

The day Switzerland was born

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Messaggio del Presidente della Confederazione agli Svizzeri all'estero in occasione del 1° agosto 1963

Cari compatrioti,

Il primo agosto, in quest'anno particolarmente, ci dà occasione di richiamare alla memoria i principi e le basi dello stato svizzero e di considerarne la posizione nel mondo, che spesso sembra esser fuor del tempo. Ancor più che nel passato dobbiamo sforzarci di difendere il patrimonio che i nostri padri ci hanno tramandato e nel contempo di andare di pari passo con i mutamenti dell'epoca moderna. Il nostro compito più importante oggi è di conservare e trasmettere alle generazioni future tutto ciò che costituisce la nostra particolarità e che in primo luogo fa della Svizzera la nostra patria. Questo compito non dovrà comunque impedire di sentirci solidari con il mondo intorno a noi e di cooperare con esso.

La Svizzera è un piccolo paese, e può giustificare e affermare la sua esistenza solamente con il mantenimento e con la difesa irremovibili dei principi del diritto e della

libertà. La nostra patria deve dunque contare non solamente sugli Svizzeri che stanno nel paese, ma anche e in special modo su quelli che sono all'estero. Voi, cari compatrioti all'estero, siete chiamati a rappresentare la Svizzera ed i suoi ideali dove vivete, con la vostra attitudine e con il vostro lavoro. Numerose sono le difficoltà nelle quali vi imbattete ogni giorno. Superandole coraggiosamente e con energia, voi date la prova di attaccamento ai principi elveticici. La patria è fiera di voi e vi ringrazia della vostra fedeltà.

In questo giorno commemorativo vi trasmetto, nel nome del Consiglio Federale e di tutto il popolo svizzero il saluto della patria lontana, augurando felicità e prosperità a voi e alle vostre famiglie.

Il Presidente della Confederazione:
WILLY SPÜHLER.

THE DAY SWITZERLAND WAS BORN

By LEE EUGSTER

In 1291, King Albert I of Austria refused to recognise the letters of freedom granted to Uri and Schwyz. This suppression of their rights caused great dissatisfaction amongst the people of the Waldstätte, who finally sent delegates to the isolated meadow called Rütli, between the steep, wooded slopes of the mountains falling down to the shores of Lake Uri.

In this secret place, the men of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwald deliberated how to get rid of the hated Austrians, their oppressors, and swore an "everlasting alliance" to assist one another in all circumstances and to tolerate no foreign lords in their valleys and accept no laws made by judges who were not men of their peoples.

The Pact, written in Latin, beginning with the words: "In the name of the Lord, amen", was signed on 1st August 1291. Switzerland was born. The original is still kept in the Federal Record Office in the town of Schwyz.

Since paths were scarce in this mountainous region and it was difficult to communicate between the valleys, its inhabitants were in the habit of lighting bonfires on top of the mountains to signal danger, call for help or indicate the favourable moment to strike at an unwary enemy.

When commemorating the birth of our country, on 1st August, we light bonfires in every town, village and hamlet to honour the courage of our forefathers.

Foreign visitors often wonder why we Swiss have not made it an official holiday but start celebrating the event of our freedom only after nightfall. Well, one reason is that we want to keep up the tradition of gathering around the bonfires and celebrate in a quiet and dignified fashion. Since the end of the last World War, most shops and offices of the big cities close in the afternoon. What happens? In this age of motors, the city folk profit by this free afternoon and give little thought to the real meaning of the day.

When all over the country every single churchbell starts swinging its melodious message of joy and thanksgiving at 8 p.m., these restless people are either too far from home or too tired or excited to attend the quiet ceremonies.

During my childhood we were at grandmother's farm at this time of the year. All day we worked hard to gather the golden sheaves of ripe wheat. But, to be ready for the

celebration, work stopped early that day and, when the cows were milked and tended, everybody dressed in his best garb, the women in the Bernese costumes. After a festive supper, all the folk of the farms walked down to where an obelisk standing on a knoll above the village of Neuenegg and the valley of Singine commemorates the victorious battle which a handful of soldiers from the Simmental waged against the armies of Napoleon in 1798. Many of them are buried in a common grave in a nearby grove of tall trees. But on the base of the obelisk one can read the sad words: "They won the battle, but lost their fatherland". This alludes to the fact that whilst they were beating the enemy, the aristocratic city of Berne surrendered.

On this sacred spot the school-children built the bonfire with dead wood they had gathered and, when the churchbells stopped ringing, the Minister said a prayer, the Mayor gave a patriotic speech, the village band played and we all sang whilst the flames of the bonfire leapt high into the air. Across the valley of the Singine we saw the fires of the villages of Canton Fribourg and those which the herdsmen on the pastures on top of the Alps of Fribourg had lit to celebrate in communion with those who remained below. It was a solemn and impressive celebration. Afterwards, the younger generation went to the village to dance and the old folk took small children home to bed.

Years later, when, accidentally, we remained in town during the summer vacation, we went on the first of August to the Minster place where the ceremony was to be held. But what a disappointment! We, who were used to the quiet celebration in the country, were disturbed by the milling, noisy crowd around the bonfire which we could hardly see. We could not hear the speeches and there was not much singing.

I could never get used to celebrating 1st August amongst city crowds and therefore I go to some nearby village or, in Geneva, take the boat which cruises along the shores to the Petit Lac.

In almost every village they light their fires near the boat-landing, and from the boat one can see also all the fires on the surrounding mountains.

(From the "Weekly Tribune", Geneva.)
(By courtesy, Swiss National Tourist Office.)