

The decade of commemorations : searching for national identity

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The decade of commemorations

Searching for national identity

For the Swiss the last decade of this millennium is one of commemorations. The objective of reviving our feeling of national identity and illuminating the very essence of our confederal community has been clear since the beginning. But the spirit of the times has pushed things in another direction. The framework and the means have turned out to be of a different hue, and the commemorative joy has turned into pain.

At the beginning no one thought farther ahead than 1991, the 700th birthday of the Confederation. Our national exhibitions have a rhythm of their own, to be held just about once a generation. The last had been held in

Pierre-André Tschanz

Lausanne in 1964, and the form and the framework of the 700th seemed an ideal opportunity. It would be a national exhibition at the very heart of the old Confederation, around the Lake of Lucerne, with the three original cantons along its banks. It would include a huge popular festival and the Swiss Way, to be built along the Uri bank of the lake. It would be accompanied by a series of shows throughout the country to illustrate the multi-cultural and multi-linguistic character of our country.

Encounters

But there was opposition to this concept at the very heart of Switzerland. It started in the mid-1980s, when fears were expressed about the impact of the great event, particularly on the environment. Switzerland was still suffering from the shock-effect of 'the death of the forests', which had led to new and much stricter provisions against air pollution. The refusal in 1985 by the voters of Lucerne to participate in the anniversary seemed like an evil presage. And the whole dream was shattered two years later, when one after the other the cantons of central Switzerland followed Lucerne's example and withdrew their support. The project of a national exhibition to commemorate the 700th birthday of the Swiss Confederation was a thing of the past.

By then time was short, and the federal government hastily called ex-

perts together to propose new ideas. The result was a programme based on the concept of 'encounters', including an inaugural event in Bellinzona, a solemn First of August on the Grütli meadow, a festival of four cultures in French-speaking Switzerland and a festival of international solidarity in Romansh-speaking Switzerland. In addition, the Swiss Way would still be built on the Uri bank of the Lake of Lucerne, as intended in the original project.

Crises

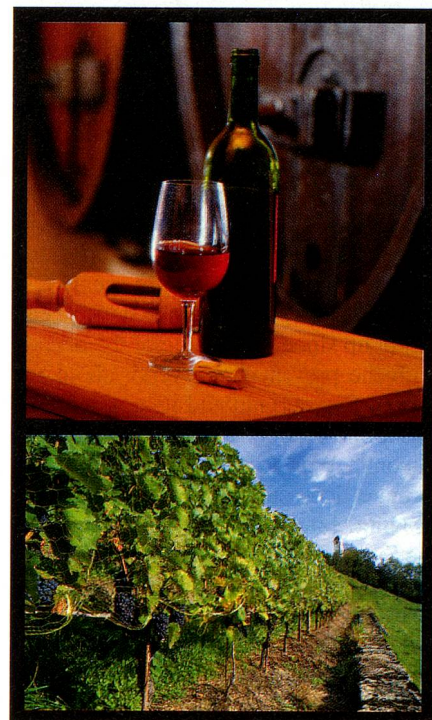
Most of us know what happened. Hardly had the Federal Council's Message on the Organisation and Financing of the Commemorative Festivities of the 700th Anniversary of the Confederation been published than Switzerland went into shock once again. The first woman member of the Federal Council was forced to resign, and in the Office of the Federal Attorney General were discovered hundreds and thousands of secret files about the inhabitants of Switzerland and organisations throughout the country. These events precipitated the people of Switzerland into a serious crisis of both identity and confidence. The festivities intended to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the mobilisation of 1939 were subjected to strong criticism and turned out a complete flop. And a popular initiative calling for the abolition of the army attracted one vote in every three.



MY SWITZERLAND:

It upsets me that people abroad think we are backward. They only see in us the idyllic Alpine country. But we are in fact quite ordinary, just like everyone else. I am glad that Switzerland is so green and does not have so many problems with car exhausts.

GINA (14)



That same year – 1989 – saw the end of the Berlin wall, but Switzerland was entering a period of utter self-doubt. Two years later – in the actual 700th birthday year – came the economic slowdown and the beginning of the scourge of unemployment. And this was not the end of the tale of woe. In December 1992 an enthusiastic French-speaking Switzerland found its voice drowned by the votes of the Swiss-German conservatives who prevented the country taking part in the European Economic Area. The crisis reached a new intensity.

