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# NEWS FROM THE COLONY

## LITERARY EVENING

On Tuesday, 1st February, a literary evening was held in the hall of the Residence of the new Embassy. It must have been one of the first functions to be held in the hall, which will doubtless be called to serve the Colony on many occasions in future. On that evening, about forty compatriots were invited to listen to a Swiss writer, Mr. Jörg Steiner, who read excerpts from his own work. Jörg Steiner, aged 41, is a former primary school teacher in Biel, where he lives. After completing his teacher training, he worked for a time in a school for the mentally handicapped and became particularly interested in autistic children. In 1955, he set up a publishing house, Vorstadtpresse, whose policy was to foster unknown talents. But the venture was short-lived and ended five years later.

Apart from collaborating with the Basle Theatre, Jörg Steiner has been engaged since 1971 in writing the film script "*Pele nein Bruder*", which he described as a "testimony for the defence of a dreamer".

Having been introduced by Dr. Birrer, Cultural Attaché, Mr. Steiner began by reading a few selections of *Schwarze Kasten*, poetic fragments published in 1965. They were simple and finely chiselled prose poems on very earthy subjects indeed. The themes chosen were: Description of a Cement Factory (with a minimum of adjectives) in two or three sentences; Tenants looking at their landlord's cat; rain seen on a wet street from a cosy flat; a group of angry football supporters; impression on the inside of a parish church; a school. Various aspects of everyday life wrapped up in a paragraph. These prose poems tended to make the audience nod and smile, yet they had perhaps the best literary sound of the evening.

Their purpose, it seemed, was to underline and punctuate the everyday events of life. They were a static reflection and a series of statements on objects and people. The poet was pointing a projector on ordinary things to give them new being.

This was also the inspiration behind two selections read from "*Auf dem Berge Sinai sitzt der Schneider Kikrikri*", a collection of short stories.

The first story read to us told of the diary kept by a good but rather bickerish Swiss mother, who makes a record of her worries and irritation while her son is on holiday in San Francisco. He doesn't send letters regularly and mother is irritated. A homely but realistic theme. The subject and colours of the occasional post card received by the good lady receive

much comment as they play such an important role in her limited existence.

There is no action and no plot to speak about. Such short stories must be understood, it seems, as a still life. Steiner wants to portray life without the support of a story. That is why his prose is nothing more than a succession of statements on situations, rather than events. Asked whether this short story was autobiographical, Jörg Steiner said that there was always an element of personal experience in the work of a writer, but that this particular short story had not referred to his mother. She had in fact, disliked it profoundly.

The second story that was read to us was about an American exchange student staying for a holiday with a Swiss family with a teenage girl and with plenty of preconceived ideas on Americans. Its rather extraordinary title "*Auf dem Berge Sinai sitzt der Schneider Kikrikri*", is that of the whole collection of short stories, contained in a hard-cover tome of about 130 pages, published by Luchterhand-Verlag and selling in Switzerland for 19.50 francs.

Like the previous story, this one has a rather slender plot. Jörg Steiner who says he doesn't like to be "labelled" but considers himself nevertheless as a writer, is in our view a poet. His choppy and static narrative, with somewhat futile statements cropping up every second sentence, is highly evocative. These statements, in the way they stand out, suggestively bring out the truth of the setting of the story, in this case, American youth and the preconceptions of a simple middle-class Swiss family. It is a somewhat naive "Grandma Moses" way of depicting simple aspects of everyday existence.

Jörg Steiner appeared to procure more pleasure to the many young people in attendance than to their elders. One or two people wrote him off as a "putter", surviving on an ephemeral literary trend. However, Steiner's sympathetic looks and his recognised success at home indicates that he is genuine. Moreover, he admitted at Question Time that he found the act of writing difficult and that he never sat at his writing desk without a pinch of anxiety.

Many interesting questions were put to him when he had finished reading his second narrative. Typical questions were: Do you like Hartmann? Are your stories inspired by fairy tales? Why does the character of the Mother appear in so many of them? Do you like Debussy? Has your work got a social purpose, do your stories carry a message? Are they critical of

authoritarian education? Do you find it difficult to overcome the differences between Swiss-German, your mother tongue, and German, the language in which you express yourself professionally? How do you adapt to the television medium? Where do you stand in the current unrest between the conservative and dissident wings of the Swiss Society of Authors?

