

INTO EUROPE 1968

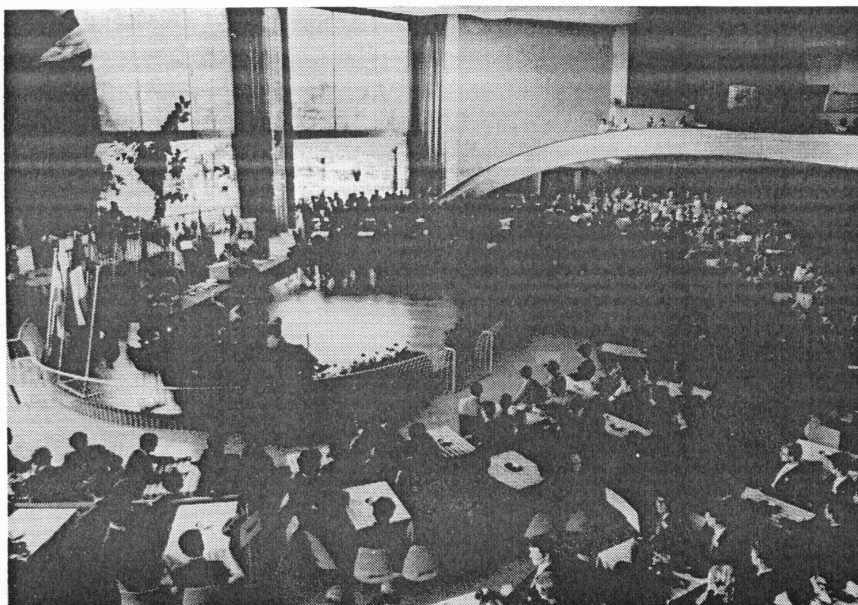
by Donal Kelly.

Success in the National Apprentices Trade Tests, held earlier this year in Dublin, would in itself be sufficiently rewarding, but in my case, the honour of being adjudged the best apprentice in my trade, was overshadowed by the prospect of a trip to Switzerland, with the important consideration that everything - travel, accommodation and sightseeing would be absolutely free. Apart from a hazy recollection that Switzerland is noted for its watches, its Winter sports and its wartime neutrality, I knew little else concerning it, and was naturally very eager to learn at first hand how the Swiss people lived, worked and relaxed.

the Minister for Education, received us at Talbot House, where he offered his best wishes for our success, and we were presented with our tickets for the journey.

At 10 a.m. on Saturday morning, we boarded our flight at Dublin Airport, and arrived in Zurich at noon, to be greeted by a heavy downpour of rain (which somewhat surprised us, as we had thought it only rained in Ireland!).

However, this was the only bad weather we experienced and the subsequent days were much more pleasant with temperatures hovering around the 90 mark - though the nights were a little cooler, but not as cool as they can be in Ireland. From Zurich we travelled by train to Berne and eventually completed our journey by coach to the little village of Hofwil, seven miles or so beyond the City centre. Here, with our fellow apprentices from Japan, Korea, Britain, Spain, Portugal and Malta, we were accommodated in a large modern student hostel, equipped with every athletic and recreational facility - including a luxurious swimming pool, and a first class football pitch. Apprentices from the other countries participating in the



The prize giving ceremony at the 17th International Trade Apprentices Competition.

On Friday, July 5th, I left Killarney with a keen anticipation of what lay ahead, and in Dublin I joined the other Apprentices who were also participating in the International Competitions at Berne. Mr. Lenihan,

Competition were accommodated in a similar hostel some distance from ours. To ensure that we would be in good shape for the Tests we were obliged to be in our quarters by 11 p.m. on the night preceding the commen-

cement of the Competition and on the two subsequent nights. However, this rule was relaxed when we had completed our assignment.

Despite the language barrier, we became very friendly with the other groups in the hostel and in particular we sought out our opposite numbers and compared notes with them. In my case, I was interested in the Apprentices who would be competing in the Metal Turning section, and of these, I found the Japanese and Korean representatives to be really dedicated to their trade (this dedication was later reflected in the final placings, when Japan was awarded the Gold Medal and Korea qualified for the Silver award). I was particularly interested in the magnificent set of tools and measuring instruments which the Japanese competitor had brought with him. I was fortunate in being able to converse freely with him through the interpreter with his party. Conversation with the other nationalities was somewhat restricted, but we generally managed to communicate with the assistance of pencil sketches.

On Sunday, the day following our arrival, we attended Mass in a nearby Church and spent the day sightseeing in the city. Certainly it well merits the popularity it has gained with countless tourists who visit there each year. Known as the "City of the Fountains", it retains much of the glamour and colour of more leisurely years, while at the same time one sees the most modern architecture and developments which contrast strangely with the cobblestone roadways and nineteenth century buildings that have become a tourist attraction in that part of the city known as "Ancient Berne".

