

Fonds George Dimier for a home for aged Swiss

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FONDS GEORGE DIMIER FOR A HOME FOR AGED SWISS.

The Union Helvetia, which is one of the Societies which contributed to the "Dimier Fund" requested the President of the Swiss Benevolent Society to report at their monthly meeting, on Tuesday, May the 2nd, on the progress made towards the foundation of the Home for Aged Swiss in the United-Kingdom.

Believing that our readers are also anxious to know what is being done in this direction, we print below this report "in extenso" and would welcome any correspondence likely to be helpful to those in charge of this important undertaking:

"The origin of this fund dates back to 1925, when the Swiss Benevolent Society mourned the death of their wonderful President, Mr. George Dimier. With his intimate knowledge of the distressing circumstances in which many of our aged Swiss found themselves, our late President bequeathed the sum of £500 as a nucleus for a fund for the ultimate founding of a home for them.

"At the suggestion of some of our subscribers, desirous of adding their share to this first contribution, we made a general appeal to the Colony which responded with the generosity characteristic of the interest it always shows in anything connected with our poor. This gave the fund a very good start but the realization of its aim was still very far away when the President of the *Unione Ticinese*, at their annual dinner in 1930, caused a real sensation in announcing that the Society was prepared to give £1,000 to the Swiss Benevolent Society for the Dimier Fund provided the other Swiss societies gave £1,000 between them, and we collected a further £1,000 from other sources.

"This set before us a task which seemed almost impossible, but in a very short while all our Swiss societies, including, I need not add, the *Unione Helvetia*, sent promises of wholehearted support and we collected over £3,000, therefore well above the figure stipulated by the *Unione Ticinese*. From that date the Home advanced from a remote possibility to a fairly early probability.

"What are the reasons which render a home of this kind such an urgent necessity?

"The Swiss Benevolent Society have at present 57 pensioners, aged from 60 to 88, and for whom they spent last year £1,517. These, I may mention, are the actual pensioners only, and this figure does not take into account the numerous men and women of that age who are helped more or less regularly but who have not been elected pensioners.

"Some of the pensioners are in comparatively good health, but a large number are invalids and others are quite helpless. They get on an average £27 each a year, which may seem very little, but a few of them receive small regular remittances from relations or friends and others receive the old age pension. Generally speaking, we allow our old people a weekly sum covering their rent, 7/6d. or even less, and a further 10/- for food and other expenses. However marvellous this may seem to you, they generally manage quite nicely on that. We find that, as is also the case with their better off compatriots, some are quite happy and care-free, knowing that their weekly allowance will come in regularly and balancing their budget accordingly; others are not such clever chancellors of the exchequer and show, at times a deficit, which is very trying when it has to be squared by part of the next week's remittance which, if very regular is just as "inelastic" in value.

"As you can well see, our pensioners can only afford the cheapest of rooms, which are frequently shockingly unhygienic. These unsatisfactory living quarters are often rendered worse still by the fact that their occupier, being feeble and in poor health, has not the energy, sometimes not even the desire, to keep them spick and span. It is very pathetic to see some of our poor — mostly the men who do not seem to be able to occupy themselves, like the women, with the small tasks of the day — sitting lonely in their room, day in and day out, doing nothing, merely staring blankly as if they were patiently waiting for the end of their uneventful existence. As you probably know, one sometimes gets funny ideas at that age and the following instance will illustrate what I mean when I say that our Home is an urgent necessity:

"One of our pensioners, who died recently, was a Bernese woman, whom we had assisted for years and years; she was over 80 when she died. Of very sweet disposition, she never grumbled and was the very type of these flower girls one used to see in the old days monopolising the foot of Eros statue in Piccadilly Circus. With a tanned complexion, generously covered with flesh and with wide hips still more generously draped with numberless petticoats, the whole was topped by

the typical strawhat, attribute of their trade. This woman paid her way till late in life, and how an "Oberlanderin" came to be a London flower girl, heaven only knows, but her trade had grown on her. Every time she bought flowers at Covent Garden she took her empty basket home with her. The result was that by and by her small room got filled with empty baskets from floor to ceiling so that in the end she just had a narrow passage from the door to the fire-place with a small space left empty for her so-called bed, and the few garments that lay on it. We tried every possible dodge to clear her room of those encumbrances, even offering to buy her baskets at a ridiculously high price, but with no result: she could not part from these reminders of her life's vocation.

I could give you many instances showing what a blessing it would be if we could offer our poor some decent surroundings. It is cruel that folks between 80 and 90 years of age, more or less in their second childhood, should be allowed to live in this state of filth, neglect and misery.

Now, as to our Home: Old people, as you know, hate a change, and we wondered how ours would receive the suggestion of moving to a home. We have asked, and more than enough of them have replied, that they would welcome a proposal of this kind to set our mind at rest on this very touchy point. The next question was: would they prefer a home in London or in the country. You and I, at first thought, would immediately reply: in the country, but no! our poor prefer a home in town, and this is quite understandable. The generality of them have always lived in London, they are used to town life and have all their friends and relations here. They welcome the home and its comfort, provided it is not too much of a break and provided they can keep in touch with their friends. Our home will therefore have to be in town.

