

Swiss events

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ENDLICH ... EINE STIMME?

The Swiss Abroad will be able to vote in their homeland. As reported in our last issue, the Government has submitted a bill to that effect to Parliament. It is generally expected that the two Houses will support the proposals and thus give substance to the Constitutional Article which the Swiss people overwhelmingly subscribed to in a Referendum in 1966.

The bill presented by the Federal Council lays down the way Swiss abroad will be allowed to vote in 12 points. Here again is a resumé of the proposals:

– Swiss abroad will be allowed to exercise their political rights on the territory of the Confederation only

– Swiss abroad (and that includes double-nationals) have the right to vote on federal issues. They can sign popular initiatives and petitions for a referendum

– Swiss abroad may freely choose the Communes in which they wish to exercise their rights

– Like their compatriots at home, Swiss abroad can vote in advance, at the hours prescribed for the vote or by correspondence from any locality in Switzerland.

SWISS EVENTS

– The vote of the Swiss abroad is counted with the votes of the Commune of their choice.

The bill is the result of a lengthy process of consultation among various bodies, including Swiss societies abroad and the 50th Assembly of the Swiss Abroad in Berne in 1972. The much talked about rights will come to the Swiss abroad over a 100 years after the Swiss of Milan, who had asked to participate in the drafting of the 1874 Constitution, had first made a demand to the same end.

In its message to Parliament, the Federal Council said that the arguments in favour of allowing the Swiss abroad to vote following the above procedure superseded the arguments against. Psychologically, the Swiss abroad will no longer feel as a second-class citizen, particularly at a time when people no longer go abroad for a long time. The Government recalled that several issues brought up in federal votes, such as the foreign labour problem, land speculation, relations with the EEC, were of direct interest to the Swiss abroad.

The bill states that would-be voters must be registered with an Embassy. This

could cause problems for the many who live in Taiwan, Rhodesia and Liechtenstein but provision will doubtless be taken for their case.

Other forms of participation such as voting at the nearest Swiss Consulate, voting by proxy or voting by correspondence have been dismissed because this would have meant reciprocal facilities for foreigners living in Switzerland. With well over a million foreigners in the country, Swiss authorities were very anxious to prevent foreign political campaigns from being waged in Switzerland. This concern was not without justification. If half a million Italian workers were involved in the hectic political life of their country, this could cause complications and upset the law and order the Swiss cherish so much. The "non-reciprocity" argument has been the most important single condition set by the Government, which was otherwise in favour of offering political rights to the Swiss abroad.

The new bill should satisfy the Swiss of France and of Germany, who appeared to be the strongest promoters of political rights at the 1972 Assembly of the Swiss Abroad. The Swiss of Britain are officially considered to be against the idea. One of the points stressed at the 1972 Assembly by one of their spokesmen, Dr H. R. Bolliger from Manchester, was that the scheme would segregate the well-off and the less well-off, the former having far more opportunities to exercise their rights than the latter. It would also create a



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geographical unfairness as the Swiss living just across the border would obviously have no material difficulty in reaching the nearest polling station.

It would be interesting to know how the great majority of Swiss people in this country will react to the offer. The great majority are double-nationals and integrated to British life. They will be voting in the 5 June EEC Referendum and are likely to have far more concerns for the worrying problems of Britain than for the minor complaints of the Swiss! Still, many compatriots have staunchly retained their Swiss individuality and passports, with the result that they have lived most of their life without being able to vote. How much this is missed must be an individual consideration. For some who have never felt that they really "belonged" to Britain it will doubtless mean a lot. Their motherland is welcoming them back as fully-fledged citizens with the same fundamental rights. This at least respects the purpose of Article 45-bis.

PMB

ASK MEETING IN BERNE

On 8 March nearly 70 members of the "Little Parliament" of the Swiss Abroad met in Berne. As usual, the spring meeting took place at the "Federal Palace". The President of the Organisation and Chairman of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad, Councillor of States Dr Louis Guisan, welcomed members from inside Switzerland, but above all those who had come from abroad, as far away as the Philippines and Scandinavia, South America and the Middle East. Great Britain was represented by Dr H. R. Bolliger (North) and Mrs Mariann Meier (South).

