

“A spirit of friendly association”

NEW HELVETIC SOCIETY, PENNSYLVANIA CHAPTER: 1938-2013
A HISTORY IN BRIEF

“This organization was created to fill the need for a Swiss society with cultural aims; its spirit is one of friendly association, independent of any political party or religious creed.”

—Tenth Anniversary Journal, 1948

Founded seventy-five years ago in Philadelphia, the New Helvetic Society, Pennsylvania Chapter, carries on a long and distinguished history of fostering closer contact among Swiss immigrants and their descendants, and cultivating strong bonds of friendship and good will between the Swiss and American people. NHS has worked tirelessly to preserve and affirm the unique blend of Swiss ethnicity, culture, customs and language for its members, while fully embracing the great ideals of the United States of America, the world's largest and most successful ethnic melting pot.

Swiss immigrants have had a continuous presence in the Delaware Valley of New Jersey, southeastern Pennsylvania and the State of Delaware for at least three and a half centuries. From the establishment of English rule in the mid-Atlantic region of North America in 1664, the invitation to colonize the area extended beyond potential settlers from the British Isles to include people from mainland Europe. In particular, the founding of Pennsylvania in 1682, fanning out from William Penn's “Greene Countrie Towne” of Philadelphia on the banks of the Delaware and Schuylkill, offered the powerful attraction of cheap land, economic opportunity and political and religious freedom. Thousands of Swiss colonists thus crossed the Atlantic to make a home in the New World.

With notable exceptions such as members of the Amish religious sect of Lancaster County, most Swiss assimilated fairly quickly and became thoroughly integrated into the social, economic and political fabric of their adoptive home. As a rule, the sons and daughters of immigrants adapted rapidly and well to the American environment, mindful and fiercely proud of their Swiss heritage, but strongly motivated to achieve success and an identity as citizens of the United States.

Major waves of immigration to America in the 19th and early 20th centuries raised consciousness of the size of the Swiss community in major cities around the U.S., particularly in metropolitan areas along the eastern seaboard. Benevolent associations, ethnic clubs, singing and musical groups, gymnastic societies, etc. sprang up everywhere in cities and towns with more than a nominal Swiss immigrant population. This was certainly true in Philadelphia, home to the Swiss Benevolent Society (founded 1860), the Swiss Turnverein, and a dozen other organizations. In 1946, Benevolent Society president J. H. Reichling noted that at the turn of the century there were at least fourteen Swiss societies in Philadelphia alone, serving an estimated population of 2,000 first- and second-generation Swiss.

The cataclysm of World War I and surging German nationalism in the first four decades of the last century gave birth to a desire among many Swiss to emphasize the distinctive heritage of Switzerland as a nation and society firmly committed to ideals of political liberty, economic opportunity and peaceful resolution of conflict. By the late 1930s, these and other factors produced a climate conducive to the establishment of an umbrella association in the Philadelphia region designed to unite everyone of Swiss heritage in one society that would transcend differences in linguistic background, cantonal or regional origin, or special interests.

Alice Finckh's 1948 account of the founding of NHS traces its beginnings to a Swiss National Day celebration in Philadelphia on August 1, 1936, when Arnold Bartschi, Hans Bader, Auguste Bernard, Adolph Egli and John C. Schoop joined Maurice J. Rohrbach, Acting Consul of Switzerland in proposing to create a new society "which would give expression to their own deep-rooted love for Switzerland and still would include their American friends." Finckh credited Rohrbach (1899-1981) as the prime mover in the undertaking, calling him "the motivating power behind a growing conviction in the minds of his compatriots and American friends that something concrete should be done to further international understanding."

Rohrbach and a growing number of colleagues in the Philadelphia area spent the next year and a half spreading the word of the nascent organization to the Swiss community, drafting and redrafting its constitution and bylaws, and deliberating passionately on what to call it. Alice Finckh recorded that "The question of the name of the new society was a very difficult one and was the occasion of much conversation and correspondence. From Mr. Rohrbach's earlier contacts with the Neue Helvetische Gesellschaft (Nouvelle Société Helvétique) of Berne, it was obvious to him that the aims of the Philadelphia society were compatible with those of the older Swiss group," founded to heal internal differences between French- and German-speaking Swiss at the onset of hostilities in Europe in 1914.

