

Swiss events

Objektyp: **Group**

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

Band (Jahr): - **(1974)**

Heft 1696

PDF erstellt am: **22.09.2024**

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A PRIVILEGED RELATIONSHIP

Switzerland is sometimes considered as a loner on the international scene. Its traditional neutrality has prevented her from joining the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund and the Common Market. Switzerland has insisted on not committing herself to the aims of any world organisation that might prejudice her strict conception of neutrality. This policy has paid off since it has won Switzerland a very special reputation and earned her an important place in the political and economic life of the world. While not compromising on its fundamental political option, armed and perpetual neutrality, Switzerland has joined various United Nations agencies, signed an Association agreement with the EEC and taken part in world monetary discussions.

But Switzerland's institutional isolation is not as important as it might seem since Berne has developed special links with two other countries with many things in common: Sweden and Austria. These two countries are those with which Switzerland's political links are possibly the strongest. Although trade and technical co-operation between them cannot be compared with relations between Switzerland and France, or Germany, for example, this special link could possibly convey considerable status to diplomatic postings in Stockholm or Vienna. At any rate, leaders of the three countries regularly exchange visits. The Austrian foreign minister visited Berne last summer. Mr. Pierre Graber, Head of the Political Department later went to Stockholm.

One important development which has contributed to strengthening the ties between the three countries has been the European Security Conference. Although the second stage of this major gathering has been bogged down in Geneva for many months, Switzerland has taken a particular interest in its work and, at the beginning, was the vocal advocate of a multilateral peace-keeping system inspired on the Pact that held the

Confederates together in the early days of our national history.

Switzerland, Sweden and Austria emerged from that conference as a new grouping to be reckoned with. The three countries, often joined by Finland, spoke in a same voice that stood out against the other power groups, namely, the NATO and Warsaw Pact countries. The three countries can almost be said to have formed an unwritten alliance reflecting their common view of European and world problems.

Sweden's foreign minister, Mr. Sven Anderson, visited Berne in mid-September in return for his Swiss counterpart's earlier visit to Stockholm. The Security Conference took an important place in their talks. The two men also discussed development aid and the energy crisis. On that particular issue, both agreed that any agreement to share out available petrol supplies among industrial countries should be worked out and implemented within the framework of an existing and well-established body: the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Another matter of common interest to the two countries is arms procurement. Sweden and Switzerland are outside any military alliance and rely on themselves for their defence. They have, all the same, endeavoured to co-operate in the field of arms supplies and a joint commission has been set up to examine eventual possibilities. Before becoming Foreign Affairs Minister, Mr. Anderson was in charge of his country's defence ministry. It was in that capacity that he received last year Mr. Rudolf Gnaegi, Head of the Military Department. The latter was highly impressed by the performance of the Saab Viggen fighter – which didn't prevent him later to order trials on the American "Tiger". But Mr. Anderson wasn't offended. "I am not an arms salesman", he said, recognising, moreover, that the Viggen might not necessarily be adapted to Switzerland's geographical conditions.

The same kind of co-operation is in progress between Switzerland and Austria. The two countries' military authorities meet frequently. Austria has bought Swiss equipment and the Swiss

Army uses some Austrian material, such as Haflinger lorries. PMB

SWISS EVENTS

Federal

Swiss-German exchange of views

A month after his trip to China and Thailand in August, Mr. Pierre Graber was in Bonn and became the first-ever Head of the Political Department to make an official visit to West Germany. This may appear surprising in view of the close ties between the two countries – Germany being Switzerland's first trade partner – but conforms to the traditional practice of Swiss leaders limiting their visits abroad to a minimum. But Mr. Graber appears to have broken that tradition with his two trips to the Middle East and his recent journey to the Far East. His visit last year in Cairo, where Mr. Graber chaired a conference of Swiss ambassadors to the Arab world and Israel, was strongly criticised by some circles. Because of these criticisms, he had postponed his trip to Bonn. This visit had originally been planned for Autumn 1973.

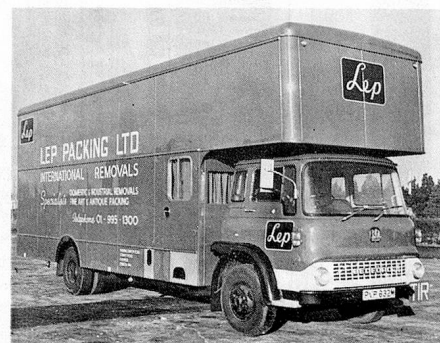
Mr. Graber had a round of talks with his West German counterpart, Mr. Hans Dietrich Genscher. There being no particular pending problems between the two countries, these talks consisted mainly in an exchange of views and information on problems of common interest, such as the European Security Conference and energy policy. Mr. Graber was pleased to hear that West Germany disagreed with American proposals to create a "club" of consumer nations banding together against the petroleum-producing countries. Switzerland, which is closely following the work of the 12-nation Energy Group, would not subscribe to any aggressive policy of this kind as it would conflict with her policy of neutrality.



