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AN HISTORIC EVENT

This was the postscript to the invitation which members of the Commission of the Swiss Abroad received for their meeting on 1st February in Berne. The Federal Council decided on 9th December to consider the first preliminary draft of a constitutional article concerning the Swiss abroad. The text submitted by the Federal Political Department, explains that the Confederation is empowered to further the relations of the Swiss abroad amongst themselves and with their homeland and of all institutions serving this purpose. Considering the special circumstances of the Swiss abroad, the Confederation may enact provisions necessary for the regulation of their rights and duties, especially regarding military service, the granting of political rights, as well as in the field of assistance. The draft also states that the Cantons are to be consulted.

It must be remembered that this is only a preliminary report and not binding for the Federal Council, the Cantonal authorities or the Swiss people. The negotiations will be long and complicated — the mills in Berne mill slowly! Nevertheless this is the first and most important step.

With this draft an explanatory letter was submitted by Ambassador Micheli, Secretary-General of the Federal Political Department.

At a Press Conference Fuersprech Maurice Jaccard, who is in charge of questions concerning the Swiss abroad at the Political Department, explained how this matter has arisen. It is a problem which has again and again come up for discussion ever since 1848. There has been no lack of effort to improve the legal position of the Swiss residing abroad, and the question whether they should be granted the right to vote in Federal matters has often been brought up. The National Council and the Council of States accepted postulates in 1948 and 1952, and the so-called postulate Vontobel which was accepted by the National Council in 1954 is pending. In it the Federal Council was asked to examine whether a constitutional article should be submitted. In 1959, the Political Department invited the Commission of the Swiss Abroad (ASK) to state their attitude towards a constitutional article. The ASK submitted a draft of a comprehensive constitutional provision in 1960, but two years later the Commission was in favour of only a short article. A parliamentary group of friends of the Swiss abroad also came to the conclusion that such a constitutional article was desirable.

Fuersprech Jaccard had already reported to the Assembly of the Swiss abroad at St. Moritz last summer. He counselled patience, though he agreed that it was natural to ask why the Swiss abroad should not be specifically mentioned in the Magna Carta of the Confederation when all kinds of matters from Rhaeto-Romansh to nature protection were included. But many juridical difficulties had arisen, not least those concerning international law. Careful consideration would be needed, and it was necessary not only to do a good job but to do it well. It was no use to rush something through, only to have to start amending it again almost immediately. ("Meister, die Arbeit ist fertig; soll ich gleich flicken?")

Monsieur Jaccard assured us at St. Moritz that the Federal Political Department was working energetically, and not only with sober reason but also with warm hearts.

Now the very important first step has been taken, let us hope that energy, reason and warm hearts will be met all along the stony path of progress.

INVENTIONS AND IMPROVEMENTS

A certain Johann Krüsi hailing from Appenzell, Switzerland, was said to be the great Edison's right-hand man who played an important part in the construction of the first phonograph. Here is Edison's own story:

"Since every sound is transmitted by some characteristic wave, it occurred to me that it should be possible to reproduce a sound by first recording it and then following the imprinted line with a needle attached to a sound-box. I made a little sketch of "the thing" and sent it to the workshop with a note for Krüsi: 'Make this for me'. Krüsi came to me to find out what "the thing" was for, in order to be able to construct it as intelligently as possible. I explained my idea to him adding that I did not think it would turn out to be much but that we should try it anyway. 'It's crazy', said Krüsi smilingly, 'but if it amuses you . . .'. A few days later he brought me "the thing"; a cylinder with a handle and on top a sound-box with a needle which could trace a spiral crease in the wax applied to the cylinder. One of us turned the handle, the other hummed, in front of the sound-box, the nursery rhyme: "Mary had a little lamb". Then we placed the needle at the beginning again, and as I turned the handle, we could hear the nursery rhyme vibrating in the sound-box. I had an extraordinary feeling of triumph — a feeling of having reached the beginning of something very important. Krüsi felt it too, but expressed it in his native language, exclaiming simply: 'Gott im Himmel!'"

Krüsi assisted Edison still in many other projects. He spent all his life in the States happily engaged in one or another of the electronic enterprises born out of Edison's genius and the know-how of his Swiss mechanic.

[S.N.T.O.]

ALMOST PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

Many Swiss were among the promoters of American Independence. Albert Gallatin of Geneva (1761-1849) fought side by side with La Fayette. In 1789 he was elected member of the Constitutional Assembly of the State of Pennsylvania. On account of his popularity he was designated to become a candidate for the American presidency. His biographers do not doubt that he was suited for this charge. If he failed it was only because he was not an American by birth, as required by the Constitution. In 1801, Jefferson appointed him Secretary of the Treasury. In 1814 he signed the Peace of Ghent with England. Then he became American ambassador to France, then president of the National Bank. Another Swiss, William Wirt (1772-1834), Federal Attorney General and Chief Justice, became a presidential candidate. But Jackson had preference. During the War of Independence, it was a Swiss from New York, J. J. Faesch, who cast the first rebel canons, and another Swiss, Henry Wisner, provided the gun powder. Wisner was a member of Congress, but being away from Philadelphia on the 4th of July 1776, he did not get a chance to sign the Declaration of Independence. During the Civil War, several Swiss fought as high-ranking officers on the lines of both armies. One of them, Emile Frey, later became Federal Councillor in Switzerland.

[S.N.T.O.]