

News from the colony

Objekttyp: **Group**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1968)**

Heft 1553

PDF erstellt am: **19.05.2024**

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NEWS FROM THE COLONY



SWISS NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION

Wimbledon Town Hall, London

"Year after year the First of August speeches are very much alike, which is in the nature of things. The speaker, on the other hand, may be different, and no Swiss community has seen as many changes as yours. In 1966, the Ambassador was Monsieur Beat de Fischer; in 1967, Mr. Olivier Long; and in 1968, myself. But such frequent changes are not in our tradition. They were dictated by circumstances very much to the credit of my predecessor, who was asked to become head of a large international organisation in Geneva. As for me, I have reason to think that you will see me on this platform again, and that I shall thus become a symbol of one of the qualities for which Switzerland is famous: stability.

"Two factors here bear eloquent witness to that stability. One is the President of the Organising Committee, the devoted and highly esteemed Mr. Friedrich Streit, to whom I should like to pay tribute. The other is the scene of our celebrations. In the course of ten years or more, Wimbledon Town Hall has become the established setting for our gatherings, thanks to the generous understanding of our needs shown by the London Borough of Merton. His Worship the Mayor, Alderman N. S. Clarke, J.P., and the Mayoress, as well as the Deputy Mayor, Councillor A. Leivers, J.P., and Mrs. Leivers are honouring us with their presence in the dual rôle of host and guest. Their fidelity symbolises the immemorial links between the United Kingdom and Switzerland. We thank them all.

"We have followed our usual custom of reading the Pact of 1291, and this has taken us back to the origins of our country. On a foundation of what we would today call internal autonomy — political and judicial — combined with mutual assistance, a unique structure has been built in the course of the centuries. It is both fragile and solid at the same time, like those simple partitioned houses which are most likely to withstand earthquakes. Just now, shock waves are spreading round the whole world and affecting all economic and social systems. The students and the workers are shaking those political structures which we thought were strongest. They are demanding a part in a society which is being dehumanised and depersonalised by scientific and technical progress. Debate and participation are the two keywords. The individual, the group, the region, the nation are asserting a right to exist which many people thought was incompatible with the modern tendency to concentrate, to form large units. They used to reject federalism, direct democracy, and active neutrality as being out of date, but today these typically Swiss institutions are enjoying a come-back. The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that Switzerland has good reason to cling to the features which make up her personality.

"So much for solidity. But we mustn't forget that this composite structure is also fragile and might be endangered by too abrupt changes. Switzerland is conservative by necessity. She is condemned to evolve slowly, and there has been no cataclysm for 120 years to speed up developments. This accounts for our realism with regard to the building of Europe, which we desire with all our hearts but not at all costs. And it explains why we wonder whether we ought to join the United Nations Organisation. Its ideals of peace are the same as ours. It is bent on shaping a new world order, a process in which we should like to participate. We collaborate with it in Geneva and in all its non-political organs. Well, then, why do we hesitate? Because if we became an ordinary unconditional member we should be called upon to abandon what makes up our individuality. And

we feel that this individuality is essential to our survival and is also more useful to the concert of nations than simply lining up with other people.

"We mustn't make a supreme virtue out of Switzerland's pragmatic caution, and we must realise our imperfections. In this Human Rights Year we have had a serious lesson in humility. We have learnt that we cannot adhere unreservedly to the Council of Europe's Convention on Human Rights because Swiss women do not have the vote, because the Swiss Constitution contains discriminatory clauses in the religious sphere, and because in some Cantons persons can be detained without trial. Besides, should we not ask ourselves whether our attitude to the foreign workers, whom we brought in in their hundreds of thousands because we needed them, is above reproach? But any examination of conscience takes time, a lot of time! Feminine suffrage is gaining ground at the communal and cantonal level; a complete revision of the Constitution is being studied; European integration and possible ways of joining the UN are among our chief preoccupations; the assimilation of the foreigners can and must be encouraged.

