

National day observed

Autor(en): **[s.n.]**

Objektyp: **Article**

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

Band (Jahr): **- (1978)**

Heft 1745

PDF erstellt am: **03.05.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689317>

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NATIONAL DAY OBSERVED

Once again our National Day was celebrated in due form in the Swiss Church in London's Endell Street. And, encouragingly, the event witnessed one of the best turn-outs in recent years.

The proceedings began with a welcome by Virgil Berthi, President of the First of August Committee which works so hard each year to organise a moving and at the same time enjoyable event.

Next, Father Paul Bossard — our catholic chaplain — read the Eternal Pact as has become customary. This was followed by prayers in French conducted by the Reverend Frank Orna-Ornstein, one of our protestant *padrès*.

Since his arrival amongst us only a few short years, ago, our Ambassador Dr. Ernesto Thalmann has already achieved widespread recognition of not only the excellence of his speeches but also for their thought-provoking and sometimes controversial nature. This year's celebration was no exception — indeed so much to the point was Mr. Thalmann's speech that it is reproduced here without comment or amendment.

"Dear Compatriots,

It is only natural that, on the birthday of our nation, we should be inclined — especially when looking back from abroad — to see our country surrounded by a kind of halo and to view it with some nostalgia. And, indeed, we have many reasons to be proud of our homeland and to think of it with affection.

In spite of many handicaps, such as the lack of natural resources (except water and beauty) or the absence of direct access to the sea, it has become one of the most prosperous nations in the world. And, despite our ethnic diversity and the fact that only a few parts of our borders are formed by natural boundaries, we have developed a strong national unity which has assured us internal peace and the respect of the outside world. Of course, all this was not achieved in one or two generations. It took centuries and it didn't happen without external and internal struggles.

But the fact remains that Switzerland is, beyond all doubt, a very privileged country, and on this First of August 1978 we should all be grateful for that. And yet — every time I go back to Switzerland I have the feeling that very many people are not as happy as you would expect them to be. On quite a lot of faces you can even see a certain anxiety. Why is this?

Of course, one should not forget that exuberance is not a typical Swiss characteristic — with the exception, perhaps, of our dear Ticinesi — and that we have rather a tendency to complain before we are really hurt. But I think that today there are some real reasons for concern which worry our people. And I

feel that a First of August celebration is also an appropriate occasion for reflection.

So I should like to say a few words about these worries. In doing so I certainly do not want to dampen the joy of the day, but I believe that it is always better to see things as they are rather than just to look at colourful and glamorous postcards.

What, then, is the nature of these worries? As I see it, they are basically: economic, political, environmental and social.

You may have some doubts when I mention the economy as one of the sources of concern. Didn't our economy brilliantly withstand the first blows of the world-wide recession and even recover from them very rapidly in the most vital sectors? Haven't we got the strongest currency in the world, probably the lowest rate of inflation and practically no unemployment? This is all true.

It has been possible because of the flexibility of our economy, the self-restraint of our workers and employers which has given us social peace, the imagination and initiative of our managements and, last but not least, careful manoeuvring by our Parliament and our authorities.

So what have the Swiss got to worry about? I believe that more and more people in Switzerland are beginning to realize how vulnerable we are and how much our economy depends on the world economy which, in spite of summit meetings, will never bring us back the roaring Sixties and early Seventies. This explains that feeling of uncertainty the Swiss have about their future and the future of their children.

The same is true in the political field. In general the Swiss are very well informed about what is happening on the international scene. They are aware of the changes which have taken place during the last few years in the so-called balance of power and of the potentially explosive conflicts in many parts of the world, and they are shocked and frightened by the provocative violations of human rights and the misery of so many human beings.

Even in domestic politics it looks as if a certain polarisation is taking place. The language used among the political parties has become more blunt and our famous system of "concordance democracy" has been somewhat shaken.

Finally, a few words concerning environmental and social problems. Many Swiss are suffering from a kind of hangover. There is a growing awareness of the damage the booming economy and the consumer mentality have inflicted on us. Motorways have destroyed some of our most beautiful landscapes. We have

carelessly polluted our rivers and lakes. There is a widespread fear that nuclear power plants, which are vital to our economy, might get out of control. And, most important of all perhaps, there is the slow but steady erosion of the institution of the family as the basis of our society.

It is a rather poor consolation that other countries comparable to our own have to deal with the same problems, or that the countries denouncing the decadence and decline of the Western world are in an even worse position.

On the other hand, it would be wrong to be disgruntled. Defeatism is not a Swiss word. History has shown us that the pendulum often swings back. Some very encouraging changes can already be discerned in the attitude of our young people, who are fed up with the blessings of our consumer-society and who are again discovering the real values of life such as nature and genuine human relationships.

And then, I think, we can all *do* something to improve our prospects, at least in those fields in which we are not actively dependent on developments in the rest of the world. The Swiss abroad are not excluded from this positive action. On the contrary, by remaining faithful to our traditions and ideals we can help to preserve our country's image and maintain our reputation as reliable trading partners and producers of quality industrial goods. I know very well that the Swiss colony in the United Kingdom will never fail in its endeavours and its determination to do this in the future as it has done in the past.

And now I should like to thank you on behalf of the Federal Council for all you are doing for Switzerland as well as for our great host country. At the same time it gives me much pleasure to convey to you their warm greetings and best wishes."

And then on to a superb finale. The audience was treated to — and treated is the right word — to beautifully played folk music by a Swiss folklore group from St. Moritz. What a stirring sound emerged as the first notes from a huge Alpenhorn echoed and re-echoed round this church in an ordinary London street. Passers-by probably wondered what on earth was going on but those inside needed no telling.

The treat was perhaps all the more special when it is pointed out that the group had arrived in London only a few hours earlier, having been heavily delayed by the French air traffic controllers' dispute. So we thank them all the more sincerely for dashing hotfoot from their hotel to entertain us so well.

We also thank the Committee for taking so much trouble on our behalf.