

Ambassador's Christmas message

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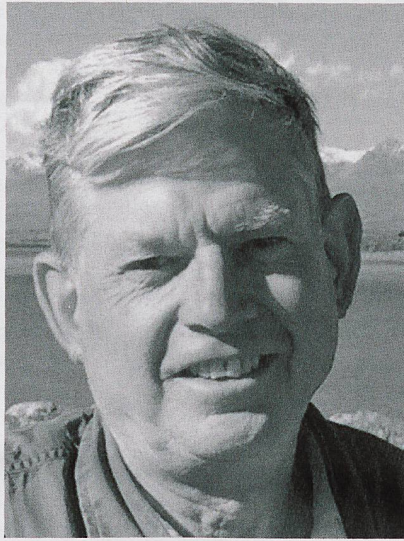
My fellow citizens, dear friends of Switzerland,

I can hardly believe that this is already my fifth Christmas and summer in New Zealand. It will also be the last as 2019 is for me the year to move on. When I am travelling throughout this beautiful country, meeting your communities, visiting men and women in their nineties who have shaped these communities, see young families with children who don't speak our languages anymore, but are still proud to be Swiss, meet with the 18 year olds and talk with them about what it means to be a full citizens with rights and duties, it seems to me that I have just arrived and have still a lot to learn and to discover.

When I tell New Zealand politicians and visitors from Switzerland that this country, the farthest from our borders, counts the highest number of Swiss citizens per capita worldwide, they hardly believe me, but it is so. There has always been a very special attraction and link between our two countries, ever since John Webber sailed with Captain Cook and since the first Swiss settlers arrived in Taranaki a century later. This link continues to exist.

2018 has been a very active year, both for the Swiss communities and for the Embassy in Wellington. In April, the most important Swiss parliamentary delegation ever come to New Zealand met with a number of members of the New Zealand House of Representatives, among them Speaker Trevor Mallard, Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters and Opposition Chief Whip Barbara Kuriger, all old friends of the Embassy, and with leaders of the Swiss community. Be assured that the issue of Superannuation deductions figured very high in these talks.

In August, the uniform of our Army appeared for the first time on the streets of Wellington, Auckland and New Plymouth. The young soldiers of the Swiss Army Band did an outstanding job performing eleven times



for the New Zealand public and at Swiss national day celebrations in Auckland, Taranaki and Wellington. I have been present at all these events. Three stand out. In a moving ceremony, accompanied by both our Army Band and the New Zealand Air Force Band with traditional tunes, Minister of Defense Ron Mark and I laid wreaths at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Wellington. It was for me a welcome occasion to remember that young New Zealanders risked and often gave their lives in the wars of the last century also for Switzerland's freedom from tyranny in the wars of the last century. Throughout the year, I have had the honour to meet with a number of these outstanding gentlemen, some of them over a hundred years old. One even invited me to his 100th birthday party and I am about to meet the last Kiwi Spitfire pilot of the Battle of Britain as well as one of the last survivors of the Maori Battalion. Unforgettable and humbling moments. These men are called "the greatest generation" for good reason.

Our band performed on 1 August in front of Parliament, received by Speaker Mallard and MPs of different parties. It was awesome to hear our traditional Swiss tunes with the flags of both countries flying in the wind. On the evening of our national day, 400 people gathered for a traditional 1st of August celebration, again attended by many of New Zealand's

leaders, in a heated tent in our garden, highlighted by the music of our young soldiers.

This celebration gave me the opportunity to thank and to honour two men who have profoundly marked our Swiss community in New Zealand. Switzerland knows no official honours and decorations, but if she did, I certainly would have put up those two for one.

I have closely worked with two dozen honorary consuls of our country. Peter Deutsche, who will end in a few weeks twenty-five years of service as Consul of Switzerland in Auckland, stands out. Both the Swiss community and the Ambassador of Switzerland cannot thank him enough. No task has ever been too difficult or too burdensome for him. He has been tirelessly working for our community, helping fellow citizens in distress and promoting the interests of our country. Peter is a proud Appenzeller from Innerrhoden. We have honoured him with the moving "Landsgemeindelied" played by the Army Band and with a sabre, the symbol of the free citizen in his home canton.

Roland Schütz has been the president of the Swiss Club of Wellington for many years, and it may well be that this club would not exist anymore without him. In his fatherly way, he has held the Swiss community together, and we are grateful to him. Roland is a proud Berner, and nothing else than the "Berner Marsch" performed by the band and the gift of a very large Bern flag would do to express our gratitude.

On behalf of the entire and renewed Embassy team, I wish you and your families a beautiful, peaceful Christmas, the enjoyment of a gorgeous New Zealand summer and many good things in the coming year, some of which I still look forward to sharing with you.

Your Ambassador,

David Vogelsanger