"The Federal Council is increasingly anxious about the responsibilities of a government which has too often been compared to a board of directors. So for the first time it has reported to the Federal Assembly on the broad outlines of its future policy. You will know instinctively what these broad outlines are, for the principles are what they have always been: the independence of the nation, the rights and freedoms of the citizens, the general prosperity. But how are they to be put into practice? A few chapter headings will give you an idea of the problems to be solved: how to distribute the land; how to fight against water and air pollution and against noise; how to create an overall system for power, transport and foreign labour; how to rethink agricultural policy; how to draw up a scientific policy; how to improve social welfare; how to perfect national defence.

"The First of August speech is an evocation of the past, an analysis of the present and a message for the future. If I finish on an optimistic note with regard to the future, I am inspired by the presence of so many young people this evening. Some are residents whose training, views and aspirations provide a stimulus for our country. Others are visitors, anxious to broaden their outlook instead of sitting comfortably in the sheltered Swiss home. If some think that there is no place in our society for their need to devote themselves to a noble cause, they can be reassured. If they really want to, and are prepared for all the sacrifices, discomfort and danger involved, they can find wide scope in the International Red Cross work in Biafra and elsewhere, or in technical co-operation for the developing countries. And failing a Swiss contingent of UN blue berets — a scheme that has run into serious obstacles — there is the prospect of setting up an emergency corps to help in times of natural disaster.

"Our National Day is a mixture of the serious and the gay. And now let's make way for the singing and the dancing."

Thus spoke the Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to the Court of St. James's, Monsieur René Keller. If I put his speech at the beginning and *in extenso*, thus breaking with my usual custom of summarising addresses, it is because I feel that his words are the best introduction of himself to the Swiss community in this country, for whilst the Town Hall at Wimbledon was packed, the bulk of the audience was made up by young people, here today and, more often than not, gone tomorrow. A relatively small number of residents was present, and certainly hardly any of the members of large and small communities outside London, spread all over Great Britain. Monsieur Keller was accompanied by his wife and a number of his collaborators at the Embassy.

The actual celebration started with organ music, the Bach Fantasia in G Major, played by a great friend of the Swiss, Lennard Rabes, A.R.C.M., the Swedish pianist. His participation was somehow also symbolic, for it signified Switzerland's friendship with other nations. This was stressed, too, by the Mayor's impromptu address in which he said we should not lose our identity as a nation. He also counselled us to work hard, to play hard and to

keep our religious beliefs. Just that had been done that evening; the members of the Committee had put a great deal of onerous work into making the evening a success; there is no need to dwell on play — the dance went on until well past midnight to the music of Harry Vernon's Band, and enjoyment never flagged.

The traditional film of beautiful Swiss scenery was missing this time, and it was a welcome change to have the Federal Gymnastic Festival in Berne in 1967, preceded by an excellent documentary on the activities of the Swiss Federal Gymnastic Society, of beneficial effect on a generation whose sedentary occupations and car-and other-vehicle-riding habits have turned it into "Sitzendes Volk — Fahrenendes Volk". A well-spoken English summary might have been of great help to our non-German-speaking countrymen and friends, for without knowing the difference in *Einzelturnen* and *Sektionsturnen*, it must have looked like tedious repetition. For those whose younger days were devoted to this Swiss national sport and pastime, it was a delight, and there was at least one man who was overcome with joy — Mr. Boog, a former *Oberturner* of the London Swiss Gymnastic Society, who had come up specially from Eastbourne with his wife. The film was perhaps a little too long, and the music often too noisy if not discordant, but it also had some lovely Swiss scenery which compensated those to whom the four Fs meant nothing: *Frisch*, *Fromm*, *Fröhlich*, *Frei*, the motto of the Swiss gymnast, *Fromm* often replaced by *Frott*.

It is to the credit of the two yodelling sisters Trudi and Josi Giess from Eiken (Canton Aargau) and their accordionist Kurt Kim, that one could still enjoy their brisk yodelling, having heard them not only at the last two National Day Celebrations, but also on several other occasions. Their pleasant personalities and beautiful costumes added to their expert performance.

