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AN organisation under the name of Pro Helvetia was set up in 1939, at a time when war was imminent. It owes its existence to rather special historic circumstances.

One of these is that each Canton is anxious to maintain sovereignty over its own culture and just how characteristically Swiss this is may be seen in the multiplicity of highly individual local cultures which have developed in close proximity to one another in Switzerland.

Naturally, the fundamental structures of Swiss culture have also been subject to changes over the years, especially in the larger towns; but the boundaries between the country's different cultures have remained unchanged.

The four languages, the religious differences and the vastly differing landscapes between the Jura, Central Switzerland, the Alps and the valleys of the South, all give Switzerland its diversity to which Pro Helvetia owes its existence.

Ten years after its creation, Pro Helvetia became a foundation with its headquarters in Zurich (Hirschengraben 22). It is under the general supervision of the Federal Council which appoints the President and the members of the Council from a list of names submitted by the Federal Department of the Interior.

In making these appointments, a balance must be struck between representatives of the four linguistic regions, as well as between the different denominational and cultural groups.

The Council of the Foundation appoints the members of the executive committee and those of the working groups whose function it is to examine questions submitted to the Foundation and to make recommendations.

The Foundation is under public law and its task is to promote cultural activity in Switzerland and to encourage cultural exchanges between Switzerland and other countries.

Its aims are to preserve Switzerland's spiritual heritage and maintain its cultural individuality.

It has to promote cultural creativity in Switzerland by lending support to those who are active independently in these fields, in the various Cantons, linguistic areas and cultural circles. It also encourages cultural exchanges between these.

Among other things, Pro Helvetia makes it possible for first performances of works by Swiss dramatists and musicians to be put on. It also fosters a lively exchange of cultural ideas by supporting concerts, theatrical presentations and other such events.

The Council also annually commissions individual musicians and writers to produce a variety of musical and literary works. It also supports such things as cultural journals and

Pro Helvetia - looking after our culture and heritage

reviews, translations and literary or cultural publications.

It works in conjunction with other culture-promoting institutions to support individual folkloric undertakings, such as publications describing the customs and dialects of the various regions of Switzerland.

Adult education and encouraging cultural activity are two areas of Pro Helvetia's activity which are becoming increasingly important.

Every year, the Council also lends its support to a number of umbrella organisations involved in various fields of culture. The Foundation also grants scholarships, and it is actively concerned with the protection of Swiss historic monuments. It is obliged to devote special attention to the two minor linguistic regions, the Grisons and the Ticino.

As far as Pro Helvetia's activities abroad are concerned, its aims are to foster cultural relations with other countries, especially by promoting an understanding of Swiss thought and culture.

It supports and organises art exhibitions, displays of documentary material pertaining to various aspects of Swiss culture, exhibitions of books, and tours abroad by theatrical groups, orchestras and musical ensembles. The Council also organises Swiss film weeks throughout the world and cultural events in neighbouring countries.

Its work in all these areas is carried out in co-operation with Swiss representative bodies abroad and with the relevant institutions in and outside Switzerland. In addition, the Council also runs a Press and Information Service, which provides people in other countries with information about developments on the Swiss cultural scene.

The supreme body in charge of Pro Helvetia is the Board of Trustees on which every region of Switzerland and every sector of artistic and cultural activity in the country are represented.

Since the Swiss Parliament, mindful of the

importance of the Council's work, has continuously increased the amount of funds available to it, Pro Helvetia has been able to expand the scope of its activities considerably in recent years.

Pro Helvetia's aim is to foster lively cultural exchanges not only between Switzerland and its neighbours, but also between her and countries with completely different cultures. It is hoped that these efforts will, in a modest way, help to further better mutual understanding between the nations of the world.

★ ★ ★

PLEASE remember that this year's Assembly of Swiss Abroad will be held in Basle from May 11 - 13, at the same time the Swiss Industries Fair, the famous MUBA, is taking place.

Don't miss this unique opportunity of meeting Swiss from all parts of the world and well-known compatriots from within Switzerland.

Please write immediately to the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad, Alpenstrasse 26, 3006 Berne, and ask for information and an application form.

You will not regret going to Basle - once one has attended an Assembly, one wants to go again!

★ ★ ★

ONE of the great and loyal friends of the Swiss abroad, the former Federal Councillor, Prof Dr F.T. Wahlen, will celebrate his 85th birthday on April 10.

He is one of the great Swiss statesmen of the century, and his wise counsel has never failed to impress.

We wish Dr Wahlen an enjoyable birthday and many happy returns of the day. (Address: Humboldtstrasse 39, 3013 Berne).

Mariann Meier