

16-18 Montagu Place : A guide to the Swiss embassy and the people who work there

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): **- (1981)**

Heft 1773

PDF erstellt am: **28.04.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-686678>

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16-18 Montagu

A guide to the Swiss Embassy and the people who work there

LONDON is full of embassies, ranging from relatively unimposing houses on the fringes of central London to giant buildings like the American representation in Grosvenor Square.

While living in their own country, most people only see the outside of embassies unless they have a specific need to deal with a foreign authority, for instance in order to obtain a visa or a permit of some kind.

Occasionally – more frequently nowadays – they read of embassies as the focus for demonstrations or other displays of discontent. Few people cannot have heard of the US Embassy hostages held in Tehran.

Matters are rather different if one is an expatriate. Then there is likely to be far more contact with the embassy of one's native land. Most people, whether private individuals or representatives of commercial organisations, have questions and problems which need to be sorted out.

This is where the elegant building in Montagu Place, just off Baker Street, has a particularly vital part to play in the lives of the more than 25,000 Swiss who are resident in Britain, not to mention the many thousands of visitors who come to Britain every year.

Forty seven staff occupy the five floors of the Swiss Embassy in London. This article would like to give you an idea about their working day.

An embassy is a comprehensive representation of the government of one country to the government of another, on the highest level. In principle it is always located in the host country's capital.

The first Swiss diplomatic mission to the Court of St. James's was established in 1891. Previously, for the better part of the 19th century, Switzerland had been represented by a Consul General alone.

Each embassy includes as a rule a consular department. There may also be independent consulates or consulates general in other major cities of the host country, such as the Consulate General in Manchester. The adjective "general" indicates in this context merely the particular importance of the consular representation.

Whereas a consulate is the

extended arm of the home administration and deals with individuals, an embassy proper is the link between home government and government of the host country and deals with high officials and government institutions.

Private matters such as business connections or the individual problems of Swiss expatriates are the daily concern of a consulate. When they raise questions of policy, such as trade promotion or the situation of expatriates in general, they fall within the competence of the diplomatic staff of an embassy.

Major mission

Our mission in the UK is one of the five largest Swiss diplomatic missions, the others being in Bonn, Paris, Rome and Washington. This reflects the importance of London as a political and economic centre and as a particularly good place for the observation of worldwide developments.

The Swiss Embassy in London is conveniently situated between Baker Street and Marble Arch at 16-18 Montagu Place, W.1, and 21 Bryanston Square, the latter being the ambassadorial residence.

This was once the home of Minister (then the highest rank among Swiss envoys) Charles Paravicini, who represented Switzerland in London from 1919 to 1939, longer than any other Head of the London Mission.

It was bought by the Swiss government and completely rebuilt and refurbished in the early Seventies, but the original façade overlooking Bryanston Square has been preserved.

There are at present 13 names on the diplomatic list of the Swiss Embassy in London. These 13 persons are entitled to display a CD sign on their car

and they do not have to pay taxes in the host country. They do, however, pay the direct federal tax in Switzerland, and they have no privileges whatsoever when posted at home, as any diplomat at home is not treated differently from other civil servants.

The question of diplomatic privileges abroad is often not understood by the public at large. They are not intended to benefit the individual diplomat in the first place, but the sending state. Therefore, the advantage of not paying taxes abroad is taken account of in the salary diplomats receive.

Likewise diplomatic immunity before the law of the host country cannot be waived by the diplomat himself but only by his government (for instance when a diplomat is being invited to appear as a witness before a court in the host country).

One may rightly ask whether it is necessary to exclude diplomats from the unrelenting regiment of traffic fines, but if one reckons that a host country not so well disposed towards a particular sending state could effectively immobilise that state's diplomats by towing their misparked cars away just before a vital conference, one begins to see the importance of categorical immunity.

Regular transfers

The diplomatic, consular and administrative staff are transferred from one post to another at regular intervals – usually three to five years. They spend about a third of their career at the Department of Foreign Affairs in Berne, but the major share of their active life is spent abroad.

A Berne post may be less glamorous than the jobs on the socially active "diplomatic front" in foreign capitals, yet from a professional point of view it can

be very rewarding to work at home where the centre of policy-making lies.

For many diplomats a home post means also a well deserved period of quieter family life without the numerous social obligations of the diplomatic world.

It is not easy to describe accurately all the functions of an embassy. Traditionally one can distinguish several fields of activities, reflected in the departmental organisation – political affairs, cultural affairs, economic affairs, legal and tax matters, press and information, scientific cooperation and consular affairs.

A distinction is also made between bilateral diplomacy (between two countries) and multilateral diplomacy (in international organisations).

At the top of the hierarchy we have the Ambassador. The present Ambassador in London is Monsieur *Claude Caillat* (married, three children) who has been in this country since February 1980. He is the representative of the Swiss Federal Council to the Queen.

