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FEDERATION OF SWISS SOCIETIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM - 1977

Minutes of the Twelfth Annual General Meeting, held at 21 Bryanston Square, London W1, on Friday, 24th June, 1977 at 6.30 p.m.

The President welcomed all those present, particularly the Ambassador as Honorary President, whom he thanked for his hospitality, expressing pleasure at the close contact between the Federation and the Embassy; the members of the Embassy and Consulate-General; Minister Maurice Jaccard and Mr. Lucien Paillard from Berne; and representatives from Scotland. He then reported the sad news of the death that morning of a very active member of the Colony, Mr. F. G. Sommer, and called on the meeting to stand in silence in memory of him and Dr. H. R. Bolliger, who until his death had been the North of England Delegate to the Commission of the Swiss Abroad.

Miscellaneous advertisement

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1. Minutes of the 11th Annual General Meeting held on 18th June 1976

These were approved unanimously.

2. President's Report

Mr. Metford-Sewell proposed that this be accepted, Mr. Boehringer seconding, and the proposal was carried unanimously.

3. Treasurer's Report and Auditor's Report for the year ending 30th April 1977

Mrs. Gyssler proposed that these be approved, Mr. Gyssler seconding, and the proposal was carried unanimously.

Mr. Schmid read the Auditor's Report and the President thanked Mr. De Maria and Mr. Burri for their work as Honorary Auditors in checking the figures; Mr. De Maria commented that these had been presented very well.

4. Report by ASK Delegates

Mrs. Meier first paid tribute to her colleague and friend Dr. H. R. Bolliger and then reported on various meetings

she had attended. Highlights of the spring meeting of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad had included its annual report, which had stated that the large number of Swiss returning to Switzerland was now probably offset by those going abroad, and had praised the Swiss abroad for their contribution to the Swiss "presence" in other countries.

This meeting had coincided with the first federal plebiscite in which Swiss abroad had been entitled to vote, but fewer than 500 had done so; the Federal Political Department had laid on a 24-hour information service for them and received nearly 30 telephone calls a day. At the Commission Meeting in August the delay in payment of old-age pensions was discussed, as was the status of children of Swiss women married to foreigners.

Turning to the meetings of the Commission on Information, Mrs. Meier reported some improvement following various schemes to increase the number of subscribers to the organisation's own organ, the *Echo*, though more were still needed; while accepting that the exchange rate made it expensive for Swiss in the UK (where there were only 150 subscribers), she urged the Presidents to make publicity for it.

The two Solidarity Fund Council Meetings had discussed the Fund's small membership — in no country did more than 10 per cent of the registered Swiss belong. It had been suggested that existing members might increase their contributions. Mrs. Meier pleaded for more publicity.

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Asked for comments, Minister Jaccard expressed on behalf of the Head of the Federal Political Department appreciation of the Presidents' activities in their societies. On the subject of information for the Swiss abroad he said that the *Revue*, consisting of official communications and paid for by the Swiss authorities, was produced in five languages; 200,000 copies were sent out four times a year to all registered Swiss in the world and read by about 600,000 people.

In the UK it was incorporated in the special issues of *The Swiss Observer*. He recommended all Swiss abroad to read it, for every day brought evidence that, through lack of knowledge, people were losing some of their rights in the fields of social security, politics, etc.

Turning to political rights in the federal sphere he pointed out that this problem was 150 years old and only last year had it been possible to reach a solution. The new Act was a compromise, as it had not been easy to find an answer acceptable to all the 25 cantonal governments as well as Parliament and the 3,000 communes.

2,000 citizens had registered to vote in the first plebiscite last March. While it was clear that only a minority abroad would ever be interested in contributing to decision making in Switzerland, and even fewer could attend federal plebiscites, it was important that the minority should be given the opportunity to do so.

On the Swiss citizenship question he said that this presented many problems. Legislation was now being discussed by Parliament and Government and it was possible that a constitutional amendment would soon be drafted, which would require a popular vote with a majority of both people and Cantons in its favour. The result of such a referendum could not be foreseen.

Mr. Paillard drew attention to a diagram in the *Revue* explaining the method of voting. If the procedure proved unsatisfactory it would be modified. It was most important that, having obtained political rights, Swiss abroad should demonstrate their interest by at least registering to vote.

Explaining in more detail the principle of the *Revue*, he pointed out that it was produced in collaboration with local publications, so that each version contained the same official communications and communications from the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad plus its own local pages and a general section.

