

The congress of the Swiss abroad in Berne [to be continued]

Autor(en): [s.n.]

Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - (1937)

Heft 833

PDF erstellt am: **22.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-696175>

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THE CONGRESS OF THE SWISS ABROAD IN BERNE.

By A. F. SUTER,

President of the London Group of the N.S.H.

The annual convocation by the Nouvelle Société Helvétique de la Représentatives of the Swiss Abroad took place at Berne on September the 5th and 6th, 1937. This was a congress of the first order, attended by President Motta, the Chiefs of the Federal Departments and many members of the diplomatic service who had held their convention on the previous day. The congress was further distinguished by the fact that the meetings took place in the Bundespalais and the townhall of Berne. There were no festivities of any kind; WORK was the order of the day.

The first day's programme was preceded by a press conference, in which Dr. P. Zschokke of Basel, central president of the N.S.H. informed the assembled press representatives of the work previously accomplished by the society and outlined the programme for the present and future activity. Prof. Piguet-Lausanne followed with the French rendering of the same exposé.

First Day, September 5th.

Dr. Arnold Lätt — Zurich, the president of the Auslandschweizer Kommission, welcomed the guests in the chamber of the Grand Council of Berne which was soon filled to capacity. His rich, warm words of greeting to the representatives of the 300,000 Swiss Abroad formed an exemplary inauguration of the 16th congress which had now attained the status of an institution and could now be regarded as the most important point of contact for the Swiss at Home and Abroad.

The deliberations of the first session commenced with the business and administrative reports of two responsible personalities at the Secrétariat, Mlle. Alice Briod and Dr. G. Schürch. The astonishing versatility of the Secrétariat's occupation, its unique and absolutely independent position, and the growing responsibility of these posts were well brought out by these reports which were received with general acclamation. — Then followed an invitation to the Swiss Abroad to take an active participation in the projected national exhibition in Zurich in 1939 by the director A. Meili — Zurich. It was particularly desired, he stated, that the cultural, scientific, technical and general pioneering work of the Swiss Abroad should be given graphic expression in order to show to what great extent the Swiss had participated in the progress of culture in Foreign countries. He made a strong appeal that such co-operation might be organised systematically and well in time to produce the desired effect; and he hoped for very large numbers of Swiss Abroad to visit the exhibition personally.

Vice-director J. Ruof of the Federal Steuerverwaltung explained the present position of the revision of the military tax for the Swiss Abroad. General amusement was caused by his confession that, in spite of, or because of, various propositions before the authorities, a deadlock had been reached in this matter and the future was uncertain. (It is of interest to note here that a later speaker made reference to an entry in the annals of the City Swiss Club of London which reads: — 1875, Petition abolition taxe militaire.) — J. Eugen Weber — Baden discussed the subject of a labour exchange between young Swiss and Foreigners which had so far operated between France and Switzerland and is to be extended to Belgium and elsewhere. — Pastor Mojon — Berne outlined the unfortunate position of Swiss pastors abroad at the present time and greatly regretted their reduced activity and influence, chiefly due to political and economic conditions.

A number of representatives of foreign colonies then took the word and informed the audience of the welfare, the work and the difficulties of the Swiss in their particular countries. Dr. Wolf, from Milan, spoke in particular of the decadence of the Swiss schooling system in Italy; how the colonies were actually reduced to begging in order to keep the schools going and how he deplored this state of things which was in such strong contrast with the fundamental obligations of the Swiss Abroad. — The president of the London Group of the N.S.H., Mr. A. F. Suter, reported upon the Swiss colonies in Great Britain and the Irish Free State; he spoke of their good reputation as citizens and revealed many pleasant aspects of their participation in English cultural life; he outlined their interior organisation, their cohesion and pride in their nationality. He advocated strongly that whatever action was possible should be taken to cause the English to re-open the country to young Swiss settlers so that these colonies should not die out, especially in view of the fact that large numbers of the Swiss children born in England inevitably grew up as Britains. — Mr. R. Frei, from Leipzig, reported upon the very serious difficulties of the Swiss in Germany to retain their economic positions on account of their nationality. This oppression, in fact forcible extinction, of the Swiss colonies in Germany, he urged, should be fought with determination by similar counter action at home, where such large numbers of Germans are settled.

