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UN: To join or not to join?

On the whole, 'No', say Swiss Abroad

AS WAS reported in the last issue, the 61st Assembly of Swiss Abroad, held in Zurich, was a great success.

Although the plebiscite on whether Switzerland should join the United Nations political organisation will not take place until 1985, the issue is of great importance and has been discussed already for a long time.

The president of the organisation of Swiss Abroad, Professor Dr Walther Hofer, introduced the subject at the plenary session of the Assembly.

He began by saying that the Swiss abroad had always been interested in the position of Switzerland in the international field. When the Federal Council issued a message to Parliament advocating Switzerland's accession, the OSA decided that the moment had come to study the matter within the OSA and to send a questionnaire to the compatriots abroad.

He maintained that 99.9 per cent of the 351,000 Swiss residents abroad already lived in

states belonging to UNO – for, of the 169 states in the world, 157 are members.

Apart from North and South Korea, Monaco, San Marino and Liechtenstein, only the Vatican and Andorra are outside, as well as the "picturesque quartet" of Tonga, Nauru, Tuvalu and Kiribati.

Thus, Professor Hofer thought, the Swiss abroad were well qualified to offer an opinion on the subject and, early in 1983, a questionnaire had been sent to 700 Swiss organisations abroad, as well as a modified one published in the "Review".

The enquiry had a good response – 30 per cent of the organisations answered and over 4,000 individuals. Surprisingly, the majority of 1,979, which was largely in favour, was not reached: 60 per cent against, 30 per cent for and 10 per cent abstaining.

Generally, one is more friendly towards the UNO in Europe than overseas and, within Europe, Germany, France and the Northern countries are pro-UNO,

whereas the others are against.

It is interesting to note that at the meeting organised by the New Helvetic Society in London on May 19, the ayes surpassed the nays.

But far more individual answers against were sent in, so that the total was very much against Switzerland's accession, probably partly due to the negative role the UNO played in the Falklands conflict. Incidentally, the Swiss in the Argentine also voted against.

Professor Hofer then went on trying to find the reason for the change in attitude. He also quoted the reasons for and against which were given in the answers.

One of the most weighty ones was that Switzerland could do more good outside, and could also do more good with the extra money which would be needed.

One must not forget, though, that she already spends vast amounts taking part in all the specialised agencies of the UNO and the peace-keeping missions.

He ended by mentioning the large number of people still

undecided, a fact also true for the Swiss at home. He expressed the hope that the debate which followed his introduction would help to clarify the position for many other people.

The next speaker was Mr Raymond Probst, Secretary of State at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. He explained the Federal Council's position and the message to Parliament.

He went back to 1946 when the Government refused to join the UNO. Since then, the position had changed and, although Switzerland was actively supporting all activities and peace-keeping efforts of the world organisation, politically she was outside and had no voice in decision making.

He mentioned Switzerland's neutrality which gave rise to some uncertainty. But he was of the opinion that it was compatible with membership, provided it was made clear from the beginning that Switzerland's neutrality was a *sine qua non*.

After this lucid argument in German, the former councillor of



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Pictured in Zurich: the two Commission delegates for Great Britain Mariann Meier and Bernard Simon (right) chat to the one from Australia

states and one-time President of the OSA, Dr Louis Guisan, made a speech in French, giving the reasons why Switzerland could and should not join.

He said Swiss policy was based on democracy, neutrality and solidarity, the three principles on which Switzerland had lived and survived successfully. In well-reasoned arguments, he showed that these three essentials in no way applied to the workings of the United Nations in its political organisation.

Switzerland was a political construction which had matured over nearly seven centuries. The three principles were not very distinctive at the beginning and rather vague for a long time, but they had grown and were by now quite definite.

Happily, Switzerland has always obeyed them, resulting in peace and prosperity. To join the UNO would mean a turning point in Swiss history, and Switzerland would no longer be able to adhere to the three principles.

The discussion was opened by Professor J. Werner (Stuttgart), who pleaded for entry. He said that Switzerland's special position was not understood everywhere abroad, and that we should not

leave ourselves open to the reproach that we take advantage worldwide of our economic strength, yet remain politically aloof.

He reminded the audience that Switzerland had an opinion to voice in world affairs and quoted André Siegfried: "La Suisse aura le dernier mot".

Mr Albert Wirth (Rome) gave a spirited talk against. He pointed out that, 38 years after the UNO was born, wars still raged, and the UNO as a political body was useless. Switzerland could do more outside than inside. The tremendous applause which greeted this statement showed that the audience was largely with him.

Mr Raymond Courvoisier (Malaga), a former delegate of the Red Cross, also maintained that Switzerland could play a more important part outside the UNO. She was needed in the world – Switzerland was "the house of peace". UNO was no saviour yet, nor did it have a soul.

More speakers pleaded for and against it. Ambassador E. Diez spoke in favour. As a member of the department of international law at the Swiss Foreign Office, he was of the opinion that the UNO

should have to make great efforts until it could, as it were, join Switzerland.

One had to be ashamed as human beings when seeing the hunger in the world. Switzerland could help to bring about an improvement in attitude at UNO level, he said.

Other speakers maintained that the UNO political organisation was nothing more than a debating forum, and that more was achieved by bilateral diplomacy.


On the other hand, more and more laws were made by the UNO in which Switzerland had no say, and yet they affected her. Already, Switzerland had to take up a position in all kinds of conflicts and decisions.

The discussion came to an end. It was obvious that the general tenor was that of opposing Switzerland's accession, as had been shown in the answers to the questionnaire.

Hopefully, the debate has helped many to reach a definite conclusion. Others may feel as the President, Professor Hofer, said "still confused but at a higher level".

Mariann Meier

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