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on everyone present before saying a few words on the importance of the London Group of the NHS as a platform of the Swiss Abroad. She strongly denied that it was primarily an institution of "women knitters" and said that a thorough investigation had shown that two-thirds of the members were male. Referring to another Swiss society in London, the City Swiss Club, which had confirmed its intention of remaining an exclusively male club barring certain occasions where wives could be invited, the speaker said that she respected this stand and strongly denied rumours against a background of guffaws — according to which one of her stronger desires was to become a member of the City Swiss Club.

Ending her address, Mrs. Meier referred her audience to the sayings of the new President of the Central Organisation of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, Dr. Hans Basler, on its meaning and purpose in Switzerland today. She welcomed the fact that the members of the London Group, had expressed their wish not to be involved in the political life of their home country when they answered the Wahlen Questionnaire three years ago. This, she said, had prevented the Society from becoming a "battlefield of power politics".

Dr. Weitnauer was then invited to make his customary address. This he did briefly and astutely, meandering unexpectedly from Hamlet's Monologue to the past enmity of the people of Basle Land towards those of Basle Town. The ability to pick completely haphazard anecdotes or facts, find a way to string them together to make a point or to produce an entertaining effect is the secret of the good after-dinner speaker. The Ambassador placed himself squarely in that category by relating Hamlet's "pangs of unrequited love" to these past frictions, and by noting that he came from Basle Town while the President came from Liestal, which is practically in Basle Land. This enmity, which led Canton Basle to split into two half-Cantons in 1833, actually moved Basle Land to oppose for a time the construction of a railway to Basle. Dr. Weitnauer recalled that the *Landschaftlers* would not allow the railway to cross their land and would only accept it to reach a new city to be called *Basletrost*. But the irate *Landschaftlers* were eventually brought to reason.

The last speaker was Dr. Hans Ruedi Bolliger from Manchester, and representative for the Swiss of the North at the Commission of the Swiss Abroad. In a few words, he impressed on members that the London Group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique was an organisation considered with the highest regard by the authorities in Berne.

The evening lasted for perhaps another half-hour before members began looking for their coats and took leave of one another in a long series of hand-shaking exchanges.

P.M.B.

WHY AIR FARES HAVE ESCALATED

an explanation by SWISSAIR

More and more compatriots living in this country are affected by the rising cost of a journey back to Switzerland. This is particularly true of retired people with fixed incomes in an inflationary period. We've had occasional letters by readers asking for an explanation to this nasty trend and wondering why Old Age Pensioners do not get reductions. The last such letter was sent to me by *Mr. Paul Haberstich*, of Henley-on-Thames, who expressed the following points on 16th March:

Dear Mr. Béguin,

I intend starting a campaign to protest against the exorbitant prices of Swissair. They are going up again on 1st April when a ticket to Zurich (return) will be £82.30. For health reasons, my wife and I have to go every year to Switzerland for a cure and the cost is simply too much. I know that they simply convert the Swiss prices into £s at 7 Sw.fr. a pound sterling in conjunction with BEA. But when you look at the prices to New York, Singapore and Hongkong, then there is something wrong.

It's bad enough that we old Swiss cannot afford to retire any more — and now this additional barrier!

Mr. Haberstich then went on to suggest that a campaign might be launched by sending strong letters to the Swiss Press or the authorities, and offered to pay his part in this endeavour.

With Mr. Haberstich's permission, I submitted his letter to Swissair's Press and Public Relations Officer in London, *Mr. John Elliot* asking him for a reply which might satisfy Mr. Haberstich and other readers concerned with this problem.

This is what Mr. Elliot had to say:

As many of the readers of the *Swiss Observer* will be aware, international air fares are agreed by the International Air Transport Association and have to be approved by the governments of the individual countries in which they are applied. As such, the level of scheduled air fares between the UK and Switzerland is not simply a matter for Swissair or British Airways.

Air fares are agreed within IATA for approval by governments for all routes in US dollars and pounds Sterling. It is therefore a misconception to suppose that the current normal economy class round trip fare between London and Zurich of £82.30 is in any way due to the conversion of a Swiss franc fare into pounds Sterling at an arbitrary rate. The position is in fact the reverse — the Swiss franc fares as applied in Switzerland are based on the fares originally agreed in

pounds Sterling.

However, since 1967 the pound Sterling has been drastically devalued twice against the Swiss franc as well as against other currencies, the depreciation against the Swiss franc being about 40 per cent. The fares denominated in pounds Sterling for the sale of tickets in the UK had therefore to be surcharged repeatedly, as otherwise the revenues of airlines other than British Airways would have reflected these parity changes as losses when converted into their own countries' currencies. As a further consequence, if this had not been done, the operation of international air services on the basis of universally accepted and interchangeable air tickets would have become impossible.

In addition, we have since the beginning of this year had two fuel surcharges, affecting tickets in all currencies, and adding some 13 per cent to prices. Fuel costs to the airlines, a major element in their cost structure, have trebled over the past few months and the fuel surcharges so far imposed in no way compensate the airlines fully for this increase.

