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Second World War: positive steps by Switzerland

Truth – Justice – Solidarity

In the course of the last year and a half, Switzerland has introduced wide-ranging measures to face up to the controversy about its role before, during and immediately after the Second World War. The main idea behind all the initiatives taken has been our belief in truth, justice and solidarity.

The measures are an expression of our sincere intention to bring full light to bear on our past, as well as on the unclaimed assets still held in Switzerland, to put these into the hands of those entitled to them and to show solidarity

with people still surviving from the Holocaust.

The following concrete steps have so far been taken in the context of these complex problems, which have seriously affected the image of our country abroad:

The Task Force "Switzerland – Second World War"

At the end of October 1996, the Federal Council decided to set up the Task Force "Switzerland – Second World War". This important step was undertaken to emphasise Switzerland's determination to treat all questions concerning its role before, during and immediately after the Second World War with efficiency and openness. The task force is part of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs and comes directly under its head, Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti. This special staff is led by Ambassador Thomas Borer and consists of a team of 26, including diplomats and historians plus legal and communications specialists. The main duty of the task force is to represent the interests of Switzerland in the international discussions which are at present taking place, to ensure that these are addressed promptly and coherently at the federal level and to provide answers to the complex political, historical and legal questions which arise in this connection. In addition, it coordinates all measures taken by the most important bodies which are dealing with the material at issue.

These bodies are:

- The Independent Commission of Experts (the Bergier Commission)
- The Independent Committee of Eminent Persons (the Volcker Committee)
- The Special Fund for Needy Victims of the Holocaust/Shoa

This means that the task force is the central contact point about these issues for all individuals and organisations concerned both in Switzerland and abroad, in particular:

- Swiss and foreign government bodies
- Jewish organisations
- Associations of Holocaust victims
- Banks, insurance companies, other private sector branches
- Media

The task force has set up a web site at which all relevant information of a historical, political or legal nature may be consulted in four languages. Its address: <http://www.switzerland.taskforce.ch/>

• The Volcker Committee

The mandate of the Volcker Committee, which was set up last year, is to trace unclaimed assets held by Swiss banks, in particular assets belonging to victims of the Holocaust.

The results of its research, which should be concluded next year, led to the first concrete results last July and October. In an unprecedented operation the Swiss Bankers' Association published lists of names of holders of unclaimed accounts which were opened before the end of the Second World War.

• The Independent Commission of Experts

In December 1996 the Swiss parliament decided by unanimous vote to set up an Independent Commission of Experts.

This commission is chaired by Professor Bergier and has the task of examining the historical and legal aspects of Switzerland's role and its financial centre before, during and after the war years. At the beginning of December 1997 the commission published an initial working report on the question of gold transactions.

• The Special Fund

Thanks to contributions from Swiss banks and manufacturing companies, as well as from the Swiss National Bank, a Special Fund has been set up to support needy survivors of the Holocaust and their families. The first payments were made to claimants in Latvia in mid-November 1997. Most of those entitled to benefit have never been compensated in any way for the crimes committed against them during



Riga, November 1997: handing over the first payment from Switzerland's Special Fund for Needy Victims of the Holocaust/Shoa to Mrs. Riva Seferi in the presence of Fund President Rolf Bloch. (Photo: Znotins Ilmars)

the Second World War and received no support during the post-war years. An example of a beneficiary of the Special Fund: a 57-year old Jewish lady who survived periods spent in various concentration camps in Latvia and Poland and must today make do with a monthly pension of about US\$ 100.—.

• Private initiatives

There have also been a number of private initiatives to gather funds for Holocaust victims. The Humanity and Justice Foundation has collected Sfr. 2 million. Sfr. 600,000.— of this has so far been disbursed to Holocaust victims and to projects related to the Holocaust.

Further evidence of sincere feelings of solidarity on the part of the Swiss people may be seen in the success of



an initiative by Berne high school students, who were able to collect Sfr. 166,000.— within a very short time.