What is the home to be like? This depends to a great extent on the money at our disposal. We have seen beautiful homes and we have seen more modest ones. We have come to the conclusion that it would be a mistake to launch out on something too elaborate. What we require is a roomy building in a quarter of the town where rents are low and which could be easily adapted to our requirements. In my opinion, we should plan for 15 to 25 pensioners, but preferably, if funds allow, for a further 5 or so, in case we feel the need at a later date to enlarge our home. The additional space could be let temporarily to Swiss people, if possible. You know how difficult it is for our compatriots in the Hotel industry to find suitable rooms or flats, and if we had sufficient funds at our disposal, the founding of our home would be a unique opportunity to begin in a small way what has been for years in our minds, not as Committee of the Swiss Benevolent Society, as this would be outside our scope, but as Swiss interested in the welfare of our countrymen in the catering trades. The accommodation offered in the heart of London and the price charged for it are most unsatisfactory, and there should be a good opportunity to invest funds in suitable property to be let at weekly rents to those of our people who are precluded by their occupations from living in the suburbs or in cheaper parts of London. It may be that the two things could be started simultaneously under the same or adjoining roofs. The lodging problem is really more a matter for a Society such as yours but if we can help you in any way, when the moment arrives, we shall only be too happy to do so.

The cheapest way to run a home of the kind which we have in view is to give each inmate a room in the form of a bed-sitting room — if possible with central heating — and, may be, a gas ring for the preparation of hot drinks, etc. The cooking would be done in a central kitchen, and meals would be taken in a common dining room. Men and women would have separate quarters, except married couples for whom special double accommodation would be provided.

As regards furniture, the pensioners would be encouraged to bring with them any acceptable furniture of their own as they will, no doubt, feel more at home with their own things around them. For the rest of the furniture, this should not be a very heavy expense, and it may be that amongst our friends in the Colony, we may gather a number of odd pieces which they may be able to spare for the home.

The number of staff employed would, of course, vary according to the number of inmates, but a kind of housekeeper assisted by a cook, a maid, may be 2, and a woman once or twice a week for the rough work would probably be sufficient. If the housekeeper has any training as a nurse, all the better, otherwise we should probably have to secure part services of a trained district nurse, as our old people are sure to need a measure of medical attention. An arrangement with one of our Swiss doctors or a local doctor, will also be necessary.

The services of our permanent Secretary will prove extremely useful in connection with the home where we may find it more convenient to transfer our offices.

The pensioners living in the home would enjoy entire liberty. They could go out when they like and come in when they like. Apart from having everything found in the way of lodging, food and heating they would be allowed a small weekly sum for pocket money to buy the few extras that make life worth living.

The home would have a large central room, for the use of everybody, where Swiss and English papers and periodicals would be available.

As you see, we are not aiming too high, and all we want is to feel our aged ones are comfortable, well looked after and happy. All I have outlined is, to a great extent, my personal view, all very tentative and liable, you will understand, to be altered in the light of further information or experience, but it is enough, I hope, to give you an idea of the lines on which we intend working.

The last question you will now want me to answer is: when will the home be started? I am an optimist, and I hope fairly soon.

At the moment we have about £9,000 at our disposal and as stated previously we spend £1,500 annually for our pensioners. The chief obstacle against an early beginning is the fact that, we have to spend as a whole about £4,000 per annum, and a sum of this importance requires some collecting nowadays, I can assure you. However careful we are, a home is sure to involve us in further additional heavy yearly disbursements. In the present state of trade and in view of the still increasing calls made upon us, can we launch out in the immediate future, as we should all like to do, or is it wiser to wait until the Fonds Dimier has accumulated more capital, and will then derive a larger sum in interest towards the upkeep of the home. For a beginning, in a modest way, we have, we feel, sufficient funds in hand to take over suitable premises and to equip same. Even, after this, our £9,000 would not have been utilized quite in full. But then we would be left with interests on investments amounting in all to £270 per annum only, and a total reserve of £6,000 representing 18 months expenses. It seems to me that the margin is a very narrow one, the more so as in these difficult times we cannot expect our subscriptions to show much of an increase in the near future.

That the home is badly needed, we all agree; the question is being very carefully studied and if there is any delay, it is purely for the reasons I have just mentioned. For the sake of giving our aged ones more comfort, we cannot neglect the hundred of others who look to us for assistance and it would be unthinkable if, by taking premature steps, we were to find ourselves compelled later on to reduce our general assistance which, as it stands, is already fixed at the strictest minimum.

This is the problem which will have to be solved at one of our next quarterly meetings.

"SMITHAY."

There is a dear old home in Devon
Nestled high up on the hill
Fairies must have plumed its gardens
Imps embellished them with skill.
Imps embellished them with skill.
Rockeries in purple tints
Tufts of stately Daffodils
Beds of glowing Hyacinths
Blue rubans of Forget-me-nots.
The nearby wood a fairy glen
Oh, how I love its solitude
And the entrancing lullaby
The jolly brook chants leaping by.
Look over yonder, neath those trees
Enchantingly alarming
A blaze of gold anemones
Reporting to springs calling.
I'll always keep in memory
The lovely view of downs and fells
Brown fields, the woods, the harmony
The grey old church in yon green dell.
Old, 'Smithay' has been there for ages
Artistic minds have done their best
To preserve from timely rages
The dear old home, its peaceful rest.

H.E.

REMINDER.

A little book on yonder shelf
Has strayed away from home
I wonder if his little self
Feels very much alone
Amongst the mighty tours
Of Art, of Science and the law
The wealthy words of Galsworthy
Lyrics of Bernard Shaw
And though this slender little book
Modest amongst the mighty
Enshrines a wealth of wisdom too
If read not all to lightly
Now, my dear friend, I dare to vow
You surely read my book by now
Take no offence, I can quite see
It must have slipped your memory.

H.E.