

The 653rd anniversary of the Foundation of the Swiss Confederation : 1st August 1944

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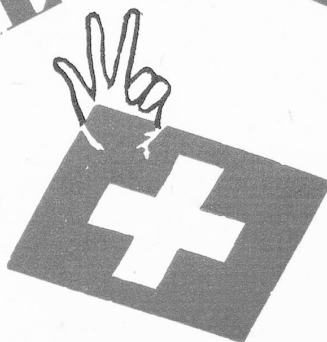
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THE 653RD ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDATION
OF THE SWISS CONFEDERATION.

1ST AUGUST 1944.

The Swiss people are preparing to celebrate, on the 1st August, 1944, the 653rd Anniversary of the day when, in the year 1291, the settlers of the upper regions of Lake Lucerne concluded the alliance with which they actually set the corner-stone of the later Swiss Confederation. This alliance, in the light of world-affairs at that time, was not an extraordinary political event: in that period of decay of the "Roman Empire of Germanic Nations", welded together by Charlemagne, such alliances were frequently formed in Italy and Western Europe. What is unique about the alliance of 1291 and other similar alliances on Swiss territory prior to 1291 and afterwards, is the fact that they are the only ones of the many similar alliances, which survived. These alliances still represent the historical, traditional basis upon which the modern structure of the Swiss Confederation rests. In the light of history, the Swiss people may, therefore, claim that their country is the oldest independent democracy in existence.

Most other modern democracies are based on the ideas of the French Revolution. These theories are rooted in the "law of nature" proclaimed in the century of enlightenment (the 18th century) and in the religious concept of English Puritanism in the 17th century. Our democracy is several hundred years older. What we in Switzerland call democracy, is the result of a consistent historical development over many centuries.

It is no doubt interesting to know something of the historical background which was the cause of the alliance of 1291. We must remember that the years 1250 - 1273 were a time of chaos in the decaying Germanic Empire; with no emperor on the throne, greed and ambition for expansion of the local dynasties were rampant, and law and order in general had reached its very lowest ebb. In Switzerland, as in other parts of Europe, the inhabitants of town and country had to take the upkeep of public order in their own hands, and thereby became used to the idea of looking after their own affairs without anybody interfering, and in many cases, conceived the idea of building up their own small states.

Emperor Rudolf, who finally came to the imperial throne in 1273 and reigned until 1291, did not succeed in putting the political clock back in Switzerland. In 1291 when he died, the inhabitants of his realm were facing renewed chaos, and the future was also uncertain and dark for self-rule and order round Lake Lucerne. The people there, however, did not wait long to get together, and concluded the alliance of August 1291.

So, in the light of the historical stage-setting, the meaning of the text of the alliance of 1291 becomes quite clear. This is a summary of it:

IN THE NAME OF GOD, WE THE MEN OF URI, SCHWYZ AND UNTERWALDEN, IN THESE EVIL TIMES AND FOR OUR BETTER PROTECTION, PROMISE AND SWEAR TO HELP ONE ANOTHER WITH ADVICE AND ASSISTANCE, WITH OUR LIVES AND POSSESSIONS, WITH MIGHT AND MAIN, AGAINST ANYBODY AND EVERYBODY WHO MAY THREATEN US WITH VIOLENCE AND INJUSTICE.

UNANIMOUSLY WE PROMISE ONE ANOTHER NOT TO TOLERATE ANY FOREIGN JUDGES IN OUR VALES. NO ONE OF US SHALL HARM THE OTHER'S LIFE AND POSSESSIONS. HE WHO HAS COVERED HIMSELF WITH GUILT, SHALL PAY THE PENALTY. IF DISSENSION ARISES AMONGST US, THE WORTHIEST FROM AMONG US SHALL MEET TOGETHER FOR MEDIATION. OUR CHARTER, CONCLUDED FOR THE COMMON WEAL OF ALL, WITH THE HELP OF GOD, SHALL LAST FOR EVER.

DONE IN THE YEAR OF OUR LORD ONETHOUSAND TWO HUNDRED AND NINETYONE, IN THE BEGINNING OF THE MONTH OF AUGUST.

Similar alliances with neighbouring counties and towns, and some rounding-out conquests in the course of the following three centuries, gradually grew into a loosely-linked Swiss Confederacy of 13 small, self-governing states. While this was being achieved in the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries, the sacrifice of blood was heavy. The following centuries, however, with the exception of the Napoleonic interlude, brought peace with the outer world, due to an important change in the foreign policy of the small Swiss Confederacy. Confronted with growing and gradually consolidating national, autocratic states around her, a new basic principle of foreign policy was evolved, which was best suited to secure survival of the independence of Switzerland: the principle of non-interference in the almost continuous wars and quarrels of her neighbours.

The adoption of such a policy of neutrality has proved a surprising success. Switzerland's independence and the unique type of Swiss democracy have survived centuries of wars and revolutions on the European continent. Peace was to be a safe foundation upon which Switzerland was able to build up an amazing economic development and prosperity, notwithstanding the absence of any resources of raw materials and an outlet to the sea. The traditional spirit of "the good neighbour" of the Swiss people, their firm belief in human dignity, and their inspiration for all cultural and humanitarian endeavours, are no doubt also the fruits of long lasting peace.

