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OUR NEW AMBASSADOR IN PROFILE

Our new Ambassador arrived in London recently. Dr. Ernesto Thalmann was also gracious enough to write a message for the *Swiss Observer* which appeared in our last issue.

But what sort of a man is Mr. Thalmann — as he prefers to be called? Obviously, he is a diplomat — that goes without saying. Equally obviously, he has enjoyed a distinguished career in Switzerland's diplomatic service. He frankly admits that his appointment to London (probably the last before he retires) is, in some ways, the epitome of his career.

He has been in our country's service since 1941 when he entered the Federal Department of Public Economy. Mr. Thalmann's subsequent political and diplomatic career is too distinguished and too elaborate to describe in detail. Anyway, *The Times* has already done that for us.

It would, nevertheless, be discourteous to Mr. Thalmann not to mention his long spells of military service (a total of 952 days) and his assignments to Paris, Prague and a special mission to Cairo where he was charged with the difficult task of looking after the interests of various countries (including Britain's) following the Suez affair.

From 1957 to 1966 our Ambassador was in the United States of America, where he was "second in command" at the Embassy in Washington. In 1961 he was appointed Permanent Observer to the United Nations in New York, as well as Ambassador Plenipotentiary and Extraordinary.

In 1966 Mr. Thalmann returned to Switzerland as Head of the International Organisations Division of the Political Department. Then, in 1971, he was appointed General Secretary of the Department, a top assignment he describes as a heavy burden but, at the same time, a valuable experience. He

remained in this post in Berne until his appointment to London.

But what sort of a man is our new Ambassador? The answer, in a nut-shell, is that he is a human being. In its review published in February, *The Times* described Mr. Thalmann as "Ernest by name and earnest by nature". Is it true? The answer, at the risk of sounding undecided, is "yes and no".

Of course he is earnest — he has to be as Switzerland's official representative in Britain! But that does not mean that he hasn't a lighter side. He has, along with a subtle but nonetheless sparkling sense of humour.

Ambassador Thalmann has also been described as a pessimist. Is he? Once again, the answer must be an apparently ambivalent "yes and no".

Professionally he is pessimistic, particularly about the longer term trend towards world-wide population growth and the problems such a trend will bring in its wake.

He is immensely influenced by the abundant literature about the future of our society, including the reports of the Club of Rome, a body of eminent scientists, industrialists and philosophers formed to discuss just such problems.

Studies of this kind have deeply interested the Ambassador. The conclusions, inadequately summarised, are that there are limits to the levels at which the growth in production of raw materials, agricultural produce and other essentials can continue at their present rate.

Mr. Thalmann believes that these facets, and others, must be studied carefully to see what measures can be taken at international level to give humanity more time to take the various problems in hand before they become too big to handle.

"These problems, and many others", says Mr. Thalmann, "can be solved over the next 20 to 50 years, but what about the future beyond? This will

be the real problem."

So he is a pessimist — professionally. But privately Ernesto Thalmann is purely and simply a family man with all the natural optimism for the future.

The Swiss male Ernesto Thalmann is NOT a male chauvinist — a fact that will doubtless delight the ladies. He admits that the real movement in favour of women's rights started relatively late in Switzerland. The reason was simple enough. Under the old laws the male electorate was called upon to decide whether the "inferior" female should be emancipated. The answer was "no" until 1971 — at least at a Federal level.

"But things have changed at last" says Mr. Thalmann, "and for the better" he adds. "Women now have cantonal and Federal rights, and Swiss women are now equal to men in many respects, even though they are not, as yet, universally equally represented."

Almost puckishly, Mr. Thalmann notes that there is still no Swiss woman cabinet minister but, he adds, proudly, Swiss universities were among the first in Europe to open their doors to women students. His own wife has a doctorate in dentistry from the University of Zürich.

He disapproves of the fact that women are still discriminated against in some economic activities (obtaining mortgages, for example) but he adds pointedly, this is still the case in most other western countries. So at least Switzerland no longer stands alone in this particular sphere.

But more about Mr. Thalmann. He is a convinced and dedicated European — with normal Swiss reservations. The very question of a united Europe is, by definition, a difficult one for a Swiss Ambassador.

Let us quote him again — "We belong to Europe, Western Europe is the house in which we live. We cannot escape this geographical fact. We are also highly integrated in all aspects of trade, culture

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and language so we cannot overstress our sense of belonging to this family of nations. So the question is only to what extent do we wish to integrate with our neighbours?

“Western Europe, after all, is still divided in many ways — there is the EEC, EFTA and, loosely, the rest. EFTA suited Switzerland because it had no political aims — it is purely a trade association.

“The EEC is totally different insofar as its ultimate aims are more than economic integration. Switzerland’s relationship with the EEC is, therefore, complex. We want and need the closest possible relationship with the Community, BUT, and this is most important, we MUST, we NEED to and we WANT to preserve our neutrality. This is not for dogmatic reasons or even a goal in itself.”

