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BERNE MEETING TO DISCUSS THE PROBLEMS OF THE SWISS ABROAD

The first of a series of meetings in Berne was that of the **Commission on Information** on 5th March. It took place at the Secretariat, and Dr. L. Guisan, President of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, was in the chair. One of the first items on the agenda was the "echo", and as so often before, the discussion showed that not enough compatriots subscribed to it. Of course, the present state of sterling makes the subscription of Fr. 30.- very high for Swiss in Britain, but the quality of the periodical is of a very high standard, and this has been kept up also under the new Editor, Mr. Juerg Nyffenegger, who succeeded Mr. Peter Jaeger. The number of new subscribers had gone up thanks to special publicity campaigns. It was emphasised that although there was a loss in the accounts for 1975 and a large deficit was budgeted for the present year, the "echo" was the Organisation's official organ and as such had to be counted in as a general service to the Swiss abroad.

The special issues sent to all Swiss registered abroad and known as "review" in Berne, was now being sent four times a year to nearly the whole globe. Initial difficulties were being ironed out, and the scheme could be called a real success. It was printed, partly in Switzerland, partly in countries where a colony paper already existed (as in Great Britain) and in five languages.

Other matters discussed concerned co-operation with the Swiss Shortwave Service, whose Director is a member of the Commission, and the "Tagesanzeiger" whose special page for Swiss abroad was a very valuable contribution to the efforts made in keeping compatriots outside Switzerland informed.

The next meeting attended by Mrs. Mariann Meier was that of the **Council of the Solidarity Fund**. Its President, Dr. G. Schelling, was in the chair. The first item of importance was the consideration of the annual report. It showed clearly how important the Fund was, especially in these times of increasing uncertainty in so many countries. The number of claims due to loss of livelihood had gone up considerably, yet the sum of Fr. 445,000.- which had been paid out in compensation in 1975 would have been appreciably larger had all those who lost their livelihood due to nationalization, war, political coercion etc. been insured. The Fund had just over 12,000 members at

the end of the year. Due to the change in the constitution of the Fund, over 400 compatriots had made enquiries regarding the introduction of three risk categories and rate of interest which is now payable. It is hoped that most of those who had shown some interest would join.

Members were then informed confidentially about some of the claims made during the year. It gave some most interesting data, and showed clearly how vital the Fund was. Some cases were extremely complicated, and not only in border cases did the Appeal Commission occasionally disagree with the Executive Committee.

Publicity was discussed, and it was stressed again that the personal approach was the most successful. It was the idea of solidarity which prompted the founders, and for many compatriots abroad this still counts, but, alas, not enough consider joining unless danger threatens.

The spring meeting of the **Commission of the Swiss Abroad** was held at the "Federal Palace" in Berne on 6th March. The President of the Organisation, Dr. Louis Guisan, was in the chair and welcomed the 60 odd members present, some from inside Switzerland and others from countries as far apart as Israel and Canada, Peru and Senegal, Scandinavia and South Africa. Great Britain was represented by Dr. H. R. Bolliger for the Swiss in the Midlands and the North, and Mrs. Mariann Meier for the Swiss community in Great Britain South.

Annual report, accounts and budget were discussed. Thanks to great savings, it had been possible to keep the deficit to not much more than 10,000 francs, in spite of the federal subsidy having been cut by 35,000 francs. The estimated deficit for 1976 was reckoned to be some 25,000 francs.

The next item concerned information, and the Deputy Director of the Secretariat, Mr. Lucien Paillard, reported on the various items as mentioned above.

The Director of the Secretariat, Mr. Marcel Ney, gave a report on political rights for Swiss abroad. Details will appear in the next special issue of the "Swiss Observer". A discussion showed that in certain quarters where there had been enthusiasm only before, doubts were now beginning to come up, specially

with regard to fair and neutral information and other difficulties. From a Swiss in France came the suggestion that some kind of demonstration should be staged to show our appreciation and gratitude. This was soon quashed by Dr. Bolliger who said that whilst in Great Britain the Swiss had on the whole been against political rights for reasons some of which were only now gradually dawning on some of our compatriots, now that we had got them, we were obliged to use them conscientiously and not in any way contrary to responsible political behaviour. It was also stressed that information issued from Berne with regard to federal plebiscites must be as neutral as possible.

Dual taxation agreements with Western Germany and Sweden were next on the agenda. They were mainly of concern to the two countries. It was stated how important it was that the Swiss communities in the countries concerned were properly consulted.

Members then discussed the two draft laws on university promotion and scientific research, and the discussion brought out one particular point, viz. that Swiss abroad should be expressly mentioned where admission to universities was dealt with.

The next matter was sickness insurance. Details of what has been worked out for Swiss repatriates will appear in the next special issue of the S.O. The result of negotiations between the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad and the Swiss sickness insurances is certainly most satisfactory, and the agreement was signed at the luncheon following the meeting. It was offered by the Nouvelle Société Helvétique in Switzerland to make the ASO's diamond jubilee. It was attended by the President of the NSH, Dr. Ernst Basler, and as is customary on the occasion of the Commission's spring meeting, by the Secretary General of the Federal Political Department, Ambassador Weitnauer. He, as well as Dr. Basler and President Guisan mentioned the diamond jubilee of the London Group of the NSH.

The next meeting of the Commission will take place at Morat at the end of August on the occasion of the Assembly of the Swiss Abroad. The representatives also had a chance of seeing a film on the "Fête des Vignerons" which will be held at Vevey in August 1977.