

A word by the Ambassador : fellow-citizens and friends of Switzerland

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A Word by the Ambassador

Fellow-citizens and friends of Switzerland,

It is hard to believe that my first full year as your Ambassador will soon come to an end. So much has happened during this year that I have trouble putting everything in perspective. New Zealand is, first of all, one of the two most beautiful countries on earth. (You all know the other one...) I have visited all the clubs of the Swiss Society and realized how strong our communities in New Zealand are. With many of you I have had a chance of personal talks, in your homes, at your club houses or in my office. I am proud of what I have learned about your families' past and present. The letters I send to our senior citizens on their important anniversaries often get a response from which I learn a lot more. Visits to farms, factories, universities and research institutes where Swiss do excellent work and encounters with artists have completed the picture. And one afternoon in February, I have put to good use one of our old "Karabiner" rifles with the Taranaki shooters on their beautiful Kaponga range and obtained the "Feldschiessen" medal.

We can all be proud of what many generations of Swiss have achieved in this country before us. For this reason, the Embassy has republished a little booklet "The First Swiss in New Zealand" that originally came out in 1967. You find a copy enclosed with this "Helvetia". The little work's author, Irène Weber-de Candolle, was then the wife of the Chargé d'affaires at the Embassy in Wellington, later Ambassador to Congo and to Morocco. She lives now in Geneva, one hundred years of age, and has gladly accepted my proposal to republish her work. The only current Member of Parliament with a Swiss name, my good friend Barbara Kuriger, MP for Taranaki-King Country, chair of the New Zealand-Switzerland Parliamentary Friendship Group, has penned a foreword.

I have visited Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands and Fiji, presented the Federal Council's credentials to their heads of state, and met their political leaders as well as the small Swiss communities on these islands. My wife Laura and I were invited in June to join Governor General Sir Jerry Mateparae at the coronation of the King Tupou VI of Tonga and in July Prime Minister John Key at the festivities for 50 years of self-governance of the Cook Islands. A visit to Tuvalu will take place early next year, as well as one to



American Samoa where I serve not as Ambassador, but as Consul General since it is a U.S. territory.

When I came to New Zealand in September of last year, it had been all but decided to sell our beautiful, but a bit neglected Swiss Residence in Lower Hutt where Swiss Consuls, Consuls General, Chargé d'affaires and Ambassadors have lived since 1954. A lot of time during my first months has been spent to convince Bern that selling this jewel of our presence in the country would indeed be a foolish thing to do. The decision is taken now, we will keep the house and make it ready for another 60 years of official Swiss presence. We made good use of it during our first year and had the pleasure to host some of New Zealand's top leaders and brightest minds.

Many of you will have visited the place during the celebration "700 Years of Morgarten" on November 14. As I write these lines, we are in the final stages of preparation, look forward to seeing over five hundred Swiss and friends of Switzerland and keep our fingers crossed for decent weather.

In August/September, I went to Switzerland and attended the annual Ambassadors Conference, this time in Bern. There, our Honorary Consuls in Auckland, Peter Deutschle, in Samoa, Sylvie Salanoa, and in Fiji, Rolf Gfeller, have joined me. My time back home has also served to muster much support for our Morgarten celebration.

One of the highlights has been my participation in the 30 year festivities and championships of the North Island St. Bernard Association and of the New Zealand Bernese Mountain Dog Club in Rotorua at the end of October. Never before have I represented our country at a dog show and I have been very proud of our beautiful furry ambassadors, also because Laura and I own the only Great Swiss Mountain Dog on both islands. (Bari had nobody to compete with, but was awarded an honorary prize nevertheless.)

Our people and our Cantons have reelected the Federal parliament on October 18. Parliamentary elections in our country are of limited importance since the people will have the last word on the most important issues. Nevertheless, they have spoken clearly and the new Parliament and the Federal Council that will be elected on December 9 will reflect that. All in all, the elections have confirmed what for most Swiss has never been in doubt: our country remains attached to its traditional values: cooperation with all countries, but remaining fiercely independent, neutrality in the conflicts of the world, but coupled with humanitarian engagement, economic common sense, respect for the individual, controlling migration according to our laws, keeping government from growing too much.

The entire Embassy team, my wife Laura and myself wish you and your families with all our hearts a joyful Christmas, a beautiful summer and many good things in the year to come.

David Vogelsanger