



## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Swiss Benevolent Society of New York, the oldest Swiss benevolent organization in the United States, was founded in 1832 by the Swiss consul, Henri Casimir de Rham. The purposes of the organization were to care for the poor and to organize social events for the Swiss population in New York City. The French Benevolent Society housed the files of the Swiss Benevolent Society and distributed its funds for a fee until 1845.

In 1846, Louis Phillippe de Luze replaced de Rham as Swiss consul and took on the responsibility of disbursing the Swiss society's funds. The Society adopted its first constitution in 1846 and was incorporated by the state of New York in 1851. In the latter year, the Swiss government and sixteen of the cantonal governments of Switzerland agreed to make annual donations to the organization.

Jacques Bertschmann, who replaced de Luze as Swiss consul in 1873, insisted that the Society should separate from the Swiss consul and establish its own independent office. The society rented office space at 63 Bleeker Street and employed an agent to disburse funds for food and lodging from this office.

The membership of the Society increased in the 1870s and so did donations. As the relief program grew, the organization received eviction notices from disgruntled landlords who did not appreciate the crowds of relief seekers frequenting their properties: the offices of the SBSNY moved five times in ten years. Subsequently the society raised \$22,000 to purchase and renovate a building at 108 Second Avenue which opened its doors as the Swiss Home on 17 October 1883. This building was equipped with thirty beds for transients and the elderly, a sick bay with four beds, sitting and dining rooms, washing facilities, and a fumigating room for transients' clothing. The residents of the Swiss Home were referred to as "inmates" in the Society's record books for many years. Eventually the Society engaged a doctor and a dentist to care for the sick. A number of nearby hospitals provided beds for the ill from the Swiss Home at little or no cost to the Society, so that increasingly the majority of inhabitants of the Swiss Home were infirm elderly persons.

The Society took an active part in helping incoming Swiss immigrants establish themselves in this country. For many years the Society conducted an employment agency. Beneficiaries of the relief program included persons temporarily out of work and in need of food or clothing to sustain themselves through times of hardship. In the late 1800s, the Society arranged discounts from railroad companies for Swiss who went west and from steamship companies which provided passage for Swiss who wanted to return to Switzerland. A Swiss fair held in 1886 netted over \$8,000 for such causes. In 1892, the Society adopted English as its official language.

In 1904, the Society purchased land near Central Park (West 67th Street) and began building a new Swiss Home designed by Swiss architect John Scharsmith and fashioned after the Town Hall of Basel. Opened in 1905, it had fifty beds and could accommodate thirty more on a temporary basis.

Robert J. F. Schwarzenbach, the Society's president from 1911 to 1924, wanted the Society to support the young as well as the elderly. During the prospering early 1920s, the Society bought an old hotel on seven acres of land in Mt. Kisco, Westchester County, New York which opened in the fall of 1923 as the Swiss Home for the Aged. In June 1924, the Society transformed the old Swiss Home on 67th Street into the Swiss Town House, a boarding house for up to 56 Swiss working girls and women and employed a matron to supervise the facility.

During the Great Depression, the Swiss Benevolent Society was actively engaged in social welfare work. The Society rented an apartment on West 73rd Street which housed the Swiss Community Room (where hot meals were provided), a dormitory room for men, and the Swiss Welfare Office. The organization hired Elisabeth Rosenthaler, a professional social worker trained at Hull House, the famous social settlement in Chicago, to coordinate these activities. Relief assistance at the Swiss Welfare Office peaked in 1932, when the organization handled 654 cases. Miss Rosenthaler remained with the Society for the next thirty years.

Another of the Society's Depression era projects was the Swiss Children's Camp conducted in the vicinity of the Swiss Home at Mt. Kisco from 1933-1949. The primary goal of the camp was to promote the physical well-being of the Swiss children of New York City, but not only poor children attended. The camp's daily programs revolved around programs which would instill in Swiss culture and history such as vegetable gardening--evocative of Switzerland's agrarian heritage--and plays which dramatized the life of William Tell. Elisabeth Rosenthaler's name remains prominent in the records of the camp where she served alternately as the camp's secretary, supervisor, social worker, and director.



