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## SOCIETY AND SOCIAL SCENE

# **The Swiss woman abroad**

THAT was the theme of the 60th Assembly of Swiss Abroad in Sierre in August. The subject was and is extremely topical, specially with a view to the citizenship campaign and the discrimination against some Swiss women abroad in the Old-Age Insurance (AHV/AVS).

The Organisation of Swiss Abroad, in Berne, has always tried to give Swiss women a hearing and has consulted them whenever possible. But this was the first time that the Swiss woman abroad has been presented in a fully comprehensive manner.

There was the danger that polemics might have arisen but fortunately this was not the case. The way the programme was set up showed clearly that the organisers were aware that real equality of rights could only be established by evolution.

It was said that even in the much-abused Victorian times determined women always managed to make a mark. The Swiss woman abroad was possibly at an advantage as her sisters at home lived in even more restricted circumstances as far as a life of their own was concerned.

The career of a Marie Grossholz, from Berne, the famous Madame Tussaud (1760-1850), is much as that of a successful business woman of today.

Then, from 1881 to 1910, the Neue Zürcher Zeitung employed a woman, Emilie Hüni from Horgen as a correspondent in Paris – one of their most important posts. She had already run a correspondence office in

Paris since 1865.

Anna Cramer-Hirzel from Zurich founded the Swiss Evangelical Hospital and Asylum in Milan in 1875, and that quite without any male assistance.

A young widow, Mrs Beeler, built an hotel in Nervi which she managed to develop to a very high standard and which she ran successfully until after the Second World War.

These are only a few examples from the past. Today, a number of Swiss women are successful professionals – one as president of a bank in Houston Texas, one as head of a research laboratory at Melbourne University and another as a professor of mathematics at the main university in an African country.

In the fields of charitable work, nursing, education and development aid a large number of Swiss women are actively engaged in valuable projects. They contribute to the good reputation of Switzerland as much as the representatives of industry and trade.

Swiss women artists have reached maturity abroad, too. Their works give new impetus and serve to enrich the art world at home.

Nevertheless, the role of the Swiss woman abroad as mother and home maker must not be underestimated. The stranger the conditions in alien lands, the bigger and more responsible is her task.

When families emigrate, the men usually go to definite fields of activity, which makes it easier to get used to the new surroundings. For women and children it is far more difficult to

adapt themselves.

Perhaps the difficulties and problems today are not as tremendous as they used to be for the women emigrants in earlier times. What those women had to cope with and the problems they had to solve made them real heroines.

But life is difficult still, especially where Swiss women have to overcome the complexities in countries whose civilisation differs from that of their homeland.

A special and often delicate position is that of the ever increasing number of Swiss women married to foreigners abroad (between 30,000 and 40,000). They, too, make a valuable contribution to the Swiss presence abroad.

At the plenary session of the assembly in Sierre, the president of the Organisation of Swiss Abroad, Dr Alfred Weber, said that the decision to have "The Swiss Woman Abroad" as main theme was taken for two reasons – to honour the endeavours of the Auslandschweizerinnen and also because there were still some problems concerning them which were awaiting a solution.

The way the programme had been conceived, and some of the subjects treated in former years, would be brought up again as a matter of course – social insurance, education and citizenship. Although these concern men as well as women, it was the mothers who had them at heart perhaps more than the men.

Dr Weber said that without the devotion of the women and their courage, Swiss emigration would

never have become what it is today. In the Swiss communities abroad, too, the women have always been willing to do valuable work in every field.

He also mentioned the women who worked in Catholic and Protestant missions, often in difficult climatic conditions.

The panel of speakers was introduced by Mr Marcel Ney, director of the secretariat of Swiss Abroad in Berne.

He said that the history of Swiss women abroad began as early as emigration itself. The Walser emigrants in the 12th and 13th centuries had single women with them, and they faced more terrible difficulties with travelling, health and problems on arrival than anyone since.

