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Cover:

The new facts unearthed in the investigations into Nazi gold, unclaimed accounts and collaboration with Nazi Germany do not easily chime with the Switzerland seen on an idyllic picture postcard.

(Photos: Max Baumann and SF DRS from 'Die Schweiz im Schatten des Dritten Reiches' [Switzerland in the Shadow of the Third Reich]. Collage by Silvia Brüllhardt)

IMPRESSUM

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It was all very carefully thought out. On the first of August 1, 1997 red balloons with hearts on them should rise into the blue sky. The motive for this airy-fairy programme for National Day was a new and positive positioning for Switzerland. Prominent politician François Loeb and a wide circle of sponsors wanted to refloat the steamer called Helvetia which had gone aground. Disaster reports concerning Nazi gold, unclaimed accounts and collaboration with our northern neighbour had badly scratched the image of our country. So there was a widespread desire to propagate trust and solidarity with the world.

The programme was virtually rained off. It was pouring on that day. The sky was dark, and there was a cold touch to the air. The bad weather – which had not been prophesied by the forecasters – perfectly reflected the difficulties Switzerland was going through. A pleasant event had been hurriedly planned, but no one had taken the fundamentals into account: the general weather scenario. In the holiday atmosphere of the approaching three-day weekend no one had noticed the storm gathering over Switzerland.

The same thing was happening to Switzerland's image abroad during 1996 and 1997. Instead of reacting with alertness and sensitivity to the growing criticism of Switzerland's role in the Second World War our small country simply closed its eyes in disbelief. Something which should not have happened – a breach in the culture of neutrality – ought to remain hidden in the caverns of the past. What was already known had in any case led to bitter controversy. And what if one or two

of the nasty insinuations were in fact true?

This naive way of facing up to the situation led to a dreadful shock to a Switzerland which completely lacked experience in the art of international self-defence. For the press all over the world slammed out with all its force and a good measure of schadenfreude at a country which until then had been fondled and indulged. Switzerland had changed from a special case to an eccentric suspect. The Federal Council chose this moment to announce the creation of the Solidarity Fund, which was promptly misunderstood as a request for absolution of sins. It was a good deed at precisely the wrong moment. Helping the needy is part of Switzerland's tradition. But doing it on a non-voluntary basis to restore a damaged reputation is anything but honourable. One thing is sure: no manner of commission and no amount of money, either unblocked or donated, can put back together the smashed Heidi picture. Notwithstanding, it will be a good thing if our future is seen as one of service and not of patching up the mistakes of the past.

Switzerland is less a national state than a relationship between people. So it is for the citizens of our country, both at home and all over the world, to sing virtues such as solidarity and justice to the four corners of the world.

Let us start rehearsing at once!



Alice Baumann

Alice Baumann