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Autor: Ludwig, Mario
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Switzerland – a small Commonwealth in a Large World

I should like to formulate a few ideas regarding the position of Switzerland in the international concept, a Switzerland I might be tempted to call a small society in a big world.

At the same time, I want to demonstrate that Switzerland is not without some greatness in spite of her smallness in area. Indeed, just because Switzerland is small she has to strive after such greatness in order to survive in this world. That is why, as Charles-Ferdinand Ramuz expressed it, we have always had a real need of greatness.

I am deliberately not speaking of Switzerland as a community. The Swiss have only one thing in common: their diversity. Community implies that forces exist which unify, as for instance origins, language, faith or voluntary and total adaptation to the existing order or way of life. For Switzerland, however, centrifugal power is typical. Community always implies distribution. In Switzerland, though, everyone jealously guards his possessions, his inheritance, in short everything which he has collected in the course of his life. It follows that it is not the common characteristics which unite the Swiss, but the differences. Switzerland owes her nationhood to a conscious act of willpower. The political and social structure of our society rests on a concept of contract. It is not the result of a creation on a historic basis, but rather resembles the idea of a «contrat social» as Jean Jacques Rousseau formulated it two centuries ago.

Naturally, these contractual origins of our society have their effect



Mario Ludwig

(born 1923) studied law at the universities of Geneva, Berne and Yale (USA). He started his professional career with the Esso Standard Oil Company in the USA and later in Switzerland, in the fields of marketing, public relations and personnel. From 1953 until 1970 he was Director of the International Federation of Cotton and Allied Textile Industries, with headquarters in England and subsequently in Switzerland. After a short association with the Dr. Rudolf Farner Agencies (advertising and public relations) in Zurich as Executive Vice-President, he was in 1971 appointed Director of the Swiss Office for the Development of Trade, a semi-governmental institution responsible for the promotion of Switzerland's foreign trade relations. Mr. Ludwig is a member of numerous national and international committees involved with world trade problems. He is also active in Swiss politics and the author of various books on economic policy and cultural history.

on the political structure as it was later realized in Switzerland, that is to say on the Confederate State. Such a State is nothing but a contractual agreement at political level: On the one side one maintains one's rights, on the other one assumes duties and responsibilities. The Swiss Confederation is no myth, but a contract which was concluded for

logical and practical reasons by sovereign States. This rational origin of the Swiss Confederation has had far-reaching consequences on the political style of our authorities, the life-style of the people and the intellectual climate prevailing in our country. In this world of ours, there are only few peoples that are distinguished by such diversity as our own country. In a very limited area organizations exist every one of which declares that it alone is competent in its particular field. Just think of the many associations in industry, trade and administration, of which there are over 1300 in Switzerland. The anecdote according to which a society or club is formed the moment three Swiss meet, does indeed contain a grain of truth.

All these groupings demand the right to take part in the formulation of public opinion, to be consulted and to be allowed to express their opinion officially. We have in all seriousness to ask ourselves whether the diversity of our society has not induced us to take consultative promulgation rather too far. We run the risk of losing our free will, because too



Chalandamarz, an old springtime custom in the Grisons.

large a number of well-meaning people want to show us the right path. We hesitate and become indecisive, because too many want to influence us. Just because there is too much advice we are at times unable even to act. This state of affairs occasionally has a paralysing effect on political as well as on occupational questions. Even if the system of cons-

ultative promulgation is the basis of democracy, it must nevertheless not be carried to the extreme; otherwise our society will lose its ability to function.

Another characteristic of our country and its people is the supremacy of mediocrity. The diversity and heterogeneity of our society demand of us – not always out of conviction – to find

Old dances are still perpetuated in Switzerland



The Julian New Year's Eve in Urnäsch (photos STO)





From left to right: Weisshorn, Zinalrothorn, Obergabelhorn, Matterhorn and Dent Blanche (Photo STO)

solutions acceptable to all. To compromise has become an end in itself. We are for ever searching for the lowest common denominator. Thus mediocrity becomes the prevalent norm. Anybody who ignores it is immediately suspect. A nonconformist in our country is not held in high esteem, especially if he achieves results which are higher than average.

The smallness of our country also has negative effects on the possibility to draw comparisons. The student, the industrious artisan and the careerist compare themselves always with those who resemble them. It cannot be surprising, therefore, if they become satisfied with themselves quite soon. In the field of sports and in one's occupation one can only improve one's performance by competing with those who surpass one. Consequently, we should look outside our national frontiers.

This prevalent mediocrity unfortunately also inhibits many a talented person from aiming high,

from taking on responsibilities, even though he may be predestined to this. A Swiss is considered presumptuous if he strives for a higher position or for responsibility even though he may have proved long ago that he has the ability. This false modesty may in itself be endearing, but it has prevented a great many young Swiss from making the maximum of their abilities. We have here a conflict between false modesty and presumption; for all those who, out of prejudice and egotism, prevent a promising young person from rising in his occupation or in any other field, are indeed presumptuous.

We need not only the courage to stand by our convictions, but also the pluck and self-reliance to make use of our opportunities. All too often, the Swiss feel embarrassed to shine or to distinguish themselves. Even though it is true that these days noble titles are no longer acquired by birth or royal conferment, a democratic State also feels the need for an elite.

Nowadays, this elite is determined on the basis of character, personality and individual achievement. It is therefore not a disgrace to be part of such an elite. We have to develop our abilities and assert our rights evolving from this, naturally in all modesty and by assuming the ensuing responsibilities. In developing one's personality as well as in the development of society – be it large or small – one should be guided by the maxim of the French philosopher Jean Jaurès: «Aller à l'idéal et comprendre le réel.»

Will you allow me to make some observations regarding Switzerland, which become obvious when looked at from an international point of view. I have said that Switzerland owes her existence to an act of will. At that time, she had to defend herself against subjugation and invasion. If, subsequently, Switzerland declared herself neutral, she pursued a defensive aim. Ever since, Switzerland's attitude in international politics has re-

mained rather passive. Realizing the insufficiency of such behaviour, one added the principle of solidarity to that of neutrality. And yet, Switzerland's foreign policy has remained passive. In the meantime, the interdependencies of states has reached a degree as never before. No country in the world could survive today if it tried to be self-sufficient. This applies more particularly to the highly civilized nations and those countries poor in natural resources. The consequences for Switzerland are obvious: we either open up to the outside world or we cease to exist.

For this reason, «participation» must be added as a third element to neutrality and solidarity. In future, Switzerland must take part in a more active way in the concerns of international institutions and in the efforts to strengthen interstate co-operation as well as in the endeavours to create a world order.

In order to understand the world, one has to leave one's home. Switzerland can remain aligned internationally only if the young

people dare explore the world as they used to do for generations. Switzerland would never be what she is today, both in material and cultural respects, without the support of the Swiss resident abroad. These Swiss expatriates are the gallant and daring compatriots who found their homeland too restricting and who settled abroad in order to search for the conditions they needed for their development. If Switzerland, in spite of her smallness, has acquired a certain greatness, it is to a large extent to the Swiss abroad that credit is due.

We Swiss form a small society which is forced to live in a big world. In order to be successful, we are dependent on greatness. In all our activities, be they ambitious or modest, we have to strive after this greatness.

I should like to close these observations with an appeal by the Fribourg historian Gonzague de Reynold who ended one of his works with the following words: «My people, to the greatness of Switzerland arise.»

Mario Ludwig

Lausanne

(Photo STO)



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