Referring to the citizenship issue he said that Professor Inebnit had played an active part in renewing discussion of this matter. The Kaufmann Commission on the subject was no longer sitting. As a result of an insertion in the January issue of the *Revue* 1,200–1,300 letters from mothers had been received by the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad.

It should be made absolutely clear to such inquirers that there were two sides to the coin and many long-term

implications. In reply to a question from Mr Schreibke he explained that the new law coming into force on 1st January, 1978, would give a child born in Switzerland to a Swiss woman married to a foreigner but domiciled in Switzerland, until its 22nd birthday to choose whether to be Swiss. It was hoped that this could later be extended to children born abroad.

Mr. Tangemann expressed the wish that Professor Inebnit's group had come out into the open and not left their compatriot to read about their activities in the *Swiss Observer* without the Embassy or ASK-Delegates and Presidents knowing of it.

5. Payment of Swiss old-age pensions to the Swiss abroad

Mr. Tangemann reported that the Federation committee, when discussing delays in payment and in notifying new pensioners of the amounts they would receive, had deputed him to approach the Secretary-General of the Federal Political Department who, as the former Ambassador in London, would take a special interest in the matter. As a result of Ambassador Weitnauer's investigations there had apparently been a great improvement. Minister Jaccard explained that much of the difficulty was due to a big expansion in Swiss social security; compared with 2,000 pensioners currently experiencing a 6–12 month delay in the UK, there were 40,000 foreigners entitled to Swiss pensions on the basis of international agreements who were having to wait 1–3 years.

There was a restriction on the number of personnel employed in the Swiss administration, but the federal authorities were doing their best to solve the problem. Mr. Tangemann's intervention had provided an occasion to discuss it with the Director of the Federal Finance Administration.

Mr. Paillard said extra staff had been assigned to the head office in Geneva, the delays were being reduced, hardship cases could obtain an advance and the backlog should be eliminated by the end of the year. Mrs Meier drew attention of the Meeting to a break in payments at the time of the termination of a disability pension and the beginning of payment of the old age pension or the wife's pension on her husband's 65th birthday.

In Germany some Swiss had had to ask German welfare organisations for help. As receiving the pension on time was not charity but a right, many people disliked applying to the Swiss Benevolent Society. Consul Glauser thanked Mr. Tangemann for his intervention, which had helped the Embassy a great deal, and Mrs Meier remarked that this was an instance where the Federation's work had been of use to compatriots.

6. Election of ASK Delegates

Mrs. M. Meier and Father P. Bossard having indicated their willingness to continue as Delegate and Deputy

Delegate respectively for the South, were in accordance with Rule 14B duly elected by acclamation, as were the nominees for the North: Dr. A. V. Lang, Delegate and Dr. H. J. Wirz, Deputy Delegate.

7. Election of Auditors

After a comment by the President on the good work being done by Mr. F. A. De Maria and Mr. F. Burri they were re-elected by acclamation.

8. Discussion on the Auslands-schweizertag to be held in Lausanne, August 19–21, 1977. (Theme: "Contribution of the Swiss abroad to Technical Development Aid".)

Mr. Paillard, conveying greetings from the President of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad, Dr. Louis Guisan, and the Director of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad, Mr. Marcel Ney, expressed the hope that, as these congresses were arranged especially for the Swiss abroad, there would be a large attendance from the UK. A number of Swiss working in developing countries had been invited to take part in the deliberations.

9. Other business

The meeting agreed that it would be useful to have a further information meeting in the autumn under the aegis of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique on the work of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad and the various other activities of the organisation of the Swiss Abroad.

Commenting on the lack of entries in the occupational register, Mrs. Gyssler said it would be particularly helpful if the Welfare Office could obtain the addresses of professional social workers. Mrs. Meier suggested that the inclusion in the *Swiss Observer* of a slip that could be completed and sent in might encourage people to register.

Mr. Schreibke placed on record his appreciation of the Swiss Shortwave Service – reception in Yorkshire was excellent.

With a view to issuing a really accurate and up-to-date printed list of addresses of Swiss societies, the President appealed for any amendments not later than 10th July.

Mr. Berti hoped as many Swiss as possible would attend the 1977 First of August celebrations.

Referring to requests that the date of the Annual General Meeting be fixed at an earlier stage, the President proposed Friday, 2nd June, 1978, to which there were no objections.

The President thanked the Ambassador again for accommodating the meeting in his residence and for the buffet supper which was to follow. He also expressed his appreciation to Minister Jaccard and Mr. Paillard for having attended this meeting and for their active participation and continued interest.

The President also thanked Miss P. Hoare for her valuable assistance in preparing the Minutes.

The meeting closed at 8.35 p.m.