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CLAMOUR AGAINST PETROL SURCHARGE

The Government's decision to introduce a petrol surcharge of 10 cents a litre has led the Independent Alliance, a political group traditionally defending the interests of consumers, to launch an initiative preventing all enforcement of the new tax. The Independents claim that the new measures, designed to increase federal revenues by 500 million francs a year, would lead to further wage rises of 250 million francs in 1975. They consider that the Government has no excuse for claiming more money from the Swiss consumer and should exercise thrift rather than plan a 14 per cent increase in expenditure next year. Relying heavily on heating fuel, the Swiss will be particularly hit by the surcharge after they have already had to accept huge increases resulting from new petroleum prices. Another concern to the Independents is that the surcharge will make petroleum more expensive in Switzerland than in neighbouring countries. This would prompt tourists to fill up before reaching the border. As 40 million foreign motorists use Swiss roads every year, this would considerably reduce income for national motorways. This income mainly stems from taxes on petrol.

Similar protests have come from an association of Migrol filling stations who claim that the new increase is "excessive".

In another development, the authorities intend to reduce the maximum permissible lead content of petrol. This would result in a further increase of a cent per litre. Maximum levels, which are presently set at 0.57 grammes per litre of Super and 0.40 grammes per litre of Regular, would be lowered on 1st January next to 0.40 grammes per litre for both grades. This could spell trouble for the owners of high-performance cars. The lead content of aviation fuel would also be reduced, from 1.29 grammes per litre to 0.57 grammes per litre.

Regulations in this field are already stricter in Switzerland than in several other countries. Permissible levels are now at 0.4 grammes per litre in West Germany, 0.55 grammes per litre in France, 0.64 grammes per litre in Italy

and 0.84 grammes per litre in Britain. West Germany and France respectively plan to reduce their allowable levels to 0.15 and 0.45 grammes per litre by the end of 1976.

Modern Life

1974 - a medium vintage

This year's Swiss wine harvest is expected to be rather poor compared to last year's. But this situation is the same in all European wine-growing countries, reports the latest issue of the Swiss wine dealers' magazine. Production for this year will be around 800,000 hectolitres (hl) whereas the average for the past ten years has been a million hl. Production in France is expected to be 73 million hl. Italy is expected to produce 68 million, Spain 30 million, West Germany 6 to 8 million, and Austria 2.2 million hectolitres. 1974 is also expected to be a very ordinary vintage in most of these producing countries. Italy may be the only country with a qualitatively good harvest.

The magazine notes the continuing continental trend to drink less but better wine. The average Frenchman, for example, who drank 107 litres of wine every year in 1972, now drinks about 90 litres and is expected to settle at this level of consumption.

The "Knight of the Road" Award for September

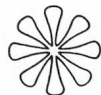
The September "Knight of the

Road" Award was given to a motorist who prevented a minibus-load of children from hurtling down a precipice. This monthly distinction is awarded by a Jury representing motorist associations, Radio and Television, the Police and the Swiss Office for Prevention of Accidents to people who have shown exemplary behaviour on the road. Fifty-five German-Swiss and only three French-Swiss have thus been honoured since the "Knight of the Road" Award was instituted five years ago. The last laureate was in fact a Genevese, Mr. Michel Jobin.

He was driving on the road leading down from Champeéry to Monthey when he saw a minibus in front of him suddenly accelerate. Realising that his brakes weren't operating, the driver of that vehicle managed to pull out into a track leading off the road just before reaching a hair-pin bend. As the minibus came to a standstill up that stony track, he sprang out to try and block the wheels with a stone. But the vehicle had already begun to reverse and to gain speed. It was saved from almost certain disaster by Mr. Jobin, who drove up the track and stopped the breakaway minibus with his own car.

Public appeal to save an old sailing boat

A public subscription has been opened to complete the restoration of the *Neptune*, the last remaining "barque" of Lake Geneva. This nineteenth-century sailing boat, a remnant of the fleet which



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once traded on the Léman, transporting stone and gravel for the construction of Geneva and carrying Confederates to the Port Noir at the liberation of Geneva from the French in 1815, was bought some years ago by the City. The Municipality decided to save the boat and devoted some 500,000 francs of its Historical Monuments Fund to restore the timberwork of the two-masted craft. But the interior finish, the engine, and the fittings required for eventual touristic operations can only be completed with a further supply of money from the public. 300,000 francs are required for the preservation of a witness of the Léman's history.

Miscellaneous

A BANK IN TROUBLE

The International Credit Bank (BCI), which announced last month it was suspending operations pending a legal decision on its future, announced it had sacked 40 of its 135 employees.

"It is impossible to keep all our staff on while things are in an uncertain state. We have dismissed about 40 employees who have been with us for the shortest time", a bank spokesman said.

The spokesman said other redundancies were possible but that they would not be on a large scale.