As one can see, questions were not lacking and the answers were as interesting as the reading session. The intellectual part of the evening, was followed by sociability and drinks, and concluded with the reading of a political poem used by the author to back the anti-Schwarzenbach campaign.

Jörg Steiner was a few days later to set out on a tour of British universities to give readings of his works. His itinerary included Magee University College in Londonderry, where he was due to speak on Monday, 14th February. Our thoughts be with him . . .

(PMB)

## S.M.S. ANNUAL DINNER AND BALL

The Swiss Mercantile Society held its Annual Dinner and Ball in the Orchid Suite of the Dorchester Hotel on Saturday, 5th February. After a half-hour reception, to which we were welcomed by Mr. and Mrs. Jaccard, President of the S.M.S., and by Dr. A. Weitnauer, Honorary President, we moved in the bluish and dimly-lit Orchid Suite to look for our seats among the eleven round tables ordered across the hall.

Grace was said by Father Paul Bossard. The meal was at least as good as anything I have experienced in two years of functions at the Dorchester Hotel. We began with a smoked trout (a première, as far as I was concerned) and enjoyed a meaty "Carré d'Agneau" (also a première) at the main course.

Speeches, introduced after the Toast to the Queen and to Switzerland were short and brisk. The Speakers were Mr. A. Jaccard, Dr. A. Weitnauer and Mr. A. Kunz. The President of the S.M.S. welcomed us all in a fitting address making explicit mention of several prominent guests, such as our Ambassador, Mr. Albert Kunz, Mr. C. H. Brugmann and Mr. F. Adams from the Embassy, Mrs. M. Meier, Mr. Walter Burren, Mr. Raymond Chapuis and Mr. Oscar Grob, all compatriots playing eminent roles in the Swiss Colony. Mr. Jaccard referred to the invaluable services rendered by the Swiss National Tourist Office in lending films for S.M.S. monthly meetings. He told us of the forthcoming retirement of Mr. C. Slade, Vice-Principal

of the School with 36 years of service, and congratulated Mr. C. W. Makin, Vice-Principal, who was to succeed him. Mr. Jaccard finally thanked the Trustees, the members of the Council and other committees for the support they had given him during the past year, and particularly Mr. F. O. Hausermann, Chairman of the Education Committee. He also welcomed Miss Brigitte Maier, daughter of Mr. Richard Maier-Neff, Central President of the S.M.S.

Mr. A. Jaccard concluded his welcome address by offering a toast to the Guests and the Ladies.

All members rose up in a rumble of moving chairs and responded heartily to the President's proposal.

Next to speak was our Ambassador, Dr. A. Weitnauer. He extolled the importance of the S.M.S. as a meeting place between youth and the older generations. He stressed that it was essential not to lose contact with young people in the accelerating world of today, and noted the importance of both the Swiss Churches in London and the S.M.S. in this respect. His visit earlier in the week to the S.M.S. School at Fitzroy Square had, he said, left him with a "momentous impression".

Dr. Weitnauer then expressed another idea which had occurred to him in connection with the work of the S.M.S. It was that the source of power in Switzerland lay in the hands of men with a deep sense of duty. It was by performing their duty to society to the best of their ability that the Swiss had reached their position in the world, he said. The S.M.S. had contributed to this by forming countless men with responsibilities in Switzerland. In teaching them the English language, it was also dispensing a knowledge which was vital in the world today.

Dr. Weitnauer concluded by recalling that he was "doubly at home in London" because of his love for the British capital and because of the presence of a Swiss colony.

In his reply for the guests, Mr. Albert Kunz, General Manager of the Swiss National Tourist Office, related three anecdotes standing out among the innumerable experiences which a job like his must bring with it. The first was about a Swiss yodelling team coming from the Swiss backwoods which had been invited to sing at the BBC. When asked to sing only the first two verses of each song, as this would have presented more variety to the English listener, the leader of the choir energetically impressed on the Programme Manager that it was in the statutes of the choir never to cut a song short. (The delightful example of national punctiliousness produced loud laughter among Mr. Kunz's audience). The Programme Manager had no solution but to yield to the choir leader's demands. So the choir sang all of twenty interminable songs in the BBC's

West End Studio. Little did they know that the studio engineer had carefully switched them off at every second verse . . .