But Mrs Dudli (New Zealand), Mrs Ruedin (Argentina) and Mrs Mueller (Senegal) left no doubt that even today integration in a foreign country was no easy matter.

The next three women told of their activities in social work. Mrs Monney from Rome looks after needy Swiss and organises other Swiss women in welfare work.

Mrs Adatte from Lyons described the work of the Swiss Club and how members help in social welfare.

A trained social worker, Mrs Walz from Stuttgart, vice-president of the Swiss Club and supervisor in the Evangelical Community, talked about her difficult work with young and, more especially, old compatriots.

After that came four women who are married to foreigners, Mrs Ruys from Holland, married to a Dutch doctor, told of the

great difficulties in giving the children a balanced life and of the problems the children faced as students in Switzerland where they were treated as foreigners – they had a fatherland but not a motherland!

Mrs Bayard, married to an Italian in Rome, is extremely active in matters of Swiss citizenship which she wants to be passed on automatically from mother to child. She also demands political rights by post.

Next, a woman representing the Association of Swiss Women married to Foreigners in Switzerland spoke convincingly about the value of such marriages as “communities of interests”. The representative of the Association for Women's Rights in Switzerland spoke both in French and German about the problems women had.

The next set consisted of women with academic degrees. Dr Ursula Ditchburn, of Scotland the new deputy delegate to the Commission of the Swiss Abroad (representing Great Britain North) spoke of her work as a teacher of German at a comprehensive school in Dunfermline and as a music teacher.

Minister Marianne von Gruening, soon to take up her post at the Swiss Embassy in Moscow, spoke of Swiss women in the diplomatic service, both in their own right and as wives of ambassadors, counsellors, consuls and other diplomats.

Mrs Studer of Argentina gave an impressive account of how, on the death of her husband, she relinquished her career in research and took on the manage-

ment of a large estate.

The last two speakers gave examples of what Swiss women abroad could do in the field of culture and information. Mrs Ilse Frei from Antwerp spoke in French and German about the work she does as patron of the arts, as well as being a business woman.

She keeps open house for Swiss artists, organises concerts and lectures, and generally supports Swiss cultural activities in Belgium.

The last speaker was Mrs Mariann Meier, of London, who spoke on information.

Journalist, former editor of the Swiss Observer, lecturer on Switzerland and author of *The Young Traveller in Switzerland* (translated into several languages), she was the first woman member on the Commission of the Swiss Abroad and president of the London group of the *Nouvelle Société Helvétique*.

She maintained that all Swiss women abroad were actively engaged in information, teaching their children about Switzerland, telling their colleagues and friends about their homeland, making sure the right impression of Switzerland was given, and that their behaviour was at all times a good visiting card for their mothercountry.

The Swiss Woman Abroad was certainly well presented at the Sierre Assembly.

Let us hope that more interest and understanding have been created so that some of their justified demands will have an easier passage to success. – **Mariann Meier.**

## Thank you!

MANY thanks to all the readers who sent me kind messages after having read Mrs Marianne Hill-Moser's profile of me in the Christmas issue.

Unfortunately, I cannot answer all of them personally but I did appreciate that so many of you took the trouble to write.

I reciprocate your good wishes. – **Mariann Meier (MM).**

## The close season?

WHAT'S happened to the Swiss Societies? Have members hibernated for the winter?

This time last year, *Swiss Observer* was receiving reports of members battling through howling winds and snowdrifts to attend meetings and events. This year, with no such problems, all has gone suspiciously quiet.

Reports from societies are very few and far between; yet if *Swiss Observer* is to reflect your activities and plans, such news is vital.

So please, do put pen to paper. And remember that for news of coming events, we need the information by the first day of the preceding month.

Pictures are welcome too, though these should be prints (colour or black-and-white) and not negatives or slides.

Our address is Europa House, 68 Chester Road, Hazel Grove, Stockport, SK7 5NY. We look forward to hearing from you.