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DINING AND DANCING WITH THE SWISS MERCANTILE

There was a time, and not all that long ago, when several societies organised dances in the Swiss community. And once or twice a month, one had a chance of attending dinners followed by dancing. Today, there are but two societies which hold an annual dinner and dance, the City Swiss Club and the Swiss Mercantile Society. As one who has attended both ever since well before the war and still looks forward to both these occasions with pleasure, I can honestly say that nothing can beat the intimate atmosphere of the Annual Dinner and Dance of the SMS. I came away from the Dorchester Hotel Orchid Room on Saturday, 4th February, fully prepared to confirm this once again. The food may not have been as special, the numbers not as large, but the happy mood and feeling of friendly companionship which permeated the event from beginning to end was such that one felt one had seldom had such a pleasant evening.

Why is this, one wonders? Maybe it is because a common aim lies in the running of the College where hundreds of young Swiss have their knowledge of English polished every year. The devotion and sacrifice in time and effort given to this work by members of Council and Committees obviously give the SMS a special mark. Once again, the function

was attended also by the Principal and Vice-Principal of the College, as well as by some students and members of the administrative office.

And this brings us to the fact that there were many young people present. One table had no fewer than three of the third generation at it — Mrs. Oscar Grob, her children and grandchildren. Her late husband was a President of the Society and Hon. Member. And this shows another facet of the special atmosphere — the way past officers and their families turn up year after year (if not prevented by illness as were many of them this time).*

So it was a real SMS Family that gathered once again on the first Saturday in February. The young President, Mr. F. O. Hausermann, who headed the top table with his attractive wife, welcomed the Ambassador's representative, Monsieur Jean-Pierre Zehnder and Madame Zehnder, herself a former student of the SMS College. As Counsellor for Economic and Labour Affairs, Monsieur Zehnder takes an active interest in the Society throughout the year, as does Consul Julius Keller, present with his wife.

Mr. Hausermann welcomed two other Presidents of Swiss organisations in London, Mr. John Seiffert, President of the City Swiss Club, and Mrs. Mariann

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Meier, as head of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique. She was present also as a member in her own right and widow of a former SMS President and Honorary Member.

The Churches were represented by the Rev. and Mrs. Frank Orna-Ornstein. In his humorous address of welcome, the President referred to the importance of language so often neglected nowadays in favour of the televised picture, and it was this theme which was taken up both by Monsieur Zehnder and Mr Seiffert.

The former referred to the SMS as one of the important Old Ladies, 90 this year, symbols of success and activity. He wondered where the SMS got her energy from to perform its tasks – only “*thanks to the devotion of past and present committees, thanks to the marvellous job done by particularly dedicated people and thanks to the cohesion of its members. The Swiss Ambassador has asked me to convey to you his congratulations and his deep appreciation of the work you are doing.*”

Monsieur Zehnder mentioned the developments in the last decades which adversely affected the SMS, and yet the Society and its College had succeeded, not least because Switzerland still needed exporting for survival, and that English as a language was still of importance in trade and commerce. He told of a recent survey which showed that of the students registered at the institutes belonging to the Association of Recognised English Language Schools, 110% came from

Switzerland. This interest in the English language, he said was also demonstrated by the success of the SMS College and that Switzerland needed the type of training and tuition the College offers.

The speaker then mentioned the good relations between the two countries and said: “*We Swiss continue to have a great admiration for this country, its history, its way of life, its tolerance. It goes so far, according to the ‘Nebelspalter’, that we share with the British their affection for the British Royal Family, but we let them pay the bills.*”

After Monsieur Zehnder had proposed the toast of the Swiss Mercantile Society and its College, Mr. John Seiffert replied for the guests. He said he was convinced that the societies had to be more active rather than less, and that the SMS and its energetic President were an excellent example of this. He, too, stressed the need for better communication between people and peoples. And in order to achieve this, the proper and skilled use of the language was imperative. He said that he was new to the SMS, but had readily accepted the invitation, although his wife was in her native New Zealand, for he believed that one should never put off till tomorrow what one could do today.

Then followed a few happy hours of dancing. And perhaps this was another reason why the evening was such a friendly and successful one – Arthur Salisbury and his dance orchestra, too,

are old friends of the Society, and they play the kind of dance music which does not require cotton wool in one's ears nor a metronome to keep time. Their tunes, old and new, appealed to dancers young and less young, to those who went round the floor just for pure enjoyment and often for the sake of old times, but also to the experts. The two “Paul Jones” dances enabled people to mix, and when the whole company sang “Auld Lang Syne” at the end and hailed the President and his wife, the success was complete. The final applause was meant for Walter and Cathrine Burren, the devoted Secretary and SMS worker for many decades, and Honorary member of the Society, whose organising abilities once again ensured that the event went off without a hitch. Yes, they are all “jolly good fellows!” Good luck and au revoir next year.

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