

## **PRESIDENT'S REPORT FOR THE 58th AGM OF FEDERATION OF SWISS SOCIETIES IN THE UK (FOSSUK)**

Dear fellow Swiss in the UK

After a few challenging years during the pandemic, a comfortable co-existence between online and 'in real life' events and meetings have been taking place. Our hugely successful AGM last year, had a record attendance of over 60 people, in particular from younger Swiss from Oxford, Cambridge, Durham and LSE universities and a very healthy showing of New Helvetic Society and Unione Ticinese members and guests.

**Swiss National Day** (1st August) events were held across the UK by clubs and societies over summer, with over 300 attending the London event in Richmond, an initiative organised by UK CSA Delegate Andreas Feller-Ryf. There will once again be one, taking place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July with traditional raclette, sausages, cakes and drinks; over £5k worth of raffle prizes; children's activities including lantern painting and bubbles; Guggenmusik; Flag throwing and more! Tickets and a detailed programme is available on the dedicated <https://www.snd-london.com/> website. There is still an opportunity to get involved – do get in touch with the Swiss National Day committee to express an interest.

The **Unione Ticinese** held a successful "Pancia mia fatti capanna" & concert by Swiss Italian singer/songwriter Leti combined with tasting of Ticinese delicacies in the spring was a resounding success following hot on the heels of a the traditional Castagnata in December and Raclette in February.

**New Helvetic Society** combined its AGM with a talk by acclaimed author Neil Heritage, the First Double Amputee to successfully climb the Matterhorn, had a Living in Hotels: a Memoir by Helen Wallimann talk and Raclette evening in the new year.

**Swiss Club Edinburgh** have a monthly 'Stammtisch' and walking tours, remaining a very active and the only club in Scotland.

**Manchester Swiss Club** held a Raclette lunch in Spring, Samichlaus party in December and coffee mornings. The Club also has a new committee, with Jurg Bentele as president.

**Southern Areas Swiss Club** had a cake fest in April, Potatoes & Cheese in Autumn, skittles in the spring and Christmas party.

**Somerset Swiss Club** is a lively club meeting 3 times per year, **Bristol**, although not a club, are looking for local Swiss to meet up and possibly launch a club, and of course all clubs and informal groups hold a Christmas event. The **Swiss in Wales** (North and South) launched a new website listing upcoming local events too.

In addition to Sunday services, the **Swiss Church London** continues to offer a rich cultural programme, from organ recitals to exhibitions, and of course the artist in residence programme. With a new arts team, the Church is firmly positioned as a cultural and arts centre for the Covent Garden community. If you are interested in contributing, the Breakfast outreach programme are always on the lookout for volunteers too.

*Council of the Swiss Abroad Update*

The highlight for us was that the elected UK CSA Delegates could attend the postponed 2020 Congress in the summer with 85 of the 129 members traveling to Lugano with the main topics of discussion e-Voting, Health Insurance for the Swiss Abroad, negotiations between Switzerland and the EU, and cooperation between OSA (Organisation of the Swiss Abroad) and the FDFA (Federal Department of Foreign Affairs). It was the first time the new Delegates could attend a Council meeting or the Congress in-person since being elected to meet and discuss with compatriots from all over the world.

The Swiss health insurance system was subject to much concern. Foreign nationals must give up their Swiss basic insurance when they change their place of residence. Many then have difficulties in taking out or maintaining private health insurance, especially if age or pre-existing conditions become noticeable. This will remain the case currently with discussions continuing.

Franz Muheim was elected to the Executive Board, whose role it is to determine strategic decisions on the activities of OSA, SwissCommunity, and consultation on the business of the Council of the Swiss Abroad, and dealing with a large number of issues related to policy on Swiss citizens abroad.

The Director of the Consular Directorate, Johannes Matyassy, representing the FDFA, provided an update to the online platforms available to support the Swiss Abroad. He stressed the importance of utilising tools such as [www.traveladmin.ch](http://www.traveladmin.ch) where Swiss and Swiss Abroad should enter their holiday itinerary which is critical in the case of emergencies. He also stressed the importance of remaining informed about when and what support the FDFA can provide in crisis situations. The FDFA will continue its digitisation efforts, with the successful introduction of the '**SwissInTouch**' mobile app, which has been designed in conjunction with OSA. The APP has been in use since November to connect the Swiss expatriate community with Switzerland's consular representations. Mr Matyassy retired in February, with the new DG of the Consular Directorate, Ambassador Grichting appointed.