The Swiss watch is one of the symbols of Helvetic stability and perfection. The Youth Group of the German-speaking community of the Swiss Church produced a sketch, parading beautiful six-foot paper watches and clocks with a background of suitable songs. What is a timepiece if it only tells us the hour, but does not remind us of what to do with it? Perhaps the author *deliberately* left it to the onlooker to put his own construction on it. The modest voices evidenced again the temporary character of the younger Swiss *de passage* — it was hardly believable that this should be the same choir that had been so strong and full of excellent voices only a few weeks previously.

That is where the Unione Ticinese's Corale scored, for their membership seems to be pretty constant, thanks to the fact that they are made up of a very substantial number of resident Swiss of the second generation, even the third, for if my eyes did not deceive me, I saw not only the son, but also the grandson and granddaughter of Mrs. Berti, a former President of the women's section of the Unione Ticinesi. She sat near me, and her eyes lit up when the pretty folksongs of her homeland were rendered by the men and women in their picturesque costumes. Mr. L. Bruni and his accordion secured strict tempo, and the thunderous applause by the audience must have been ample proof to the singers that their efforts were appreciated.

We are told that when the Swiss goes abroad, he becomes less of a Zürcher, Urner or Vaudois, but more and more of a Swiss. The boundaries of his Canton become smaller, and he looks more and more on Switzerland as a whole. That he does not lose his *Kantönlicheist*, was clearly shown earlier in the programme when the can-

tonal flags were carried on the stage, singly, and in the order of entry into the Confederation. The Master of Ceremonies, Mr. P. Jacomelli, gave the commentary. Lively applause greeted each flag, and citizens of the respective Canton stood up to pay homage to their particular banner. Quite a distinction to belong to a small Canton — the masses obviously came from Zurich and Berne!

The flag bearers and the choirs remained on the stage for the singing of the National Anthem, and that ended the first part of the evening. It was, on the whole, a happy and enjoyable event, marred only by the ever-apparent lack of discipline of many of the younger members of the audience, who have not yet learned that courtesy demands quiet behaviour even during uninteresting items.

But we have only dealt with *Frisch* and *Fröhlich*, with the "work" and "play" advice by the Mayor. *Frei* — yes, we did hear the reading of the Swiss Pact (this year in French by the Rev. Father P. Bossard). We heard how our forefathers united and fought for freedom *in the name of God*.

And so we come to the last of the four Fs, the third of the Mayor's exhortations. The word *Fromm* causes slight embarrassment, sometimes even to believers. Many cannot take His Worship's advice to keep their religious beliefs, for they have never had any or have discarded them somewhere on the way. Yet if we gather for the Swiss National Day Celebration, it cannot be just to play and dance and wave a patriotic flag. Nobody could have expressed this better than the Rev. M. Dietler when, preceded by the Bach Toccata in D Minor on the organ, he said the Prayer.

Perhaps Prayer is the wrong word, at least if we think of the conventional form. He identified himself with the audience and expressed surprise that God and the Swiss should meet at such a gathering. He referred to the tradition which asked for a prayer as much as for flags and national costumes. Did this not sound almost like blasphemy? But God did not prevent us from taking any serious prayer seriously and to invoke Him in earnest.

We thank You that we are not floating in a vacuum, but have roots; that You have given us as our home a very particular country and that we know where we belong; that we have families in Switzerland and that we may live in Britain as Swiss. We pray that we shan't get immersed in the small Swiss problems, but that we open our hearts and minds to the world. We pray for the Swiss in this country, for we are — or at least should be — more open; grant us this extra enlightenment that we may carry it back to our homeland. Such enlightenment and awareness is what we pray for our country and her national tasks; that Switzerland and every one of us may become aware of our international obligations, that we face the burning focal points in the world where there is hunger and violent death. If You call us to action in such a spot, let us follow the call and not cast it aside.

The Rev. Dietler did not use these exact words; he had no written Prayer, but spoke from the moment, and that is what gave his words such an impact, one so strong that even those who did not understand German were aware of something more than just an item on the programme. We were called to think and to reflect, not just to thank for a lovely, peaceful homeland, but to consider earnestly what that implies. That is what makes sense of a Prayer spoken at a Swiss National Day Celebration, and that is what made this year's Celebration at Wimbledon rather special.

MM