a great

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opportunity, one which also has its pleasant and more restful aspects — a change from the days when he shouldered the responsibility of taking decision in the name of the whole country at international negotiations.

P.M.B.

NEWS FROM THE COLONY

"ASTERIX" IN SWITZERLAND

Asterix's reputation is firmly established on the Continent. He and his Gargantuan friend *Obelix* are two heroes from Gaul whose adventures are depicted in a highly-successful series of illustrated books. The series, which has been the rage of France for years, sees *Asterix* and *Obelix* live through their adventures in every country of Roman-occupied Europe. The humour of the script and the cartoons (respectively by *Goscinny* and *Underzo*) pertain to their grotesque exaggeration and the transposition of modern reality to Roman days.

Asterix has penetrated the British market for some years. There are at least nine titles, including *Asterix in Britain*, *Asterix at the Olympics* and *Asterix and Cleopatra*. Now, the series has been enriched with the addition of *Asterix in Switzerland* — adaptation of *Asterix chez les Helvètes*. The book is published by Brock Hampton Press, Leicester and costs 90p. Although the humour and originality which has ensured the success of the series on the Continent would seem more likely to appeal to a Latin mind, it appears that it has caught on here. One reason for being doubtful of the success in Britain of the formula is that it relies to a great extent of schoolroom reminiscences, and more particularly, Latin and history lessons. More emphasis is laid on such subjects in French schools and *Asterix* should thus amuse youth of a certain age, but not young children. The English translation remains close to the spirit and wit of the original.



FISHERMEN AGAINST GAS PIPELINE IN LAKE GENEVA

The association of professional fishermen in Lake Geneva are to launch a political action against the projected construction of a gas pipeline under the Lake.

The natural gas company GASNAT, which will supply Switzerland with North Sea gas from Holland, plans to build the pipeline next year. It will carry gas brought down the Rhone Valley up to Villeneuve, at the end of the Lake, to Geneva and Lausanne. The pipeline would rest on the lake bed and connections would branch off to supply communities on the lakeshore.

The fishermen claim that the system is unsafe and that a fracture of the pipeline would have grave environmental consequences. They insist that the pipeline should be built alongside the present motorway joining the two ends of the Lake.

Swiss Mercantile Society

The twenty members of the Swiss Mercantile Society who were at Swiss House for the March Meeting enjoyed an exceptionally good film show. Three films were on the programme, one on Australia, one on Japan and one by a member, Mr. F. G. Sommer, on the historical celebrations held in Berne in the fifties to celebrate the 600th anniversary of that city's entry into the Confederation.

The film on Australia urged one to leave the cramped British Isles to enjoy the sun and prosperity of the expanses of a virgin continent. The film led us to a tour of that huge island — starting at Sydney, and continuing with Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth and the other coastal cities in which most of the population is concentrated, it brought us back after a full circle to the point of departure. The film had some beautiful views of the inside and wild reaches of this near-empty continent. The film on Japan had been supplied by the Japanese Tourist Office. It naturally dwelt on that country's phenomenal economic expansion, but also gave us insight into the Japanese way of life and offered glimpses into the country's beauty.

Mr. Sommer's film was in colour and showed a memorable procession in front of the Federal Palace. The dresses of spectators and the scarcity of cars in the street immediately indicated that Mr. Sommer had shot that film at least twenty years ago. Amateur films in colour were evidently as good technically then as they are today. It was striking to compare the seeming emptiness of the capital's street in the fifties with the traffic-clogged situation today.

As usual, the meeting was followed with beer and conversation in the Committee Room downstairs.

Prior to the film show, Mr. A. Jaccard, the President, told members that council permission had not yet been obtained for renewal work on the S.M.S. school of language, which is housed in Swiss House. The premises were bought last year with the help of the Society at home. Members had been told at previous meetings that part of the difficulty resided in neighbour's objections to the proposed works. Meanwhile, the nearly 300 students of the school will have to continue their studies. Mr. Jaccard stressed how important it was to continue normal teaching activities. Any interruption with the school's routine would have damaging effects and mean new efforts to build up attendance to its previous level. Earnest attempts to find temporary premises made in every

quarter — from the Salvation Army to British Rail proved vain. A solution seemed however to have been found thanks to the Swiss Catholic Mission, which is to put its Great Peter Street premises at the disposal of the school. Those premises are large enough to cater for about half the S.M.S.'s student enrolment.

Concert at Endell Street

A concert was held in aid of the Swiss Church of London under the auspices of the Nouvelle Societe Helvetique on March 30th. This second edition of an event introduced over a year ago at the Swiss Church attracted a fair attendance in the quality of the performance certainly deserved a greater turn-up. Melodies from Mendelssohn, Teleman, Brahms and J. S. Bach resounded under the curved ceiling of the 19th Century Hall. An excellent performance was put up by Christine Sewell (mezzo soprano), Robert Bossert (violin) and Lennard Rabes (organ). The Cantata No. 14 "Fleuch des Luste Zauberfrau" by Teleman was particularly moving.

Dear Sir,

Having just returned from a wonderful ski-ing holiday in Switzerland with the Auslandschweizer for the fourth time, I feel I must write to you to let you know what an enjoyable time I had and to ask you if you would please give this holiday scheme a little publicity.

There were in all 35 of us from all different countries, and again I was the only English person there.

I feel that if only more people knew of this holiday more people would participate.

The ski-ing holiday this time was held in a lovely chalet in Schonreid. We skied most of the morning and afternoon, taking a picnic up the mountain for lunch. In the evening, we had films, lectures, parties or played Jass! (my favourite!).

Information can be obtained from the Swiss Embassy, or direct from:

Auslandschweizersekretariates,
Alpenstrasse 26
3006 BERN
Switzerland.

Claire Bertschinger