

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1974)
Heft: 1693

Artikel: A successful 52nd assembly of the Swiss abroad in Neuchatel
Autor: [s.n.]
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688095>

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A SUCCESSFUL 52nd ASSEMBLY OF THE SWISS ABROAD IN NEUCHÂTEL

Officially it was opened in the evening of Friday, 23rd August, 1974 by the President of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (ASO) Councillor of States, Dr. Louis Guisan. The ceremony took place at the cathedral of La Collégiale near the Castle of Neuchâtel, both buildings dating back to the last quarter of the 12th century. The cathedral was consecrated in 1276 and is partly Romanesque, partly Gothic. Very nearly 500 people were present, many having journeyed from far corners of the earth, from many parts of Africa and Asia, from North and South America and from Australia. There were 90 Swiss from France alone, a large contingent from Germany and a dozen or so from Britain, including Consul-General and Mrs. F. Adams, the President of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the U.K., Mr. B. Simon, as well as one of the oldest participants, Mr. Jakob Vogel from Hereford, whose 94 years nobody would credit. There were six young Swiss from abroad at present on military service and a number of visitors from inside Switzerland.

The opening ceremony was held in the presence of many official visitors to the Congress, representatives of Government, Parliament, the Canton and the City of Neuchâtel, federal authorities, Ambassadors and Consuls and fraternal delegates of various organisations. A very special guest shall be mentioned, a great friend of the Swiss abroad, the former Federal Councillor, Dr. F. T. Wahlen.

One of the highlights of the opening was the concerto for alphorn (and organ) by the Swiss composer Jean Daetwyler, a most beautiful piece of music which clearly demonstrated that the alphorn is not only a tourist attraction, but a musical instrument. Nothing better could have been chosen to enhance the special occasion than this interesting composition so expertly performed.

Work before pleasure

Already the day before the 52nd Assembly was declared open, no fewer than five meetings took place, those of the executive committees of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad (ASK) and the Solidarity Fund, of the Council of the Foundation for the Swiss Abroad, responsible for administering the funds, and two meetings on **information**, the first of the special commission on the subject on which the Federal Political Department, the Secretariat (ASS), journalists and other experts and a few members from Swiss communities abroad (including Mrs. Mariann Meier from Great Britain) are represented. They regularly discuss all matters concerning information, and they were responsible for launching the "review", news and information sent to all Swiss registered with Embassies and Consulates four times

a year. (In Great Britain the *Swiss Observer* is used for the purpose). Already all German-, French- and Italian-speaking countries are covered, and a good many in the English language regions. It is hoped to cover Spanish in the not too distant future and thus to complete regular information of all Swiss communities abroad.

The Commission on Information also concerns itself with the *Echo* and how this interesting illustrated periodical for the Swiss abroad could be made better known, and the *Weltschweizer*, the excellent magazine specially for the younger compatriots outside Switzerland.

Incidentally, several of the agreements between the Swiss Government, the Secretariat and the publishers concerned with the *Review* were signed at the plenary meeting on Saturday. So Mr. Simon put the last signature on behalf of the *Swiss Observer* and the Federation in the U.K. on the contract, next to that of the Chairman of the S.O. Advisory Council and of the publisher.

The second meeting on information was one attended by consuls, editors and other experts responsible for dealing with the *Review*. It was one of co-ordinating the various aspects and discussing problems regarding the quarterly publication. Great Britain was represented by Consul Adams and Mrs. Meier.

On Friday morning, the most important working meeting took place, that of the "Little Parliament" of the Swiss Abroad, the Commission (ASK). All four delegates and deputies from the U.K. took part, Dr. Hans-Reudi Bolliger (Manchester) and Dr. Hansjoerg Wirz (Edinburgh), Mrs. Mariann Meier and Father Paul Bossard (London), though the latter's presence was curtailed owing to aircraft trouble on the way. A special report on the work of the ASK will appear at a later date.

In the afternoon, the **Solidarity Fund's Council**, under its new President Dr. G. Schelling, discussed various problems of this marvellous institution of self-help that the Swiss abroad have created. The Swiss in Great Britain were represented by Mrs. Mariann Meier, a member of the Council. At the Annual General Meeting in the evening, held again in the fine Council Chamber of the Hotel de Ville, the new Constitution of the Fund was accepted, as well as annual report, accounts and budget. There was one dissenting voice regarding the new structure of the Fund, allowing for interest on payments made. It was heartening after all to hear somebody regret the fact that the main solidarity idea should now be dropped. Much as one would like to support this overseas Swiss, it has unfortunately been found that not many of our compatriots support wholeheartedly the principle of solidarity.

Special meetings were held, too, for newcomers to an Assembly and of the Friends of the ASO. There was also

question time when members of the Secretariat were at the disposal of participants.

The theme of the congress

The first plenary of the Assembly took place on Saturday morning at the auditorium of the Cité Universitaire. A more ugly and uninviting hall could hardly be imagined. The only relief were the various flags and pretty floral arrangements.

Monsieur Guisan welcomed delegates and visitors in three languages. He was followed by the new Central President of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, Dr. Ernst Basler. He spoke from the point of view of the mother society, proud that its daughter, the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, has become such an important body.

Next, the President opened the discussion on the Assembly's main theme "Social Insurance". It was followed by questions on the voluntary old age and invalidity insurance for the Swiss Abroad, answered and commented upon by experts on insurance, and representatives of the federal authorities by way of a round table discussion and illustrated by slides. It was explained that the Swiss social insurance idea was based on the tree columns, public (AHV/AVS), professional retirement funds and private life insurance. Sickness insurance and how it affects Swiss abroad was also discussed. It was held that much would still have to be done in this sector.