After supper the director of the Swiss Radio Corporation, Mr. A. W. Glogg, explained the development of the radio service for the Swiss Abroad, from the first weekly report by Dr. Buchi to the fuller programme now sent out regularly from the League of Nations station at Prangins to North and South America. The next step, the speaker said, would be the building of their own short wave station for a wider service. — Dr. A. Siegfried, secretary of the Pro Juventute, followed with a description of the action in favour of the Auslandschweizerjugend and reported that this year no less than 1,350 Swiss children from abroad had been enabled, by his organisation, to spend their holidays in Switzerland entirely free of cost to them, while 150 more had borne their own expenses. Apart from the wonderful effect on the health and morale of the children themselves, he maintained that this work was of great patriotic value to Swiss culture abroad. — Mr. Marki, representative of the N.S.H. group Oberbaden, shortly referred to the difficulties his members experienced in the payment of insurance premiums on Swiss policies.

In the course of the general discussion which followed the proceedings, a great deal of instructive information was gathered from those who spoke. Danner, a Swiss from India, strongly pleaded the cause of the workless Swiss returned from abroad, who did not receive the sympathy and help due to him. Prof. Mariani, from Milan, expressed his desire for amplification of the radio emissions. Consul Hafliger, Frankfurt a/M, pointed out that the military tax for Swiss Abroad was no longer of great importance to the Swiss in Germany, and he warned the audience from accepting the individual cases of hardship in his country as a generality. — Dr. Rothmund, chief of the federal police, humorously styled himself the "Auslandschweizerpolizist" and then made a valuable contribution to the general discussion. He explained why any possible counter action by the authorities against foreigners in Switzerland in order to improve the condition of the Swiss Abroad must of necessity defeat its own purpose, while the Swiss Abroad were undoubtedly in a better position to achieve this end by their own individual and collective efforts.

The first day of the congress, at which some 250 N.S.H. members and friends had assisted, had come to a close and left the observer with the distinct impression that the "Auslandschweizerwerk" was gaining ground, throwing its roots deeper into the structure of the Swiss colonies abroad, and imposing the recognition of its importance upon the Swiss at home. The second part of the congress was anticipated with keen pleasure, when President Motta and the diplomatic representatives of the Confederation would be present at the chief meeting to be held in the National Council chamber at the Palais Federal.

(To be continued.)

SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY.

The first of an attractive series of lectures arranged for the season 1937/38 was held at Swiss House on Wednesday, October 13th following the Monthly Meeting. A more topical subject than "What's Happening in China" could hardly have been chosen and Mr. O. M. Green, M.A., late editor of the "North China Daily News" and 29 years Shanghai Correspondent of "The Times," was undoubtedly the best qualified lecturer to acquaint the large audience with the events and history of the impoverishing and horrible conflict now raging in the Far East. Mr. Green lucidly analysed the complex situation which has arisen through the upheavals in the Sino-Japanese war. He recorded the usurpation of the Japanese Government by a clique of military men who watch with an eye of disapproval the rapidity of progress of Western civilisation in the East and whose desire is for the conquest abroad and the building up of a big Empire on the mainland. He spoke of the phenomenal unification of a disrupted China in the hour of need to stem the tide of Japanese appropriations which began with the seizure of Manchuria at a time when China was quarrelling among her own factions.

The lecturer then proceeded to give graphic descriptions by means of lantern slides of the military campaign in China on which the eyes of the whole civilised world are focussed. He vividly depicted the strategy of what he termed the most insane war the futility of which he argued on economical grounds apart from the moral aspect. He threw some interesting side-lights on Chinese customs, the emancipation of Chinese women and gave gleanings on their national life. He portrayed the lives and gave personal accounts of to-day's leaders of that vast and ancient dynasty and modern democracy, the influence of the village elders and women on national life. The lecturer concluded by saying that he could see no end to this strife unless the Great Powers put a stop to it by concerted action. Referring to the enormous capacity of China to absorb those who try to conquer her he said she would again emerge victorious from this struggle and remain, what she deserves to be, a great Power in the comity of nations.

The lecturer was heartily applauded on the conclusion of his most interesting and instructive address which was followed by a very animated discussion. Mr. A. Steinmann, President of the Society, moved a cordial vote of thanks which was carried with acclamation.

Members are reminded that on November 10th Miss Ella Maillart, Author of "A Forbidden Journey," will address the Society on "From Peking to India by Caravan." The lecture will be held at Kingsway Hall, Kingsway, W.C.2, and will be illustrated. Please do not fail to reserve this day for our compatriot who became so famous by her hazardous journey with Peter Fleming, the well-known "Times" Correspondent.