The Geneva-based bank, which has been at the centre of a financial controversy involving the Israeli Government and prominent French banker, Edmond de Rothschild, said on 10th October that it had applied to Geneva's Civil Court for a temporary freeze on payments.

It said it had been forced to take this action because false press reports about its liquidity position had led customers to make considerable withdrawals.

The spokesman said that the bank was still waiting for the court's decision on a payments moratorium, which could be for a period of between six months and two years. "We are optimistic about the outcome", he commented.

The Israeli Government has ordered its Treasury Department to find out whether the Israel Corporation, a development and investment-seeking organisation which it sponsors, broke any laws by depositing funds in financial institutions associated with BCI main shareholder Tibor Rosenbaum.

Talks have been going on in several countries to aid the BCI. The Israel Corporation's Chairman, Baron de Rothschild, called an emergency meeting of the Corporation's Board of Directors two weeks ago to discuss how to support the bank in which it had placed large funds.

The Geneva Union of Bank Employees said in a statement that it was seriously worried about the fate of BCI personnel and called for further meetings with Management.

In London, it was discovered that

Prime Minister Harold Wilson had a current account of £50 and a deposit account of £1,450 with the bank. Both of the accounts were frozen because of the moratorium. The money had been supplied by a Labour supporter but Mr. Wilson had never used any of it.

RATION CARDS PRINTED

The Swiss Government confirmed that it had ordered the preparation of Food Ration Cards, but added that there was no supply crisis in sight.

A spokesman for the Economics Ministry said households are advised, as always, to keep sufficient stocks of some basic foodstuffs in reserve to last two months.



Among the recommended reserves are two kilograms of sugar per head, one kilo of rice, one kilo of spaghetti, one kilo of butter or other fat, a bottle of cooking oil and tins of vegetables, fruit, meat and fish.

The spokesman added that whereas it took several months to organise a rationing system in World War Two, the new arrangements would enable ration cards to be distributed to the country's six-million population in only a few days.

LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

The weather-gods have behaved strangely this year. As if somebody had pulled a wrong switch summer has suddenly turned into an early winter. After some abnormally hot Indian-summer days the temperature fell dramatically, the radio announced heavy falls of snow in the higher regions and the first winter coats appeared in the streets. Hundreds of thousands of swallows who had not yet emigrated were caught by the cold snap and many were dying of hunger, as the insects, their natural food, had disappeared. An appeal was then made to rescue swallows and to hand them in, packed in strong cardboard boxes with air holes, to any Federal Railway Station, whence they would be sent to the warmer regions of the Ticino. Swissair then joined in this rescue-operation and flew some 200,000 birds to Nice and Barcelona. Not all of them have survived, unfortunately, but it was, nevertheless, most gratifying to see how everybody responded. Even the Zürich police — which is by no means noted for its courtesy — became human and opened collecting-stations, where cardboard boxes of live birds could be handed in for quick transport to the air terminal.

As from 1st October the "Neue Zürcher Zeitung" has started appearing once a day. Not so very long ago this quality newspaper came out three times daily, then twice and it has now been forced to adapt itself to the general trend of considerably reduced postal deliveries. The "N.Z.Z.", as it is known everywhere, is, I believe, one of the last, if not the last, Swiss daily newspaper which has been compelled by circumstances to concentrate all its contents into one issue per day. It has become considerably thicker and has lost none of its high quality, even if some of the topicality may have gone overboard. It still informs the reader about politics and economic problems abroad and at home, about

literature, cultural events, sport, the happenings in the courts, and overall the high level of its journalism, including its language, has not suffered. But it is, nevertheless, a noteworthy event that even the "N.Z.Z.", with its considerable resources, has, as it were, become a victim of the shrinking process of a state monopoly enterprise.

Switzerland has, as it now turns out, too many cablelifts, funiculars, tesièges and ski-lifts. There are more than 1,500 dispersed all over the country, 980 of which are members of an association. According to published figures, about half of the cablelift enterprises are in the red. They sprang up like mushrooms in the boom years of the 'sixties and some are even competing with one another. Thus one may well ask whether it is necessary to have two easy routes up the Rigi: one from Vitznau, the original one, and one from Weggis, a few miles away. Another two take people up to the Brienz Rothorn, the first one from Brienz on rails and a second one, built much later, from Sörenberg in the canton of Luzern. Yet another example concerns Zinal, once a small mountain village in the Valais. There a cablelift to Sorebois has been constructed, although Zinal is lacking the infrastructure to sleep and house sufficient guests to make such an enterprise pay its way. The access road is still narrow and fairly bad and the Club Méditerranée has now more or less taken over the village. They appear, as is well known, in masses, they pay badly, and, as is also well known, where they appear, other guests have a habit of disappearing. No fewer than three cablelifts now take people up to the Säntis massif and the region around St. Moritz — which I happen to know well — is a chapter in itself. If the present economic circumstances now put a stop to this exaggerated building craze, they can be said to be a blessing in disguise.

Gottfried Keller