Transport in the municipal area is mainly by system of tramways and there are no horse drawn vehicles. Cycling does not appear to be popular pastime as the number of cyclists to be seen was remarkably small.

In the ordinary everyday economies of living, one finds that Switzerland is in many ways more expensive than Ireland as may be judged from the fact that a bottle of Coco-Cola costs the equivalent of six shillings but on the other hand beer and cigarettes are considerably cheaper.

On Monday, July 8th we were present

with all the other participants and officials at the opening ceremony of the 17th International Vocational Competition at the Kursaal. This was a very impressive and colourful event and was televised in its entirety. Each delegation wore their distinctive blazers bearing the emblem of their respective countries, and were assembled beneath their National Standards. To those of us who were privileged to be present, the sight of the Green-White-and-Orange colours of Ireland was an inspiration to do our utmost to bring honour and success to our country. During the afternoon, lots were drawn by the competitors for their work-shop places and were permitted to inspect and handle the machines on which they would be working during the Tests.

On Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday we were fully occupied with the Competitions which commenced each day at 8 a.m. and finished at 5.45 p.m. These took place in a very modern Trade School, which was recently opened for students. The machinery, while familiar, was slightly different to what we had been operating in

Ireland.

On the termination of the Tests we were permitted to spend Friday in accordance with our own inclinations but we were all present on Friday evening when coaches brought us to WABERN and from there by mountain railway and cable car to the GURTEN where we had our first experience of the famous Swiss Yodellers and heard the echoes of the Swiss Horns resounding through the valley. During this get-together we were entertained by members of the foreign delegations and it is worthy of note that a number of Irishmen contributed to the gaiety of the occasion.

On Saturday we were taken to the Swiss Sports College at Magglingen and afforded an opportunity of seeing the Swiss National Olympic Team in training. That evening we attended Mass as our schedule for Sunday entailed a very early start and would not permit our attendance at Mass on Sunday morning. This substitution of the Saturday evening Mass was apparently approved by the local clergy and we were quite satisfied that we had fulfilled our obligations in the matter.

At 5 a.m. on Sunday, we left for an all day excursion to The Alps, which involved a three hour train journey through some of the more renowned areas of Switzerland - along by the Rhone River and through many mountain tunnels, including one that stretched for more than twenty miles. We then ascended by mountain railway to a height of more than ten thousand feet where the air is so rare that one soon finds difficulty in breathing. However, the scenery was magnificent - snow capped peaks all around us, and beside us the world famous Matterhorn - highest pinnacle of the Alps. Before leaving this elevated location, a most enjoyable luncheon was served in a mountain restaurant which was especially equipped with air conditioning to counteract the rarity of the atmosphere. It was 11 p.m. when we eventually returned to our quarters after a most exciting and interesting experience.

On the following day we were entertained by the management of the Brown Boveri Engineering Factory in Birrfeld and Baden where we spent four very interesting hours touring the very extensive and ultra-modern workshops and assembly bays. We had a wonderful opportunity of witnessing the Swiss precision workers at close quarters. This was followed by a most enjoyable luncheon at the factory canteen, with liberal liquid refreshments for those who cared to indulge and a plentiful supply of cigarettes for those of us who were slaves to Lady Nicotine. An interesting feature of our visit to this Factory was the unusual sight of overhead cranes being operated by women from a cabin situated on top of each crane.

On Tuesday we attended the closing ceremonies of the Competition at the Kursaal, and witnessed the presentation of prizes to the successful Apprentices. Afterwards we inspected the exhibition of finished work and spent our last afternoon in the purchase of souvenirs for friends at home. We had already exchanged souvenirs with the competitors from other countries and we had quite a selection to pack away in our cases as we prepared for the homeward journey next morning.

We shall always retain the happiest memories of Switzerland and its friendly

people - of a country only half the size of Ireland, where cleanliness in everything is of paramount importance; where every arable acre is cultivated and wasteful ditches completely eliminated (reminiscent of the plains of Kildare); where the cows wear tinkling bells and mountain folk are light-hearted and musical.

It was a wonderful experience and one that I shall never forget. Unfortunately I did not succeed in bringing home one of the coveted medals but at least, I had the satisfaction of knowing that I had done my very best. In Metal Turning, in which Ireland lacks the traditions of those countries which eventually gained the leading positions, I had, at least made a respectable showing by securing a place in front of the representatives from Spain, Portugal, Belgium, Italy, Luxemburg and Malta.