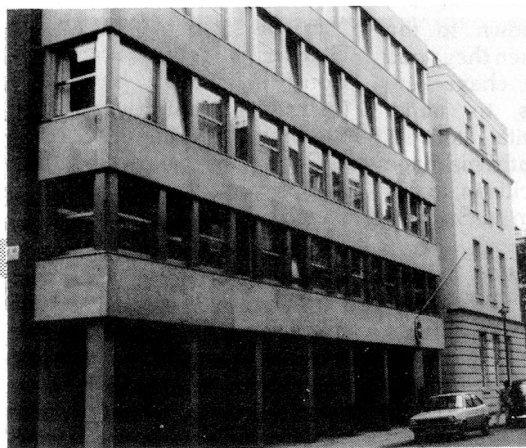
His prime duty consists of maintaining good relations with the British Government, advising the Swiss Government on important political, economic and cultural developments in Britain, and serving as an intermediary between the governments of the two countries in any given matter of concern to them.

Normally he delegates the task of reporting on routine events or of interventions on lower levels to his deputy and other diplomatic staff members.

If one considers that all major contacts between two countries involve their respective embassies somehow, one can imagine how demanding the schedule of an ambassador is.

He has to be able to give an expert opinion on the most diverse subjects which often require detailed knowledge of

Place



The familiar facade of the Swiss Embassy in Montagu Place, London.

highly technical matters.

It goes without saying that an ambassador also has to have a winning, likeable personality with a special gift for entertaining. In all this, the support of his wife is a major asset.

Monsieur et Madame Caillat are particularly well suited to cope with their difficult task. They came to London after ambassadorships in Paris (heading the Swiss mission to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development), the Hague, and Brussels (heading the Swiss mission to the European Communities).

They are therefore profoundly acquainted with their respective roles in a bilateral as well as multilateral context.

Ambassador Caillat has also served in London as a junior diplomat during and after the last years of the second World War, so he is already quite familiar with British ways and traditions.

Important posts

The Ambassador is assisted by the deputy head of mission, Minister *Karl Fritschi* (married, one child). He has overall responsibility for the day to day running of the embassy and stands in for the Ambassador in his absence. In this case he assumes the title of *Chargé d'Affaires ad interim*.

This function apart, one could describe Minister *Fritschi* as the political specialist of the embassy. He has gained experience at such important posts as Bonn, Moscow and Paris, and has served as the deputy of one of the Sub-Directors of Political Affairs in Berne.

Below the head of mission and his deputy, holding a somewhat special position, is the Defence Attaché (for army, air-force and navy). *Brigadier Heinrich Mändli* (married, four children) has just arrived in London, replacing Colonel *Werner Dudli* who has taken over a senior post at the Military Department in Berne.

The Defence Attaché is directly answerable to the Military Department and acts as a consultant on military strategy

to the Ambassador. He is also accredited in Ireland and the Netherlands.

His main task is to establish contacts in the host country, in the interest of the Swiss armed forces. He represents Switzerland at all military events, such as manoeuvres, air-shows etc. and always has an eye on new available military equipment.

His function as "naval" attaché consists in monitoring the seapower of the nautical nations, whose movements can be of eminent importance to Switzerland's economy.

Let us now look at the Embassy's main services and some of the officials with whom expatriates are likely to deal when they wish to contact their official representation in London:

Counsellor *Jean-Jacques Indermühle* (married, two children) has been head of the cultural department since 1975. His main task is to "export Swiss culture" such as exhibitions.

He provides young Swiss musicians with contacts in the British musical world and helps to introduce guest-lectures by Swiss authors and academics, mainly at universities. He also assists in finding sponsorships for cultural events with Swiss participation.

Through informing the Swiss media Counsellor *Indermühle* may help to introduce a Swiss artist living abroad to the Swiss public.

Student contacts

An important aspect of his work are contacts with students. Each year a group of Swiss students comes to Britain on an educational exchange, working as language assistants in various schools. Guest-lectures at universities on Swiss cultural matters are another of Counsellor *Indermühle's* duties.

Swiss residents in Britain as well as other nationals, can obtain information on education

from his office. As the Embassy's most senior diplomat after Minister *Fritschi*, Mr *Indermühle* is also particularly involved with the monitoring of domestic British politics.

He is being assisted by a young woman diplomat – in fact the first Swiss woman to serve in London in this capacity – Miss *Regula Ochsenbein*.

The Economic Department is headed by Dr *Marino Baldi*, Counsellor (married, two children), in London since February 1980. On the diplomatic side, the Economic Department prepares reports on economic trends in the UK, new trade regulations, import restrictions and so forth.

Aid to exporters

It also monitors compliance with existing treaties which are of relevance to Swiss economic interests in Britain, and intervenes, if necessary, to sort out problems obstructing the free flow of goods and services between the two countries.

On the other hand, the Department also assumes many of the functions normally held by a Swiss chamber of commerce abroad, since such an institution does not exist in London. This is done by two Commercial Attachés, Mr *Julius Keller* and Mr *Raymond Rossier*, who both have the rank of Consul.

