

We meet in Berne : meeting of the Commission of the Swiss Abboad

Autor(en): [s.n.]

Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): - (1964)

Heft 1449

PDF erstellt am: **24.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689983>

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WE MET IN BERNE

MEETING OF THE COMMISSION OF THE SWISS ABROAD

The tenth meeting of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad (ASK) took place in Berne on Saturday, 1st February. Some thirty members mainly from European countries took part, as well as several members from within Switzerland. The meeting was held in the "Federal Palace", the Swiss Houses of Parliament, and the fact that we assembled in the hall of the Council of States made us doubly aware of our responsibility. This was stressed by the Chairman, Dr. G. Schuerch, President of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (ASO), in his opening remarks. He reminded us of the Commission's aims to work for the common good. This meant that at times compromise was the best solution. Politics, after all, is the art of achieving what is possible, and Dr. Schuerch said that it was up to the ASK to try and find reasonable solutions to the problems facing the Swiss communities abroad.

The Swiss community in Great Britain was represented by Dr. H. B. Knuchel for the north and Mrs. Mariann Meier for the south.

A large part of the morning was spent in going through the annual report of 1963. Many subjects were discussed in the course of working through nearly thirty type-written pages covering the extensive activities of the organisation. We shall refer to the report more fully when it is published.

This year's spring meeting was fixed to coincide with the Golden Jubilee of the New Helvetic Society, the parent body of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad. For this reason the accounts for last year were not yet ready. These will be approved by letter later in the spring.

Item four on the agenda concerned the preparatory work of the Swiss National Exhibition in Lausanne. Details will be found on another page (under EXPO 1964).

Next, the state of the organisation as regards membership was reported on. More groups had been formed and were in the process of joining the ASO and the Commission, especially in South America. In Paris a group for the purpose of studying helvetic problems had been created. Dr. H. J. Halbheer, the Director of the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad in Berne reported on his recent visit to London, during which he had attended a Presidents' Assembly of the Swiss Societies in Great Britain, addressed a meeting of the London Group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique and replied for the guests at the Annual Dinner and Dance of the Swiss Mercantile Society.

A long debate took place on the subject of permission to buy land in Switzerland. As readers may remember, a new decree came into force which made it compulsory for foreigners desiring to purchase land to get a permit. As the laws of residence were applied, Swiss citizens residing abroad also came under this regulation. This caused a great deal of bad feeling, and on the initiative of the Swiss community in Italy, a petition was launched, asking that the Swiss abroad should be exempt. This was not possible as it would go against international law. The Commission of the Swiss Abroad has been debating this subject at every meeting for the last few years. A special sub-committee was set up to go into it, and a new proposal was put to the meeting in Berne on 1st February. After a long discussion, this proposal was accepted by a large majority. It must be stated here that the two members representing the Swiss in Great Britain did not approve, as the proposal suggests an alteration of the clause dealing

with persons not subject to permit. This should in future also include persons who themselves or their fathers or grandfathers were born in Switzerland or had been resident there for more than ten years. The two representatives from Great Britain objected to this on the grounds that such an extension would also open the way to large numbers of foreigners of Swiss origin who were no longer attached to Switzerland, or dual nationals who were as one of the French representatives put it "Suisses de la Crèche", namely Swiss only when it suited them.

The meeting was then informed of the progress made in the question of the new constitutional article regarding the Swiss abroad. As was reported in the "Swiss Observer" of 10th January, an article of competence has been drafted and has been put forward to the cantonal governments for consideration. The ASO asked the meeting for the approval of a letter to the same authorities, as well as to the main parties and leading firms, in which the ASO explains the position and how the wish for such an article came about. This should make it easier to get the necessary support. A draft letter to the Federal Political Department was also put to the meeting.

The so-called "anticipated" or "withholding" tax (Verrechnungssteuer) was then discussed. This is a problem which mainly concerns Swiss living in countries with which there exist no double-taxation agreements.

Regarding the Solidarity Fund abroad, it was reported that eight thousand Swiss citizens had joined so far. Whilst this was a handsome number, it was only about a fifth of a possible total.

The educational scheme for Swiss abroad was next on the agenda (see article "Educational Scholarship Scheme for Young Swiss Abroad" in last issue). It was stated that over seventy scholarships had already been given. The question of scholarships for younger children was raised, and the desirability of some kind of acclimatisation course for Swiss children from abroad was discussed.

One item which came up during the discussion is the fact that Swiss books of educational or cultural value can be obtained from the Secretariat in Berne at a discount of 33%.

The agenda was a heavy one, and many problems were touched. These exchanges of opinions are most helpful, and we Swiss abroad may well be grateful to have our interests well looked after by the ASO and its Secretariat. The Commission has great responsibilities and has become more and more a kind of Parliament of the Swiss Abroad, whose opinions and decisions are considered in higher quarters where questions regarding the Swiss residing outside Switzerland are dealt with.

Of less importance but by no means less useful are the discussions and conversations which take place outside the meeting hall. This time it was a luncheon on Saturday, a reception and a dinner in the evening and the Jubilee Celebrations of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique on Sunday. These will be dealt with in a separate article in this issue.

Mariann.

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