## Swiss Benevolent Society

During the Depression years, the Society's constitution and bylaws were modified. The society discontinued its board of trustees. Activities were structured into various specialized "departments" (such as Social Service, Children's Camp, and Swiss Home for the Aged) chaired by executive board members but staffed increasingly by paid employees.

New goals were identified during the Society's centennial year in 1946. First, the organization resolved to improve its services to convalescents and to the chronically ill. This required a new home--fireproof and adequately equipped. Second, the organization decided to continue to operate the Town House as a boarding house but also wanted the building to accommodate a welfare office, cafeteria, library, and meeting rooms to house the activities which had been conducted at the rented site. Third, the organization resolved to improve the effectiveness of the welfare office.

The Centennial Fund Drive netted \$222,000 for these projects. All goals were reached, except for a new Swiss Home for the Aged because the construction costs proved too costly. Therefore the organization decided to renovate the old building and add a two-story fireproof wing. When the wing formally opened in May 1953, more than 1,000 Swiss traveled to Mt. Kisco for the occasion. This pilgrimage of persons of Swiss descent from throughout the New York metropolitan area became an annual Society tradition, known as the Spring Outing.

Three giant bazaars in 1953, 1954, and 1956, sponsored by the Swiss representative in Washington, D.C., paid off the \$65,000 loan which the Society had taken to complete the building project at Mt. Kisco. Nonetheless, occupancy of the facility dwindled throughout the 1940s and 1950s, in part because of changes in the immigration law begun in the 1920s which limited the number of Swiss immigrants arriving in the United States, and in part because of the enactment of Social Security legislation begun in 1935 which made the elderly less dependent in their old age.

A Women's Division, established in 1953 to raise money for the Mt. Kisco wing, became an active arm of the Society through its continuing involvement in the fall bazaars, open house parties, penny bank drives, and participation in the annual Spring Outings. Over the years, these funds were used primarily to support the physical upkeep of the Swiss Town House and the Swiss Home. The Society's programs were carried out by an energetic membership whose numbers exceeded 1,000 in three years: 1954, 1957, and 1961.

The focus of the organization changed as a result of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. According to Sylva Brunner, president of the Society from 1967 to 1969, these were "tough times," for the Swiss Home had to fully comply with often-costly state and federal regulations. Moreover, the organization adopted an open door policy to accept persons of all ethnic backgrounds. This diluted the original Swiss orientation which had attracted clients and funders. Additionally, the town of Mt. Kisco placed a large water tower on Society property near the Swiss Home which became a source of controversy. In 1969, the Society obtained approval to operate the Swiss Home as a Health Related Facility which provided a modified type of senior health care without the stringent requirements demanded of a nursing facility. In 1971, the Swiss Home was incorporated into the New York Department of Health.

Throughout this period, the Society continued to conduct social service programs at the Swiss Town House in Manhattan and to make rooms available to lodgers. Increasingly, the social service cases included elderly persons who could be visited in their homes or at care-giving facilities. By the 1980s, the quarters formerly devoted to Swiss working women had become a hostel for visiting students of all nationalities. The Swiss Town House provided space for Swiss-related cultural events organized by the Swiss Institute, but the space was no longer as fully used as it once had been.

In 1995, the Swiss Benevolent Society relocated to a new headquarters at 608 Fifth Avenue in the building which houses the Swiss Center. The organization employs an administrative staff as well as two fulltime social workers who meet with clients in the organization's office or at clients' homes. The organization hosts a seniors' organization which meets once a month for coffee at the Swiss Inn on 48th Street and 8th Avenue. The Society also administers the Pelligrini Scholarship Fund created in 1979 to grant college scholarships to students who have at least one parent who is of Swiss descent. In 1994 alone, the Fund provided college students with awards totaling more than \$38,000.