But why a New Helvetic Society? What was this 20th-century incarnation of the society in Switzerland seeking to recreate? In 1762, Philosopher Isaak Iselin, poet Solomon Gessner and a small group of compatriots founded the original Helvetic Society in Schinznach, Canton Aargau, as an all-inclusive association whose "only goal and unique object . . . must be to establish and conserve between the Swiss love and friendship, unity and concord; to maintain among them the taste for beautiful, noble and great acts; and to transmit for posterity liberty, peace and virtue through the care of good citizens." The 1762 society advocated democratic reform of the Swiss constitution and a federal form of government in place of the old Confederation, improved public education, and greater harmony among Swiss regardless of language, cantonal or regional affiliation, or religious preference. More than just a philosophical debating club however, the original Helvetic Society sponsored cultural and social activities.

So, as war loomed on the European continent in 1914, Carl Spitteler, Gonzague de Reynold, and Carl Albert Loosli took inspiration from this 18th century forerunner in founding the New Helvetic Society, reviving a pan-Swiss patriotic association whose goal was to promote unity in the face of the controversy and conflict tearing at surrounding nations.

In Philadelphia, Rohrbach, Bartschi, Bader, Bernard, Egli and Schoop followed in their footsteps. Formally established on February 25, 1938, the New Helvetic Society, Pennsylvania Chapter, thus became the first (and ultimately only) American branch of the association, dedicated to promoting “a similar spirit in the Swiss American sphere, awakening its members to their duty of strengthening the already harmonious ties between these two sister democracies.” The members of the newly founded NHS unanimously elected Consul Rohrbach as first president, a post he held continuously for ten years.



NHS, January 1939

In its early years, NHS played an important role in representing the interests and civic ideals of the Swiss community in regional and even national affairs. During its first decade, NHS participated as an organizational member of the Philadelphia Community Chest, American Red Cross, International Institute, Intercultural Committee of the United Nations Council, and its members served as delegates on the War Manpower Commission of the United States.

Under president Rohrbach's leadership, the society sponsored a remarkable variety of social, cultural and educational programs for its members and the greater Philadelphia community. Along with traditional member events such as annual Swiss National Day celebrations, dinner-dances, receptions and Christmas parties, NHS hosted showings of contemporary Swiss films, choral recitals and orchestra concerts, and many lectures on themes

ranging from the light, entertaining and informative, to the deadly serious. Lecture topics featured in the 1930s and 40s included "Off the Beaten Path in Switzerland," "Majesties Compared: The Rockies and the Swiss Alps," and "The World's Worst Failures of Recent Times" (all in 1938), "Switzerland in the European Storm" (1939) and "What's Next in Europe?" (1940), "Intimate Glimpses of Switzerland" (1941), "37,000 Miles Through the War" (1942), and "Switzerland and Postwar Prospects" (1944). Early film presentations included *Fuesilier Wipf* (1939), *Schweizerische Landesausstellung 1939* (1941), and *Landammann Stauffacher and The Secret of the Mountains* (1943). There were many others.

Eighteen presidents have followed Maurice Rohrbach at NHS's helm since 1948. All are listed by name and terms of service at the end of this essay. The society's program and benefits of membership have evolved with the passage of time and changes of leadership. But a commitment to providing a pan-Swiss meeting place whose "spirit is one of friendly association" has been a continuous thread through the seventy-five years of NHS's existence.

All-member events such as annual Swiss National Day celebrations, Christmas fondue parties, Father's Day picnics and a wide range of cultural and entertainment offerings are supplemented on a regular basis by special-interest activities, such as hiking trips, Jass-playing, canoeing, and periodic field excursions to noteworthy sites in the region. Major public events such as the Philadelphia Swiss Roots programs and the Bundesbrief exhibition at the National Constitution Center in 2006 were made possible through the steadfast support of NHS members working with the Swiss Benevolent Society and many allied organizations in the mid-Atlantic region.

Forty-three years after its founding, NHS refocused its program by splitting its social and cultural missions. The society decided to honor the memory of its principal founder upon his death in 1981 by establishing the endowed Maurice Rohrbach Fund for Swiss-American Cultural Exchange with a generous bequest from the Rohrbach estate, NHS general fund contributions, and member donations. Since then, MRF has funded a wide variety of historical and artistic exhibitions, musical programs, lectures, theatrical performances highlighting Swiss contributions to American society and culture, including events associated with Switzerland's 700th anniversary in 1991, and the Swiss Roots/Bundesbrief programs in 2006. A more detailed account of the history of the Maurice Rohrbach Fund and a complete listing of MRF-sponsored programs and events appears elsewhere in this journal.

The New Helvetic Society, Pennsylvania Chapter, heads for its century mark in 2038 as the largest and most active organization of Swiss and friends of Switzerland in the Delaware Valley. Its spirit remains now as in the beginning, "one of friendly association," committed to fostering closer contact among Swiss immigrants and their descendants and cultivating strong bonds of friendship and good will between the Swiss and American people.