Mr. Kunz's second anecdote brought us back to the staging of a "Swiss Week" in the early fifties. The SNTO and the Legation, which staged the campaign in a joint effort, wanted to hang the flags of the 22 Cantons across Oxford Street. They required a set of six official authorisations. They obtained five of them. The sixth, coming from the highest level, was politely refused. At a luncheon with government officials, the Plenipotentiary Minister and Mr. Kunz were told that it was not possible to accede to their demands as this would entitle other less-well-liked nations to ask for the same privilege. Top British officials present at the meeting offered to hand the Legation's letter back and thus eliminate all record of its request.

Having sadly come to terms with this official opposition Mr. Kunz was no little surprised when several large West End stores rang up to ask for Swiss flags. It turned out that a high ranking official had obligingly contacted these businesses, asking them whether they would be interested in supporting the Swiss Week Campaign. So in the end, the shopping streets of London were decorated with more Swiss flags than the SNTO could have hoped for in its wildest dreams. When Mr. Kunz approached the helpful official to thank him, this person phlegmatically answered: "I don't know what you are talking about".

The last, and hilarious story, in Mr. Kunz's bag was that of an April Fool hoax. The BBC approached the SNTO one day for suggestions on a good 1st April spoof. After much brainstorming, the SNTO came up with the idea of a "spaghetti harvest". The idea was tested by hanging spaghetti in the trees of the parks of London, and research for an adequate "fruit" was carried out by applying straight to a spaghetti factory in Soho. The upshot of this careful preparation was a film presented on the BBC "Panorama" Programme on 1st April, presented with professional seriousness by Richard Dumbleby, about the "spaghetti harvest in Switzerland". It was a "scream" and made the headlines of the national press.

In most accurate detail, British viewers were shown overloaded spaghetti trees in the Tessin. They were told the hard facts of an excessive harvest; Spaghetti prices had crashed on the Spaghetti Exchange, spaghetti companies were in dire difficulty, spaghetti farmers were driven to leave their land, but Americans were at last given a chance to learn how to eat spaghetti. The film amused millions of viewers. The SNTO received only one letter of complaint—it came from the Association of Swiss Spaghetti Manufacturers . . .

With this story ended the first half of the evening. Tables and chairs were displaced to clear a dancing space. The band sounded its first flourish and the ballroom floor was quickly full with swirling dancers.

The evening lasted until midnight. One veteran S.M.S. member noted that fewer people were dancing than in previous years. The advancing age of most members, he said, had made them short of wind. After the final dance, we rallied round Mr. and Mrs. A. Jaccard and sang a glorious "Auld Lang Syne". Most patriotically, we sang the Swiss and the British National Anthems. The words of the latter were clearly better known by the attendance.

Mr. Jaccard, who at the same occasion last year had received a large landscape of the Jura as a gift from the S.M.S. for his forthcoming retirement, thanked us all for making the evening a success and bade us a safe return home. The evening was officially closed.

(PMB)

#### **EDUCATIONAL SCHOLARSHIP SCHEME FOR YOUNG SWISS ABROAD**

This may be the right time of the year to remind our readers of the existence of the "Association pour la formation des jeunes Suisses à l'étranger", whose seat is at the Secretariat of Pro Juventute, 8 Seefeldstrasse, 8008 Zurich.

The aims of this Association, which is subsidised by the Federal Authorities, are not only to provide funds for young Swiss to be educated in Switzerland, but also to advise as to the method best suited to the applicant's abilities and background. Once the best training has been chosen, the "Ausbildungswerk" will plan the whole course of studies or training, as well as arrange for suitable lodgings. Where financial support is needed scholarships can be provided. In addition, the scheme aims at introducing young Swiss from abroad to their homeland by choosing suitable training centres, by fostering relations between the young student and young people in Switzerland and by arranging special meetings and functions at which the young Swiss from abroad will be able to get to know and love Switzerland. By so doing the Association hopes to make a useful contribution towards the rejuvenation of our Swiss colonies abroad. Founded in 1961, it is the joint concern of Pro Juventute, the "Aide aux Suisses" Foundation and the Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique. The services of the scheme are available to young Swiss between the age of 10 and 25, exceptionally also to older people.

Information and application forms may be obtained from the Swiss Embassy, 16-18 Montague Place, London W1H 2BQ.