Assistance is given to Swiss exporters and manufacturers in finding representatives, agents, licences or outlets in the UK, and, to some extent, in market research, difficulties of customs clearance and debt collection in Britain.

Vice versa British firms are helped with information to find Swiss suppliers, or their complaints about Swiss products are received.

A special role has Mr *Hans Buchmann* (married, three children, in London since 1976), Counsellor for Agricul-

tural, Commodity and Scientific Matters. His main task is to represent Switzerland in international commodity organisations, of which several, such as coffee and cocoa, are based in London.

He also monitors the achievements of British scientists and the official policy for the promotion of research in Britain.

During the past two years the Economic Department also benefitted from the support given by First Secretary *Jean-François Riccard* (married, three children), an official of the Federal Office of Foreign Economic Affairs in Berne, to which he is now returning.

Dr *Peter Schweizer* (married, two children), in London since 1978, is First Secretary in charge of press, legal and tax matters. In his function as Press Secretary Mr *Schweizer* monitors and tries to improve, if possible, Switzerland's image in Great Britain, giving information about Swiss events or facts as needed to the British media and occasionally producing press releases, as on the visit of a high Swiss official to Britain.

He was particularly busy during the Queen's State Visit to Switzerland, when he acted as Embassy spokesman.

Legal advice

He maintains close contacts with about 40 London correspondents of Swiss newspapers and liaises between the Swiss Observer – on whose advisory board he is – and the Swiss Government who use our magazine for official announcements. From time to time he contributes directly to the paper.

The main amount of the legal work consists in advising the public (Swiss or British) about Swiss law – like how to write a valid testament, on what grounds a divorce can be pronounced or what the rules are for foreigners to buy property in Switzerland.

Mr *Schweizer* can, however, only inform on the basic legal principles and give advice on how to proceed. He cannot

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function as legal counsel (paid or unpaid).

The same goes for tax matters. Quite often he has to deal with legal issues between the governments, such as requests for extradition of fugitive criminals from Britain back to Switzerland. These cases have been on the increase recently, particularly for drugs offences.

Mr Schweizer is leaving London and is being replaced by Mr Joseph Doswald, coming from Berne.

Consul General Charles Glauser (married, two children), in London since 1975, describes assistance or service to our compatriots abroad as the essential task of the Consulat Department, which includes the chancellery service.

His staff assure the registration of the Swiss in Britain, the administrative control of compatriots under Swiss military service obligations, the issuing of passports, the administration of the Voluntary Old Age and Disability Insurance for the Swiss abroad.

The Swiss in Britain are not only registered – in their own interest – as members of the community of compatriots, so

that they are known to the Consul General when they need his help, but the chancellery service also has to notify changes in the vital statistics (such as birth, death, marriage or divorce) of a citizen to his commune of origin in Switzerland.

It also assists Swiss tourists whose passport or money has been lost or stolen, or who urgently need medical treatment while in the UK. Mr Glauser may intervene on behalf of a compatriot who is involved in an accident, recommend legal counsel or see a detained Swiss in prison to make sure that he will be properly treated and defended.

Check on visas

Another aspect of the consular service has to do with foreigners wanting to visit Switzerland or settle there. It gives appropriate advice and issues the necessary visas and permits, always with an eye on the list of unwanted persons.

Finally Mr Glauser is also responsible for all administrative matters pertaining to the personnel and the buildings of the Embassy.

In his multiple tasks, Mr Glauser is assisted by Vice-Consul Hans-Ulrich Maurer (married, one child), who joined the Embassy in June 1979.

Conditions to be accepted for a diplomatic career are completed university studies (particularly useful are degrees in law, history and economics) and personal suitability. The candidates are thoroughly tested and scrutinised before being accepted as "Stagiaires".

Some professional experience is desirable before entering the diplomatic service. After a candidate's acceptance, a two-year training starts generally with a period of six months in several offices of the Department of Foreign Affairs in Berne, followed by six months at the Geneva Institut des Hautes Etudes Internationales.

Subsequently, the candidate serves a year of "apprenticeship" abroad in order to learn the ropes of the trade, assisting a senior diplomat in his everyday tasks. The London post – one of the most desired by prospective diplomats – has gone this year to Mr Thomas Füglistner (married, one child), a lawyer from Zurich.

At all times the fully-fledged diplomat is the representative of his country and its government and must therefore be equipped

to deal with the intricacies of international politics.

He must be up-to-date with all events of political importance to his home-country as well as to the host-country. Foremost he should be able to communicate with people from all walks of life, since people are the matter of his trade.

Not all routine . . .

Being a diplomat also means being prepared for the unexpected. Anything can happen on a day which starts calmly and orderly with reading the newspapers and attending to routine administrative details.

It is a good thing for a diplomat to be as "polyvalent" as possible and to be a fairly practical citizen. One of the Embassy officials remembers well the occasion in Indonesia, his former post, when the double-bass of a visiting chamber orchestra came off the plane with a broken neck and no replacement instrument could be found for the concert the same evening. A dab of the right (Swiss) glue from the diplomatic household eventually saved the day – and the concert.

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