The first important items were the annual report and accounts for 1974. In its introduction, the report refers to economic and political difficulties which, one way or another, have affected Swiss nationals abroad. As always in difficult times, the Organisation and its Secretariat gained in importance.

On one hand, more Swiss returned to their homeland and asked for counsel at the ASS. On the other hand, more emigration candidates affected by difficulties at home asked for advice regarding settling abroad. The Secretariat has assisted wherever possible with advice, information, films, lectures, contributions to Swiss institutions (special purposes), newspaper and book service, moral and financial help to Swiss behind the Iron Curtain, etc. An important part was played by the Youth Service, including annual camps in summer and winter and help to young Swiss from Abroad who do military service in Switzerland.

In spite of stringent economies, the deficit for 1974 amounted to Fr 7,697. On account of difficult times at home, the federal subsidy will be cut in 1975, and further savings will have to be made. One of the casualties is the *Weltschweizer*, review for the young, which will stop publication and will be partly integrated in the *Echo*, an illustrated periodical for Swiss abroad.

The next item on the agenda was information, mainly covered in a separate report.

With regard to political rights for the Swiss abroad, it was reported that under the consultative method the Cantons, on the whole, had reacted favourably. Seventeen-and-a-half cantons had accepted the Government's proposals completely, two-and-a-half suggested certain limitations, and only two cantons had expressed doubts as to the wisdom of giving Swiss abroad the vote. The answers given by the political parties were all positive. On 3 March the Federal Council had passed on the report to parliamentary committees, and it is expected that the two Chambers will deal with the proposed legislation in the summer and autumn sessions.

Further discussion took place regarding double taxation agreements with Austria and Portugal and the result for Swiss nationals in those countries.

At a previous meeting of the Commission, the proposed revision of the constitutional articles regarding citizenship and the family had been discussed extensively. Two more questions remained open: should a foreign woman marrying a Swiss still automatically receive Swiss citizenship and should children of a Swiss mother but foreign father be given Swiss citizenship? A very lengthy and lively discussion took place, and various points of view were expressed. It was said that the family law was anchored in the 19th century, but that one should not reject the new philosophy of often having a woman at the head of a family. The greatest objection to the proposal that a foreign woman marrying a Swiss would have to be resident in Switzerland for a certain time before acquiring Swiss citizenship, was that no Swiss abroad marrying a foreigner would qualify. It was agreed that it should be optional for the wife, and that it seemed reasonable for children of foreign fathers to have the choice at the age of 20. Members of the Commission were asked to send in their answers to a questionnaire on the subject within a fortnight.

Various matters, such as the President's travels to Swiss communities in France and the dates of annual meetings of Swiss umbrella organisations abroad were dealt with. Information was given regarding the meeting of Swiss from abroad at the Swiss Industries Fair in Basle on 18 April and the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad, also in Basle, from 29 to 31 August.

* * * *

Prior to the meeting of the ASK, the special **Commission on Information** met at the Secretariat under the chairmanship of Dr Guisan. A progress report was given of the "review". In this country it is known as the "special issues" of the *Swiss Observer*. Four times a year, all Swiss registered with Swiss Embassies and Consulates now receive news and information free of charge by courtesy of the Federal Political Department. The scheme was evolved by the special commission on which the FPD and the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad are represented, and whose members include journalists and broadcasters and a number of Swiss personalities from abroad, amongst them Mrs Mariann Meier, from London. In five languages (German, French, Italian, English and Spanish), the "review" is now sent out to all parts of the world. The scheme may be considered a great success.

All matters of information to Swiss abroad are handled by the special commission, such as *Echo* and *Weltschweizer* (see above). The *Echo* is an illustrated magazine and deserves a wider circulation than it gets at the moment. It is hoped that more subscribers will be recruited; it must be emphasised that it is not a duplication of the "review" and that it is excellent value for money.