Again the criticism was brought up by one of the federal representatives that the Swiss abroad received 7½ times more in benefits than they paid in contributions. The reason for this discrepancy was pointed out by the President of the NSH, London, that the highly paid employees had to pay the full contributions, whereas their colleagues at home only paid part; on the other hand they were not allowed to deduct expenses as self-employed persons. Once a solution to this were to be found, the larger income group employees would also join and the difference between contributions and benefits would become smaller. It is a comforting thought that the Swiss abroad are represented on a special commission dealing with such problems.

At noon, the by now customary ecumenical luncheon took place at which the Secretary-General of the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and both a Protestant and a Catholic Minister spoke.

Monsieur Lucien Paillard, Deputy-Director of the Secretariat, continued his able chairing of the discussion on social insurance in the afternoon. Much had been learned by the end of the meeting, and many points had been clarified.

After a somewhat complicated introduction to the new Constitution of the Solidarity Fund given by a Swiss from France, the highlight of the afternoon arrived in the speech by a member of the Government, Federal Councillor Dr. Hans Huerlimann, Head of the Federal Department of the Interior. It was

received with much interest and prolonged applause, and it brought to an end the working session of the Assembly.

An evening's entertainment

A happy crowd met at the pier of Neuchâtel harbour to embark on the *Ville de Neuchâtel* for a most pleasant trip on the lake and through the Thielle canal into the Lake of Bienné to Le Landeron. From there coaches took the party to the famous Maisons Vallier at Cressier where dining and dancing went on until well past midnight. It was a most successful evening, and all concerned with the arrangements as well as with the organisation of the Assembly are to be congratulated, the Director, Mr. Marcel Ney, his deputy Mr. Paillard and their competent staff. Their talents were further evidenced next day when an outing into the Jura Neuchâtelois took place. At 9.30 on the sunny Sunday morning, congress participants and their friends assembled in La Collégiale for an ecumenical service. The Protestant Minister, Dr. E. W. Huppenbauer, gave a short sermon in German, followed by the R. C. Abbé Marc Joye who spoke in French. Hymns and prayers were sung and spoken in several tongues by the community, and it gave the whole Assembly a seal of being not only under the good care of authorities and friends at home, but under Him who has looked after our country through centuries.

Several coaches then left with men, women and children eager to see more of the beautiful Canton of Neuchâtel. A tour of the old proud town had been made on Friday, and now the drive lasting 2½ hours gave an opportunity of enjoying large unspoilt parts of woodland and fields, up to the Chasseral and by way of La Chaux-de-Fonds to the heights of Les Geneveys-sur-Coffrane. How one enjoyed the tasty pea soup and boiled ham together with a glass of one of the many fine Neuchâtel wines in the open air!

Equally enjoyable were the songs and folklore dances presented by a group from Neuchâtel. All too soon the coaches had to return to the capital of the Canton.

A last get-together took place, and

farewells were said. It will be au revoir until the end of August next year when the 53rd Assembly will take place in Basle. If it is in any way as successful as the one just ended, it will be well worth attending.

M.M.

Climbing the Matterhorn at 71 by Werner Stettbacher (Part 1)

I resolved to climb the Matterhorn for the fourth time last summer; first, in order to celebrate my seventieth birthday in a suitable manner, and secondly, because a talk on the Matterhorn with suitable slides under the auspices of the Scottish Geographical Society was expected of me at the Speakers' Hall at Glasgow University.

My wife and I spent three weeks in Macugnaga in July 1973, but the weather was unsettled that year and the conditions on the Matterhorn ruled out any climb.

This summer, we arranged for an eight-weeks' stay in Macugnaga, feeling sure that there would be a good spell for my fourth attempt on the Matterhorn.

Macugnaga is a famous Italian alpine resort at the foot of the Monte Rosa Massif, only about a kilometre away from the Swiss border.

The surrounding districts first came into prominence some thousand years ago, when gold prospectors were attracted by the gold deposits lying there.

Three or four hundred years ago Macugnaga came into being through a number of German-speaking Swiss from the Brigue area of the Valais, who crossed the Monte Moro Pass and settled down there. Swiss names such as Burgener, Zurbriggen, Müller, Buman, Reich and Lager are still common, and it is

remarkable how Swiss customs have been preserved through generations. Moreover, most of the descendants still speak *Schwyzerdeutsch* today with varying degrees of fluency.

In the early 1860s, when prominent British tourists started exploring the Alps — men like Whymper, the conqueror of the Matterhorn, who also came to this district — Macugnaga became more widely known. Our hotel — the *Albergo Passa del Turlo* — was built in 1862, in Borca de Macugnaga. Macugnaga covers a wide area, such as Davos for instance, and incorporates several villages miles apart.

Originally the most important one it has been superseded by Staffa since the advent of winter sports, and most of the hotels and shops are now situated in the latter.

Gold under the Alps

Before the Second World War, an English company began to search for gold dust in earnest. Buildings, shafts and tunnels of great length were constructed in several areas, and in the village of Pestarena alone (one of the Macugnaga villages) there were about a thousand men working in the mines. This kind of work, however gainful it may have been, brought nothing but misery and misfortune to the district; for most of the workers were severely affected by the dust, and many of them died at an early age. Those surviving are still suffering from the effects of working in those mines. Now all the buildings are in ruins.

Some ten years ago, attempts were made to restart gold mining, but after three men had died in an explosion during trials, it was decided to drop the whole project.

(Continued in Next Issue)

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