When war and chaos broke out again in 1914 and 1939, the future of the Swiss people looked as uncertain and dark as it no doubt did to their ancestors in 1291. On both occasions - 1914 and 1939 - the proverbial neutrality was invoked at once by the Swiss Government. So the first world-war of 1914-18 passed Switzerland by, and regarding the second world-war, we know where we stand at the time of this anniversary. The chances are that Switzerland may again escape the ordeals of this war, but, as yet, nothing should be taken for granted.

As in the previous world-war, the policy of Switzerland's neutrality has been a target for criticism from both sides of the belligerents, one side voicing distrust and accusations on account of our democratic make-up as a nation, the other side arguing that neutrality of a democratic country in a "world struggle for the survival of democracy" was illogical. There is no doubt, however, that neither the Swiss people nor the Swiss Government will, at the end of this war, agree to depart from a principle which has proved to be so successful over many centuries in the conduct of Switzerland's affairs as their principle of absolute neutrality. Its basic strength lies in the backing it has from a nation willing and prepared to defend it to the utmost, and in the absence of any opportunism and ambiguity in its application in the changing game of international politics. Said M. Kobelt, Swiss Minister of Defence, in a public address in May 1944 at Lausanne:

"Only complete independence is a guarantee of Switzerland's future. We can, in the long run, only safeguard this complete independence of ours by remaining true to the principle of strict neutrality. Neutrality cannot be maintained under all circumstances, unless it is armed neutrality. This is why, after the war, we cannot disarm, even if a new world organisation should promise perpetual peace. Such an organisation would first have to prove that it is able to ensure peace. In order to subsist, a new order must be based on liberty, justice and respect for human dignity. These principles have always inspired the Swiss Confederation. A peaceful world cannot but wish the maintenance of a peaceful Switzerland, independent and neutral, pursuing her traditional ends and herself providing for

her protection. Our country would sacrifice her neutrality and independence on the day when, in order to place herself under the military protection of foreign powers or of an international organisation, she would renounce the defence of herself. In the field of international affairs, therefore, we shall continue to apply those proven principles, which hitherto have guided us in our policy, and Switzerland will continue to claim the recognition of her particular position as an independent, neutral state."

Dr. Walter Schmid,
Swiss Consul.

SWITZERLAND AND THE ECONOMIC WAR.

In every war, belligerent states strive not only to overthrow the enemy's military power, but also to undermine its economic resistance. They are thus induced to adopt methods of economic warfare affecting even traditionally neutral states, such as Switzerland.

Now Switzerland is a small country, situated in the very centre of the European continent. Its economic structure is such as not to allow it to be self-supplying and foreign trade is a vital necessity. Consequently, one can imagine what ever-increasing difficulties Switzerland had to face as soon as the present war broke out, especially as it was not only a question of ensuring the life of a nation, but also of crediting a centuries-old policy of absolute neutrality.

On August 30th 1939, the Federal Parliament adopted a resolution conferring upon the Government "power and mandate to take all measures necessary to maintain the security, the independence and the neutrality of Switzerland, to safeguard the credit and economic interests of the country, and to secure public food supplies". On the basis of this important decree, the Government has ordained a great number of legislative enactments, especially of an economic nature, in view of ensuring Switzerland's subsistence. The task was not an easy one. Not only did it become more and more difficult to obtain commodities not over abundant in other States which were regular suppliers of Switzerland, but transport also began to be hampered by an increasing number of obstacles and, above all, methods of economic warfare were applied.

It is easy to understand how delicate Switzerland's present situation is, if one considers how this country is surrounded on all sides by a single belligerent Power. Whether commodities shall enter or, on the contrary, leave Switzerland, therefore depends on the will of that Power. Consequently, it is only natural that, since the outbreak of war, Switzerland should have concluded several economic agreements with Germany, and all the more so, since that country was, even in peacetime, the most important buyer of Swiss industrial products and, besides, Switzerland's chief supplier. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that Switzerland's foreign trade exchanges are thereby limited only to the countries under German influence. The Swiss Confederation has always maintained very active trade relations with Great Britain and her Dominions, as well as with other markets overseas, especially the U.S.A. and the Central and South American States. The maintaining of these relations as far as possible was for Switzerland not only a question of material interest. Switzerland was very desirous of doing so also because neutrality is an essential principle of her foreign policy. To keep contact with every nation is the only aim which can be pursued by a truly neutral State, whose active neutrality is, moreover, extremely beneficial to other countries. But this is no easy object to achieve. On the one hand, England and her allies fear that the commodities consigned to Switzerland should, in some way or other, be used to facilitate the supply situation of the IIIrd Reich, while on the other, Germany will not admit that certain Swiss products should relieve enemy industry. Hence the blockading plan adopted by England and the counterblockade decreed by Germany, measures not directed especially against Switzerland, but which affect her also. Hence, the "navycerts" and "landcerts" without which no foreign commodity can pass the blockade; hence, also, the "declaration certificates" delivered by Germany which allow certain Swiss products to pass through the chain of the counter-blockade.