

Centre de Rencontres Internationales

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pour le Réarmement moral

CAUX

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Caux, 14 July 1997

House count: 340. Weather: Changeable, mainly fresh and sunny.

ARCHIVES

Mountain House
CH-1824 CAUX

Dear Friends,

The 51st Caux summer conference has begun.

This year in the absence of Andrew Stallybrass, it has been suggested that the popular Colourful Caux Communication with its atmospheric behind-the-scenes glimpses be written by different volunteers each week. So - here goes!

We have just completed a pre-conference week of 'installation, warm-up and preparation'. Co-ordination between all the willing but somewhat unschooled volunteers from many countries has been achieved at the 'point fixe', a daily 40 minute meeting for everyone. Chaos has been averted thus far! We have started with reflection, prayers of different faiths and often with music and jokes. A great atmosphere of mutual support and sharing has been achieved. Caux is like a crown containing many gems. Some are bold and glowing, some more discreet. The combined effect when all polished up can be stunning! We want to describe some of these jewels to you.

* 'I didn't realise that there would be so many young people in Caux', said one of the nineteen Caux Scholars. They range in age from 20 to 44. Many are doing formal studies in conflict resolution. They come from Nigeria, Liberia, Yugoslavia, Costa Rica, Canada, New Zealand, Mozambique, Croatia, and the United States (from many ethnic backgrounds). The two interns are scholars from last year who have returned with enthusiasm to help. Quotes from the first meeting: 'I am the first person in my family to go to college and to go overseas'; 'The CS prospectus gave me goose-bumps'; 'I kept coming across MRA during my research'; 'My 82-year-old Nanna has been with MRA for ages'.

* Up to 22 graduates from interpreting schools revel in the opportunity to practise live translation and more offer each year. One heard about it by chance during a conversation at a wedding. A young British woman who is fluent in three languages and is in Caux for the fourth time has taken on the co-ordination of the interpreting for the whole summer.

* A young Polish man who is helping with housekeeping for the second time, has brought a friend with him to add to the team.

* Four graduate students of hotel management, coming from Indonesia, Argentina and Guatemala, are working as 'responsibles' at the reception, in the economat and in the kitchen. One, who also came last year, says: 'I want so much to be part of MRA. It is not an organisation but a lifestyle. Together we can build better human beings.'

* An electrical engineer from Sweden (who normally earns Sfr100 per hour for his work) is giving a week to overhaul the translation equipment.

* French Swiss TV sent a crew to film the beginning of the summer. Later two minutes appeared on the main 7.30pm bulletin, including a brief interview with the Swedish engineer. The following day, two women appeared at the entrance to Mountain House. 'We saw on the TV that there is an exhibition here. Can we look around?', they said.

* The YPLT (Young People's Liason Committee) has been formed, planning sports and the programme for the enlarged Caux Café - open until midnight on the 3rd Floor.

* Four students from Britain are heading up the service teams. One says: "I'm really excited about having my first try. We are grateful to be trusted with such a responsibility." They were picked from applicants who responded to advertisements at several British universities. Although they work without pay like many other young people who offer skilled and energetic help here, their accommodation in Caux has to be funded by MRA. Many are thrilled by the opportunity to be in Caux on this basis, as it would otherwise be impossible for them. Donations can still be made towards the cost of their stay.

'We Swiss have long been accustomed to public praise for our beautiful country, the quality of our goods and integrity of our business deals. Now we feel numbed, shocked and at times indignant at the storm which has descended upon us over the last few months... the criticisms hit hard and they hurt. But would we otherwise have had the courage to examine our past and raise fundamental questions?'

The eight Swiss and one American who signed this statement opened the weekend on Saturday afternoon, to a very attentive audience. In the front row sat the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Cornelio Sommaruga, and Professor Jean Halperin, a leading member of the Jewish Community in Switzerland and Professor for Jewish Thinking at the university of Fribourg.

Marianne Spreng acted as interviewer, giving each of the signatories the chance to express what they had experienced during the difficult months since Switzerland was attacked in the world press and TV for its role in World War II - and like a mosaic, for each one it entailed decisions and experiences of the most different kind. Pierre Spoerri said that in spite of all the wrong that happened in that period, he was extremely proud of what his father and many in that generation had achieved. At a moment when an attack by Germany seemed imminent, his father launched a nation-wide movement against defeatism, supported by all parties and all churches. Jean-Jacques Odier spoke as a member of a Geneva banking family of six generations: meeting the Landau family in Jerusalem had changed deeply-held prejudices in him; David Forbes, a young American lawyer working in a law firm in Geneva and married to a Swiss, described how he identified himself with the Swiss, strongly defended them and then also recognised the injustices done by Swiss banks in the way descendants of holders of 'nameless accounts' had been treated.

Mr. Sommaruga captivated the audience by spelling out the failures of the Swiss authorities and of the International Red Cross in responding to the challenges presented by the floods of refugees all over Europe and the terrible consequences of the holocaust. He said that without the neutrality of Switzerland upheld during the war, Caux would probably never have existed and therefore could not have done the work 'it has done so remarkably well'.

On Sunday morning speakers from different parts of the world said how touched they had been by the honest searching of the Swiss the day before. It had made them think about their own situation and their own countries' past history. An Englishwoman voiced thoughts about Britain's relationship to Ireland. An African statesman living in Switzerland said that unless the Africans themselves faced the issue of slavery they would never overcome their inferiority and ineffectiveness. An African intern of the Caux Scholars Program appealed for a new relationship between North and South on the vital debt issue. In conclusion Professor Halperin read out a piece from the Talmud: 'Do not judge your neighbour till you have put yourself in his place'.

A la prochaine,

Rosemary Thwaites Fulvia Spoerri

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