

August 1st, the Swiss National Day

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AUGUST 1st, THE SWISS NATIONAL DAY

by MAURICE ZERMATTEN

Every year on the first of August the Swiss celebrate their National Day. It's not a full holiday. Rejoicings are limited to the evening hours only. Then all the bells of all the churches start ringing merrily. Cortèges with torches and illumination lamps are arranged in towns and villages, patriotic speeches are made to the crowds which gather in the public places and around the bonfires which after nightfall greet each other from all the hills and mountain tops. So do fireworks and rockets in all directions. Thousands give expression to their heartfelt joy in merry songs. With such rejoicings they are celebrating the birthday of their country. A very small country placed in the heart of the Continent of Europe, enclosed by Lakes Geneva and Constance, the mighty mountain ranges of the Jura and the Alps, from which tumbling rivers flow down to the plains of Germany, France, Italy, and Austria. The home of the Swiss — a cottage in size, if compared with the more spacious dwellings of most other nations — is well protected. On all sides there are fortifications raised by Nature herself "to serve it in the office of a wall". Between the mountains there are open valleys and narrow gorges, high table lands like sunny balconies, and innumerable lakes. Like the gutters of a roof water currents flow in four different directions, the Rhine to the North Sea, the Rhone to the Mediterranean, the Ticino and the Po to the Adriatic, the Inn and the Danube to the Black Sea.

The house is traversed by corridors, the valleys and the Alpine passes through which for centuries far distant nations — Sweden in the North and Ireland in the West with Italy in the South — by way of the St. Gotthard, the Simplon, and the Great St. Bernhard have established friendly relations with one another.

Switzerland, the friendly cottage, lies at the cross-roads of Europe. Who has built it there and why? That's what I am going to tell you now, for it's in honour of the builders of the Confederation that we celebrate the 1st of August as our National Day.

Up to the thirteenth century the territories which now belong to Switzerland were subject to various princes. The mightiest of these were the Habsburgs, first dukes of Austria, then emperors of the Holy German Empire. To them the possession of the St. Gotthard Pass, the shortest route from Germany to Italy, was of the very greatest importance. But there they ran up against the freedom loving inhabitants of the three little valleys of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwald. These hardy mountaineers threw off the yoke of the foreign lords who did not respect and protect their ancient rights and liberties. When the tyrants were driven out the peasants declared their independence and in the name of God they solemnly swore to stand by each other for ever in loyalty and close alliance, in peace and war, in life and death. This covenant, made on or about August 1st 1291, and sealed by oath,

is a sacred pledge binding even to-day all the Swiss, all the "Eidgenossen" or Companions of the Oath as they first called themselves.

From these small beginnings in 1291 the Swiss League grew until it reached its present geographical limits in 1815. The three original Cantons were gradually joined by nineteen younger ones, some rural districts, some free cities and towns. The loose alliance of small states in 1848 became a modern state, the closely united Swiss Confederation, with a federal constitution and government, federal laws, political, legal and social institutions, and a federal Army. Though we are proud of what we have now, a state which ranks among the most modern and best governed, on our National Day we still honour the memory of that handful of men from the mountains, who first resolved to be free, and, if need be, to die for their liberty. This spirit of freedom is our pride. It was won and defended in many glorious fights against the princes who naturally wanted to win back the territories they had lost. They attacked the mountaineers with mighty armies of knights and men of arms. It reads like a miracle how the Swiss again and again got the better of their powerful enemies. But it is really not a miracle. Living in constant danger, the mountaineers were always prepared for war. They still are. Independence is an expensive luxury. And the Swiss have always been ready to pay the price for it by taking the risks of their policy. The infantry of "the Confederates of Upper Germany" as they were called in the 14th and 15th century was then the best in the world. And is it not a paradox that even now the most pacific country of Europe is, proportionally speaking, probably the one that spends most on its army?

Traditions of freedom, of honour, and the spirit of independence are still the foundations of the Swiss Confederation. They were written with blood in the red of our flag with the white cross which on this day flutters from public buildings and monuments. It reminds us of six centuries of heroic struggle.

But it reminds us of another history, too, the story of a land devoted to the service of every humanitarian effort. Whoever sees the White Cross of Switzerland must think of the Red Cross, the symbol of Charity and Humanity.

The history of Switzerland deserves to be studied more closely also by our foreign friends. It's an inspiring story in many respects, leading up to a harmonious conclusion and the celebration of the First of August in the Swiss Cottage, where people live happily together though they speak four different languages, some with many dialects, where there is peace and tolerance between Catholics and Protestants, town dwellers and mountaineers, rich men and poor, captains of industry and workers, all united in mutual trust and goodwill and that love of liberty which fills every heart and every page of their country's history.