W.B.

LA POLITIQUE Plafond fiscal.

Après que le Conseil national eut voté le programme financier, on jugea nécessaire d'interrompre la session d'automne durant quinze jours, afin que la commission du Conseil des Etats pût examiner à loisir le projet transmis par l'autre Chambre. A la reprise, le Conseil des Etats devait être appelé à se prononcer à son tour. Et c'est bien ce qu'il a fait, au cours de la semaine dernière. Mais on s'était exagéré la lenteur on la minutie de la commission sénatoriale, car, tandis qu'on lui accordait quinze jours, elle expédia sa besogne en trois fois vingt-quatre heures. Le Conseil lui-même ne fut guère moins expéditif, puisque, jeudi matin déjà, il a voté le programme.

Le Conseil national avait diminué, d'une part, les ressources nouvelles que demandait le Conseil fédéral, et rétabli, d'autre part, quelques subventions. Les Etats ne se sont pas montrés plus favorables aux accroissements d'impôts, puisqu'ils ont repoussé aussi bien l'impôt sur l'accroissement de la fortune que l'augmentation de l'impôt fédéral de crise, et qu'ils ont admis le texte original du projet concernant les sociétés dites "holding." En revanche, s'ils se sont ralliés aux propositions du National au sujet des traitements (taux de réduction de 13% et exonération d'un salaire de base de 1800 francs), ils ont rétabli, contrairement à l'avis de l'autre Conseil, les réductions de subventions, et créé de la sorte une divergence qui devra être "liquidée" cette semaine. Il est vrai qu'il s'agit surtout de dépenses relatives à des travaux d'aménagements forestiers, de cours d'eau, etc., et que l'on envisage de prélever les sommes nécessaires à ces améliorations sur le crédit de 35 millions nouvellement voté pour les "possibilités de travail."

Le Conseil des Etats, nous l'avons dit, a réservé un enterrement de première classe à la proposition du vieux tribun zurichois Wettstein, qui s'était fait le terre-neuve du Conseil fédéral en reprenant l'idée d'un supplément d'impôt fédéral de crise pour 1938. La commission avait écarté cette solution, et c'est en vain que M. Wettstein s'efforça de la faire agréer; il se heurta à l'opposition formelle du rapporteur, M. Riva, qui déclara que la fiscalité a atteint son maximum, et de M. Bosset, qui marqua sa préférence pour les économies plutôt que pour les surcroûts de contributions; malgré la fureur de M. Klöti, le maire socialiste de Zurich, qui crut opportun de saisir cette occasion pour invectiver contre les Romands, le vote balaya la proposition Wettstein.

Il résulte de ces importantes décisions des Etats que si personne, au Conseil national, ne reprend les propositions primitives du Conseil fédéral, l'impôt sur l'accroissement des fortunes et le sur-impôt de crise seront définitivement repoussés.

On voudrait que le Conseil fédéral méditât quelque peu sur ces résultats et en tirât des conclusions générales. M. Riva a parfaitement raison quand il constate que l'on paie bien assez d'impôts et que ce moyen de se procurer des ressources donne tout ce qu'il peut donner. Mais c'est ce que l'on s'obstine à ne pas comprendre au département fédéral des finances, où l'on fait preuve de beaucoup de zèle et de persévérance, mais où l'on manque décidément d'imagination. Entre la commune, le canton et la Confédération, le citoyen, dans certaines villes, répartit actuellement son gain entier, au mois et demi, sous forme d'impôts directs, auxquels s'ajoutent, selon les cas, de nombreuses taxes spéciales.

On est déjà allé beaucoup trop loin dans cette voie; il serait temps, non d'y avancer, mais de reculer prudemment. On ne peut pas augmenter sans cesse les impôts; c'est une politique qui ne convient qu'au Père Ubu, à qui d'ailleurs, comme on sait, elle ne réussit guère.

Puisque le Conseil fédéral ne veut pas se mettre cela dans la tête, il est fort heureux que les Chambres usent de l'arme la meilleure dont elles disposent: le vote négatif. En l'occurrence, la décision des Etats est d'autant plus significative que les représentants des cantons, tout fédéralistes qu'ils sont ou devraient être, se laissent parfois séduire par l'appât d'une "ristourne" d'impôt qu'ils n'ont que la peine d'encaisser, alors que les contributions cantonales leur causent des soucis de toute espèce.

Léon Savary,
(Tribune de Genève.)