The provocative topic of electronic voting or ID was addressed by OSA President, Filippo Lombardi who outlined the arguments in favour of an e-ID for the Swiss Abroad. An e-ID is a prerequisite for e-government services, healthcare and administration. Mr. Lombardi stressed that E-voting would be easier to achieve cross all Cantons via the e-ID. It could also improve access to Swiss banks for the Swiss abroad. The Delegates voted unanimously in favour of OSA making a favourable contribution to the e-ID consultation process. Andreas Feller-Ryf rightly raised the question of whether e-voting could significantly change the composition of the electorate, considering that approximately 200,000 Swiss citizens residing abroad would vote. At an extraordinary meeting in November, Franz Muheim reminded the FDFA that E-Voting is only one half of the requirements for Swiss Abroad to exercise their political rights, namely that the new attempt to introduce electronic identification (E-ID) needs to be set up such that it can be used to distribute voting documents securely online, however the good news on the e-Voting front is that trials are taking place from this spring, and we look to our Delegates to keep our community updated on status.

The CSA Delegates are continuing to place pressure on the Federal Council to draw up a clear strategy for maintaining the agreement on the free movement of persons. For the Swiss living in the UK, it is of vital importance to ensure that the Swiss government works towards the preservation of the Agreement on the Free Movement of Persons (AFMP). This would guarantee the rights of Swiss citizens living in an EU country and all those who wish to settle there in the future. Lakshmi Sundaram highlighted how drastically the Brexit deal has impacted the United Kingdom from a workforce point of view. Limiting movement of people in the UK contributed to the shortage of workers and consequently crisis in various sectors such as transportation and farming.

Many Delegates expressed a desire from the Embassies and Consuls to better support 1st August celebrations, in particular financially and organisationally. The UK was cited as a prime example of an inclusive and large event however, Andreas Feller-Ryf raised the issue that these events invariably fall on the shoulders of volunteers that require a huge amount of time and resource.

The next Congress of the Swiss Abroad will take place in St. Gallen from 18 to 20 August 2023 – it is important that you raise concerns and issues with our dedicated team of UK Delegates, who are clearly making an impact. This is also the primary purpose of FOSSUK as an umbrella organisation – ensuring the interests of Swiss living and working in the UK are fairly and accurately represented and that mandates are subsequently communicated. A big thank you to the dedication and hard work of our UK Delegates: Andreas Feller-Ryf, Loredana Guetg-Wyatt, Michelle Hufschmidt, Franz Muheim and Lakshmi Sundaram.

### *Events*

Online information events were held in October (with SoliSwiss) addressing health insurance and pensions and in May (OSA and New Helvetic Society) hosted by Andreas Feller-Ryf, Loredana Guetg-Wyatt with guest speakers Ariane Rustichelli, Director of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad and Thomas Wagner, Consul General at the Embassy of Switzerland in the UK on the work the Delegates do, the political rights of the Swiss Abroad and how to enrol on the voting and electoral roll. With Federal elections this year, it is important to exercise your rights and vote.

With so many events on-and offline, the calendar became a little full to hold the planned student forum in Autumn, which due to exam and term timetables had to be cancelled. The FOSSUK Committee meet approximately every six weeks – do let us know of any events that you are planning, news and activities that we can publish on the FOSSUK website in addition to the Swiss Review UK & Ireland pages.

Regardless of where we connect, FOSSUK wouldn't exist without such a dedicated team. I am extremely lucky to be president of an association that has such supportive and driven members: whilst all of us serve the Swiss community in the UK on top of our day job, I am impressed by the committee's commitment in their personal time! Massive thanks to Andreas Feller-Ryf, Loredana Guetg-Wyatt, Michelle Hufschmidt, Franz Muheim, Joelle Nebbe-Mornod and Lakshmi Sundaram.

Thanks to all FOSSUK members – corporate and associate, friends and sponsors of FOSSUK. A special "thank you" goes to our friends at the Embassy, especially Thomas Wagner who facilitates communication between the Embassy and FOSSUK.

Many thanks also to Ambassador Leitner for his support of FOSSUK and providing us with a place to meet at the Embassy. We look forward to continuing our collaboration.

On a personal level, it's with mixed feelings that I have taken on the Presidency with the effects of the pandemic still looming large and now economic turmoil and the cost of living crisis. The reality is being felt across communities and clubs where the cost of eating out and traveling to meet impacts people's ability to remain active within clubs. This forced FOSSUK's hand in being unable to justify the expense of holding this year's AGM and Congress in Oxford, but do hope to hold next year's outside of London and are currently fund raising.

Dwindling club membership remains a concern for all, and our sincere condolences go out to in particular Unione Ticinese and Manchester Swiss Club and their families where sadly, many members passed away over the past year.

On a positive note, there is renewed involvement through informal Facebook and WhatsApp groups where Swiss gather for a bite to eat and to watch sporting events such as Wimbledon and football. If you are London-based, or come into the city often, do get in touch if you'd like to join the WhatsApp group. Another positive is The New Helvetic Society and Unione Ticinese partnering on most events, ensuring that the London Swiss community have plenty of opportunity to engage and connect. Both clubs are reaching out to the community for committee members – do reach out if you are able to contribute.

Do keep an eye on the very active online Swiss in the UK Facebook group for upcoming events and connect <https://www.facebook.com/groups/swissintheuk>.

I am looking forward to seeing many of you at our upcoming AGM, which is packed with engaging speakers and cultural programme.



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