* * * *

Also on the eve of the ASK meeting, the **Council of the Solidarity Fund** met in Berne, with its President, Dr G. Schelling, in the chair. The main business concerned problems arising from the new position of existing members. Originally, the Fund was built up on the principle of solidarity; one renounced any interest in order to help those less well off. But it was found that that idea did not carry much weight in countries not threatened by nationalisation, political upheavals and strife. Membership at the end of 1974 stood at only 12,734. A new scheme was worked out introducing rates of interest and three risk categories. It was reported that in the first two months after the new constitution was published, 215 new enquiries had been received from inside Europe alone and, surprisingly, over 50 from Great Britain where membership stands at just over 300 only.

From the draft of the annual report submitted to the meeting, it was learned that in 1974 alone Fr 670,000 had been paid out in lump sum compensation, 39 applications had been dealt with, and 35 had been found valid. The applicants had come from Algeria, Chile, Kambodsha, Morocco, Austria, Papua/New Guinea, Peru, Tanzania and Zaire.

It was hoped that membership would increase now that interest would be paid on contributions (repayable if no claims submitted). It was a unique insurance scheme with the Swiss Confederation guaranteeing payments and security of savings.

MM

CONCERN FOR YOUNG SWISS IMPRISONED IN ALGERIA

The fate of 15 young Swiss people imprisoned in Algeria on drug charges is causing considerable anxiety among their relatives. The young people, who include several girls, are aged between 18 and 28. There are only three men in their 40s among the detainees most of whom have yet to stand trial.

President Boumediene of Algeria recently signed a decree whereby any person convicted of drug offences liable to endanger the morality of the Algerian people can face the death penalty. Offences not directly affecting the moral health of the Algerian people are punishable by prison sentences ranging from 10 to 20 years. There is therefore cause for alarm among these youngsters' relatives. All of them were working as middle people and had probably allowed themselves to be involved in this racket out of inexperience and ignorance.

They are regularly visited by Embassy staff. The Swiss Embassy has appointed a lawyer to defend them but can, of course, not become involved in the proceedings. The 15 are part of a group of over 100 people caught at the Moroccan border in January. The group were carrying over 600 kilograms of hashish in a convoy of cars.

TROUBLE AT THE HEAD OF THE WOMENS' ARMY

Trouble is brewing at the head of

the Womens' Complementary Service, the female arm of the Army led for the past 20 years by Colonel Andrée Weitzel. Few details transpired from the official communiqué which brought attention to the matter, but it must be something of some importance because an inquiry has been opened of the problems of the Service.

It transpired from the communiqué that Miss Weitzel, who is known to some Swiss of London as she spoke at the Nouvelle Société Helvétique three years ago, is on very bad terms with the people on whom she depends at the Military Department. The inquiry is expected to throw more light on the problems of a Service thanks to which the war exercises staged during repetition courses are not the exclusive preserve of men.

NORTH KOREA TAKES SPACE IN SWISS PAPERS

North Korea is the last country one would expect to launch a massive propaganda campaign in the Swiss press. Probably because it is financially hard pressed, the *Tribune de Geneve* published something like six successive full-page communications with a large portrait of President Kim Il Sung on each one of them. The stern face of the Korean leader was surrounded by thick columns of turgid prose vaunting the achievements of the Popular and Democratic Republic of Korea. We saw half a page of similar prose in the *Daily Express* (which is also in

need of all the support it can get) but the high-powered publicity given by a small and distant country in the press of another small country with a completely different way of life was striking, to say the least.

SWITZERLAND: FROM ROMAN TIMES TO THE PRESENT

This book by William Martin was published in 1971 and is still available at £3.50 from Paul Elek Ltd, 54/58 Caledonian Road, London N1 9RN (tel: 01-278 6552).

This classical history of Switzerland is particularly interesting at a time when European integration is an issue of such importance. In discussions about European unity, Switzerland is almost invariably invoked as a model of multi-national integration.

Martin has an eye for the picturesque and telling, but little known fact: Switzerland had almost the population of England in Shakespeare's day. Mercenary service with the French kings (who rarely had less than 80,000 Swiss in their pay) almost certainly saved Swiss unity after the Reformation. The Republic of Berne, which controlled Gibbon's Lausanne, was — with Venice and England — one of the most enlightened states of the eighteenth century.

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