

Ambassador Corti's 1970 1st of August address

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AMBASSADOR CORTI'S 1970 1ST OF AUGUST ADDRESS

Every year, on the 1st of August, all the bells of all the steeples in our country ring, from Hallau to Novazzano, from les Verrieres to Martina. And on all the hills, even on the mountains, the fires blaze. An old custom to celebrate, to commemorate, the foundation of our country; a simple one, but for many of us a more appreciated one than great festivities with male chorus and folklore.

Six hundred and seventy-nine years have passed since we began to get independent, since the first, and still existing Charter was written and signed, "to the beginning of the month of August 1291" as can be read on it. Many States have been formed since, and more than one has vanished since those times. But we are still a State. The intervening years have not been all peaceful ones. It was necessary, more than once, to fight for the country; and often we have been at loggerheads ourselves. Certainly we have not always been "ein enig Volk von Brüdern"; and in spite of it we still exist. Why? It was not only luck, not only a gracious fate and not only the advantageous geographic situation that helped us. It was also the merit of the men whose motto, as one of our greatest poets said, was "Help yourself, then God will help you". In Switzerland, at all times, at the crucial moment the right men had the majority and their example was followed. Despite all the friction and all the quarrels they never lost during centuries the feeling that only unity and solidarity could protect them from a break-down. And when, at the end of the 18th century, the country really did break down, because the old building was dilapidated and rotten, the tradition and the feeling of unity were strong enough to re-erect the State some twenty years later.

That is one element that allowed us to continue to exist. Another was the policy that kept the country out of the disputes of the others and their wars, since the early 16th century, and led to the policy of neutrality, one of the principles of our State.

But that is not all. Switzerland is, by nature, one of the poorest countries of the world. It has no raw material except water. The density of the population is twice that of China, and seven times that of the United States of America. The small part of the country which can be used for agriculture is by no means sufficient to nourish the inhabitants. But nevertheless Switzerland is, as regards the standard of living and income per head, one of the richest countries of the world. Why? It is as a result of the merit of the diligence, the reliability and high-quality workmanship, not only of some single first-class men, but of the whole people, women and men, in Switzerland and abroad. It is the work of thousands and thousands of unnamed Swiss that makes

the quality of our industrial products and of our hotels, the main basis of our wealth. The way to it was long and not easy. In earlier times we could not send the unemployed sons of the farmers and artisans to the hotels or to the factories. We could not export goods, we had to export men, as mercenaries. Only the last century allowed the Swiss to create export and hotel industries. The process was not a pleasant one. Over the years, foreign markets could be won only by starvation wages, and by the ruthless exploitation of cheap workmanship of women and children. But on the other side, that era, which we so often speak ill of because of its materialism, was also the era of personal readiness to act, of the courage to stake all; qualities which our time, with its demand for security, is in want. We never could afford our noble intellectual idealism if the generation of our great-grandparents had not rolled up their sleeves and with more or less dirty hands had not only greedily made money, but also built the foundation of our modern economy. It is not superfluous to remember those facts from time to time.

On our National Day it is a custom to have a look back on the past year, and as well, to look to the future. Two things are, I think, remarkable in our country during the last twelve months. One, a very spectacular one, the other much less known. The first was the referendum of the 7th of June, 1970, when a majority of the Swiss voters rejected an amendment to our Constitution, which wanted to limit the number of foreign workers in Switzerland and which, if accepted, would have been disastrous for the country. The second was in 1969; the conclusion of a new agreement between the employers and the union of the machine industry. The main element of this agreement, the so-called "peace agreement", is the renouncing on one side of the lock-out and of the strike on the other. It has been in existence for the last 32 years and it is, also because it was followed by similar agreements in other industries, one of the most important elements of our stability and of our prosperity. Last year the head of one of the most important enterprises had his 80th birthday. He received a lot of congratulations, even one from a member of the Government. But the most gratifying words came from the chairman of the workers union of the enterprise, and they were published in a newspaper of the right wing. "We always could rely on your word; and the best thanks we can give you is that the enterprise can always rely on us". To be able to count on one another's word, is a sign of mutual confidence. What is more important? A fact such as that social peace — and the words cited seem to adequately express it — or some deficiency in our legislation in social relations? The most perfect law has little or no efficiency if the individuals have not sufficient loyalty and reason or commonsense to apply it.

The outlook. As all peoples, we want and need peace. Unfortunately, we cannot do much to maintain it, but we can help

where there is no peace; and we can try to help by our technical and financial assistance to the growth of healthy less fortunate peoples, and perhaps bring about an element of peace. The most important events for our country in the coming years will be the negotiations with the Common Market Countries, in which we are already today integrated so much. Nobody can say what will be the result of such negotiations, but probably there will be some consequences which need a change in our habitual thinking. Probably the Swiss have to learn to think a bit more European, similar as they had more than a hundred years ago to begin to think less Cantonal and more Swiss. It will not be so easy as many of us think. And here, it seems to me, is an activity for the Swiss abroad. He who lives abroad and has by that fact a wider view than the Swiss living between the Rhine and the Alps, he is able, even as an individual, to prepare the Swiss at home for this change of mind. The Swiss has always had an open ear to what he heard from outside and he learned it, even if he never would admit it. Why should he not listen to the word of a Swiss from abroad? The Swiss at home, as the Swiss abroad, belong to the same family, to those people with four native languages, who are linked to three big European cultures but who are strongly unwilling to be considered or named Germans, French or Italians, to those rather prosaic people, often hard looking men and women who frequently get tears in their eyes when they hear an old patriotic song, to those people enduring only with some difficulties one of their own rising above the average; to those peaceful people proud of their Army, people from St. Gallen or Luzern, Zürich or Geneva, Bern or Basel, Lugano or Neuchatel, and so on, with all their smaller or greater differences, to that open-minded people loving their narrow valleys and high mountains, to the kind of women and men who are too shy, too coy and too temperate to say it, but who on the birthday of our fatherland are thinking what Gottfried Keller once said:

“Lasse strahlen Deinen schönsten Stern
nieder auf mein irdisch Vaterland”.

GROUP TRAVEL

The Committee is presently organising a Group Travel for 1971, leaving approx. in May. It is hoped that the full itinerary can be published in the next “Helvetia”.

Please contact Mrs Messmer, 15 Fortification Road, Wellington, if you wish to get further particulars or if you wish to take part in the Group Travel.