Mr. Thalmann reminds us that the nine have, by signing the Treaty of Rome, and at subsequent meetings of Heads of State and Governments, given up some of their independence and agreed to a common foreign policy and common aims. Perhaps even a Federal Government! But all is still in the melting pot.

Neutrality, stresses Mr. Thalmann, is only justified so long as it preserves Swiss independence. Switzerland, he says, is in a way an anachronism. She became a nation not because of geographical situation or common language but through history, external pressure and, above all, because of the will of her people to form a nation. Now Mr. Thalmann gets down to the nitty-gritty. He is convinced that Switzerland exists only because her people want her to by consensus.

Nevertheless, Mr. Thalmann does remain a European in spirit. “Switzerland”, he says, “has an agreement with the EEC which includes an evolutionary clause. This means we want to develop our relationships in all those fields which do not compromise our neutrality.” Mr. Thalmann lists some of the fields where Switzerland can and will co-operate to the full with her neighbours — science, technology, trade, insurance and legal matters.

When asked for his views about Britain’s current political and economic problems, Mr. Thalmann understandably declined to comment. He feels he has not yet been here long enough to do so but expresses the hope that Britain is on the way to recovery.

To return to a slightly more personal note by way of conclusion, Mr. Thalmann admits ruefully that his duties over the past years have kept him so busy that he has been forced to neglect his leisure activities. Whilst in London he and Mrs. Thalmann hope, in spite of their heavy schedule, to be able to enjoy some of the cultural facilities which the capital has to offer.

In short, this cultured man, whom we are glad to welcome into our midst, hopes to devote some time to leisure activities which he considers part of a normal and balanced life.

WGS

Dear Friends and Compatriots,

It is with pleasure that we present the 106th Annual Report on the activities of the Swiss Benevolent Society. As in the past, it has been our aim during the year under review to offer material and professional help to those Swiss people who choose to apply to us when facing difficulties they could not cope with on their own.

Whilst the number of elderly people has declined slightly, there are a few more families on our books and the overall number of people (58 men, 173 women and 72 children) has stayed virtually unchanged. With some of them, we have had more or less frequent contacts over long periods, sometimes years, others were referred to us by the Embassy, the Churches and English social workers or they got in touch with us directly. In an effort to get our Society’s activities more widely known, an article was inserted into a Special Issue of the *Swiss Observer* which is sent to all Swiss registered with the Consulates.

We were in touch with our clients by 565 receptions at the office, 238 visits to people’s homes or hospitals and, because of the size of our “parish”, to some very considerable extent by correspondence. Whenever possible, at least at the beginning of a contact, the Social Worker aims at seeing the applicant in person as this permits a very much deeper and better appreciation of the real needs. That this involves a good deal of travelling, in and out of London, is obvious. The majority of our clients live in the Greater London Area and the Home Counties, but visits to various towns on the South Coast and up to Northamptonshire have also been necessary.

The number of pensioners has gone down but in view of the present difficult situation, we have been obliged to help those more substantially. The decline in the number of pensioners is partly due to the fact that the Colony is getting smaller and partly to the fact that more elderly people, through job pensions and the

Swiss Old Age Pension are in a materially better position. The Swiss Pension was distributed to some recipients at regular intervals if this was more convenient to them than receiving quarterly payments through the Embassy.

Whilst there are now only 44 persons or family groups who receive regular financial support from us, we have been called upon to make casual grants for unexpected or larger than expected outlays to a substantial number of people.

More than half our clients, however, do not receive any financial help from us at all and approach us with a great variety of problems. In some cases, we are able to provide the advice and support required ourselves, in others, we either direct them to the appropriate source of help such as legal advice for instance, or we act in conjunction with English social services. Sometimes, particularly with elderly compatriots who are not keen to give up their independence, we find that our involvement and the interest we take in them, increases the tolerance of their neighbours towards their own particular difficulties. In being able to get in touch with us when too many problems occur at the same time, they can use us as an outlet for their anxieties and sometimes grievances.

Christmas time was very busy as usual, though we did make one significant change in the composition of our parcels. In view of the extremely large increases in postage, we did not buy much foodstuff ourselves and made a larger use of cash grants and gift tokens. We did send out 146 parcels, made up mainly from gifts of the Frauenverein, the Réunion de Couture and a number of generous Swiss firms and individuals. The whole operation was again in the able hands of Mmes N. Burri and B. Kaluza, helped in many ways by Mmes G. Gyssler, M. Hill, R.-M. Zumofen, Mr. and Mrs. W. Buol, Mr. and Mrs. R. Glarner, Mr. and Mrs. E. Tangemann and Messrs. E. Huber, S. Kaluza, W. Lockyer and L. Smith. Not