It is indeed possible to travel by air to Switzerland for appreciably less than the above, but naturally at the sacrifice of some flexibility or choice. There is, for instance, the midweek night tourist return fare between London and Zurich of £51.75 or the weekend excursion fare of £51.50. Special spouse fares are available for short stays, under which either husband or wife pays the normal return fare, the other only 50 per cent. In addition a large selection of inclusive holidays are available from travel agents, reducing the air fare element still further, but they obviously limit passengers to certain flights and oblige them to stay in Switzerland for at least six nights. When inclusive tours are arranged by tour operators based on charter flights, the economics of the operation assume very high load factors for the aircraft and each seat, available only together with the land arrangements, comes that much cheaper again. Once more, however, the limitations are that the passenger has to travel strictly on the designated flights, on the specified dates, and could incur heavy costs in case of cancellation. Last minute changes of booking or cancellations can, on the other hand, be made free of charge on all scheduled services. Clearly, it is the availability of a high frequency of scheduled services to the public that determines the cost, and this is in turn reflected in the price of normal air tickets.

Mr. Haberstich refers in his letter to low air fares to New York, Singapore and Hong Kong. In the case of the first two, there are on the market various charter flight arrangements, basically subject to

various limitations such as advance booking and payment or a low frequency of service, to which my comments above apply. Hong Kong happens to be one of the few remaining points in the world to which, as a British Crown Colony, the UK government can fix a fare outside the international fare setting machinery.

We in Swissair have the greatest sympathy with the position Mr. Haberstich, and no doubt other readers of the *Swiss Observer* find themselves in during this period of rapidly rising costs and prices. Consideration is constantly being given to these problems, but no solution is yet in sight which would be fair to all concerned, while offering air transport on an economic and unsubsidised basis. This, regrettably, also precludes special fares for old age pensioners, since the latter are plainly not the only category of passengers deserving of special consideration and a liberal application of rebated fares over a wide front would undoubtedly lead to adverse operating economics and the eventual reduction in services available.

Birmingham-based Swiss business aircraft operator would appreciate opportunity to uplift light freight to/from Basle. Customs clearance at Birmingham airport. Write or telephone Midland Aero Charter (Birmingham) Ltd., 75 Woodcote Avenue, Kenilworth, Warks. CV8 1BG England. Tel: 0926 55148.

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Swiss Benevolent Society Annual Report

presented by Mr. M. Schneebeli, President,
at the Society's AGM on 6th April

Dear Friends and Compatriots,

It is with great pleasure that we present the 104th Annual Report of the Society's activities, which, as in past years, has been geared to helping, both financially and professionally, Swiss citizens living in the London Consular District who find themselves facing temporary or permanent difficulties of many sorts.

In the course of the year, we were in touch with a total of 337 people, representing 208 persons living alone and 41 family groups. Some of them, we have known for a number of years, others were brought to our notice by the Swiss Embassy, the Swiss Churches, English social workers and institutions or they approached us directly themselves.

First and foremost in the claim on our time and resources came as usual the pensioners, whose number has risen slightly from 57 to 61 during the course of the year. In addition to the help which we gave from our own funds, we continued to distribute the Swiss Old Age Pension to those who find regular instalments preferable to the quarterly payments made by the Embassy.

As a large number of our clients are elderly, it is essential to make as many visits as possible as they tend to find the journey to our office too long and wearisome, not to mention expensive. Thus, of a total of 757 interviews, 192 took place at people's own homes or in hospitals and old folk's homes. Ideally, these visits should be made on a rota basis, but in practice, there are always emergencies which at certain moments require a large portion of the Secretary's time, until some particularly urgent problem has found a solution, or at least simmered down. Also, some people live

so far away that a visit can only be justified if a particular need arises and for smaller problems it is more efficient to enlist the help of the local social services. This can, of course, only be done if the client is agreeable to this step being taken.

Members of the Swiss Churches take a great interest in the visiting of people and, in an endeavour to create better understanding of each others problems and points of view, the Secretary met a group of French speaking visitors during the year for a talk and discussion.

Apart from regular grants which go mostly to pensioners, we were again called upon to help in a number of cases when someone was faced with particularly heavy expenses caused by illness or other circumstances which prevented the breadwinner to pursue his or her normal activities. The Executive Committee examined every request with great care to determine how needs could best be met. In some instances, help from the Society seemed appropriate and sufficient, in others, clients had to be directed to another source of help, or combined efforts by us and other institutions were required to find the best possible answer.

The collaboration with English welfare organisations was not confined to financial questions only and social workers were brought in on a number of occasions or we were approached by them in order to give maximum help. The sheer fact that our 'district' is virtually the whole of Southern England means that regular personal contacts with many are out of the question. Where intensive care from a social worker is a necessity, it is our job to persuade people to seek it in

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