● In the right direction

With these measures, Switzerland has shown that it is not suppressing its past but learning to come to terms with it and to project this into the future. We are admitting the mistakes which were made, even though the disclosure of the darker side of our recent history is not an experience which is easily digested.

The other side of the coin is that no other country has reacted as quickly and in such a practical way to this challenge from the past as has Switzerland. These efforts, together with the leadership role that Switzerland has been playing in the matter, have now been recognised by a number of other governments, including that of the United States. This shows that we are travelling in the right direction.

Ambassador Thomas G. Borer, Head of the Task Force "Switzerland – Second World War". ■



Registration form for Swiss Abroad entitled to vote

(please write clearly in block letters and send to your embassy or consulate)

Addressee

To the Swiss diplomatic post at _____

Sender

Family name _____

First name _____

Maiden name _____

Precise address abroad _____

Date of birth _____

Place of birth _____

Marital status _____ since _____

Place of origin _____

Canton _____

Post code _____

Family name/First name of father _____

Family name/First name of mother _____

On the basis of the Federal Law of December 19, 1975, and the Ordinance of October 16, 1991, on Political Rights for the Swiss Abroad, I wish to exercise my right to vote in federal elections and referendums and to sign popular initiatives and demands for referendums.

As voting municipality I wish to choose:

Place _____

Canton _____

Post code _____

* because this is my municipality of origin

* because I resided here from 19..... to 19.....

(* Cross out where not applicable)

Language of voting documents:

German French Italian

Place/Date _____

Signature _____

The optional pension scheme

How do I claim my pension?

- If you are a member of the optional pension scheme (AHV/IV), you will automatically receive an application form for an old-age pension from your Swiss diplomatic post a few months before you reach pensionable age.
- If you are not or are no longer a member of the optional pension scheme but belonged for at least one year to either the compulsory or the optional state pension schemes, you will not be automatically informed of your rights. In such case you should apply to your Swiss diplomatic post a few months before you reach pensionable age, since you will be entitled to at least a partial pension.

Initiatives in brief

For sickness insurance premiums proportional to income and fortune

The initiative "For sickness insurance premiums proportional to income and fortune" was launched by the Swiss Labour Party. Its aim is to bring about a number of changes in the system.

The insurance scheme should be financed by the federal government to the extent of no less than 50% and by contributions from insured persons. At present the federal government's share is less than 15%. This huge increase in the federal government's contribution would mean that premiums would be tailored to taxable income and fortune, as well as to the number of household members. It would be financed by direct federal taxation, by contributions from cantonal authorities and by an earnings tax on businesses. The latter would amount to no less than half of the federal government's contribution. In addition, cantonal authorities should pay no less than 50% of the costs of recognised hospitals and other health establishments.

NYF ■

Current popular initiatives

The following popular initiatives are still open for signature:

For one Sunday without automobiles per season – a trial for four years

until August 11, 1998

Judith Hauptlin, P.O.Box 40, CH-9414 Schachen bei Reute

For sickness insurance premiums proportional to income and fortune

until October 22, 1998

Swiss Labour Party, Elise Kerchenbaum, 25 rue du Vieux-Billard, P.O. Box 232, CH-1211 Geneva 8

Property rights to be transformed into usufruct or building rights

until November 20, 1998

Werner Mühlheim, P.O. Box 8140, CH-2500 Bienne 8

For medicaments at a lower price

until February 12, 1999

Denner AG, P.O. Box 977, CH-8045 Zurich

For speedier direct democracy (processing deadlines for popular initiatives taking the form of a complete draft)

until February 12, 1999

Denner AG, P.O. Box 977, CH-8045 Zurich

For greater traffic safety inside built-up areas thanks to a maximum speed of 30 km/h, with some exceptions (streets for all)

until March 16, 1999

Swiss Traffic Club (VCS), Anja Pauling, P.O. Box, CH-3000 Berne 2

Work distribution

until March 16, 1999

Society for Fair Work Distribution, Patricia Staub,

P.O. Box 7236, CH-8023 Zurich

Federal referendums

March 15, 1998: No referendums to be held