Now 1998 is approaching. Berne launched a competition of ideas for the national exhibition, and it was the one put forward by the cantons at the foot of the Jura mountains which won. It was a way of compensating the French-speakers, frustrated as they were by the failure to join the European Economic Area. This time, however, it was the people of Ticino who were in shock. They had been making careful preparations and had thought they could count on the support of the federal government. After all, the Federal Council's message to parliament in 1988 had contained these words: "The big events of the three festivals (in the context of the 700th anniversary of the Confederation)

Swiss
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will be held mainly in the three northern linguistic regions. For this reason, it seems appropriate to mandate Ticino and the Italian-speaking valleys of the Grisons with the task of organising a national exhibition”.

From 1998 to 2001

As the years have gone by, it has turned out necessary to postpone the date of the national exhibition yet again, and this time it is to be Expo 2001.

Will the 150th anniversary of the federal state succeed in enabling Switzerland finally to recover its cohesion and national unity? Nothing seems less certain. More problems have been piling up since the middle of the decade with the present controversy about the role of Switzerland and its political and economic leaders during and after the Second World War. The economic climate does seem to have started improving, however, and if all goes well the Swiss people ought to have got back their confidence at least by 2001, the year now proposed for the Expo.

This is assuming that by then they will have succeeded in bringing joblessness down, getting the federal budget back into balance and reaching some sort of broad agreement on the question of European integration – and of course always providing that the creation of the single European currency does not send the Swiss franc skyrocketing anew! ■



1848–1998

150 years
federal state

1998 – the logo

A minus sign and a plus sign against a dark-blue and a red background. The plus sign can also be seen as a Swiss cross. What is it meant to signify?

Lausanne graphic artist Sandra Binder, who is responsible for the logo, says: The aim is to recall for the 1998 jubilee that new and better times began with the founding of the federal state. The old, negative period was left behind. The white Swiss cross against the red background is made into a positive sign. But it can be recognised as such only if we include the dark passages of the past. For its part the negative sign stands for a Switzerland which was imperfect, not yet complete – I mean the pre-1848 Switzerland.”

AB

Switzerland in 1998

The State of the Nation

Where does Switzerland stand at the end of the 1990s in international comparison? Here are some key data.

The nineties will probably go down in the annals as a mainly morose decade in Switzerland, principally because of a seven-year period of economic stagnation, not to say recession. After the unprecedented economic

*Peter Haller**

boom of the post-war period, which had only been briefly interrupted by the oil crisis of the early 70s, Switzerland tumbled into stubborn economic doldrums which have brought the highest unemployment figures ever recorded in this country. While never reaching six percent nationally, the phenomenon's resistance to countermeasures caused surprise and consternation in a country where unemployment had been a relatively brief episode in the 1930s.

Positive indicators

Since late 1996 there have been indications of recovery, but most economic pundits did not want to risk disappointment by putting too much faith in these signs. Now, however, there is unanimity amongst the banking and economic experts that recovery is indeed on the way. Renewed growth in Switzerland, as in Germany, is export-led. The boom cycle in the United States and Britain is springing over to the continent, and for instance Credit Suisse forecasts real growth in Swiss gross national product of about 1.6% in 1998, as opposed to this year's rate of around one-third of a percent. Inflation is expected to stay below the one percent mark, ensuring low interest rates.

An unknown factor for next year is the true timetable of Economic and Monetary Union. The Swiss franc clearly will not be part of monetary union, but this is not seen as a disadvan-

tage. On the contrary, Swiss banks are ready with new products which take monetary union into account.

Despite positive economic indicators there is unlikely to be any rapid improvement in the unemployment situation. In September it dipped below the 5% mark, but one reason for the problem's persistence is the lack of construction activity in this country. The building industry and gastronomy trade are two structurally weak sectors kept alive by the import of unskilled labour which experience shows is always the first to be hit by job-shedding.

Large budget deficits

But one can also say the rosy export prospects for Swiss industry are due to radical rationalisation measures with jobs being pruned to the absolute minimum. This has resulted in impressive increases in already high productivity figures and shows that global challenges need not be feared. There are however also voices which maintain things have gone too far and that work should be shared amongst a larger workforce.

Unemployment and economic stagnation have brought large federal budget deficits. High costs for the unemployment scheme and falling tax



MY SWITZERLAND:

Our government wastes taxpayers' money because it builds much too expensively. And it is abusing the three-lakes landscape for Expo 2001; the planned speedboats are really bad. I think it is a good thing that Switzerland is democratic and that it offers so many opportunities for tourists. We are also quite rich and have relatively low unemployment.

LORENZ (11)



revenue are forcing Finance Minister Kaspar Villiger to make cuts across the board, but with little support from parliament so far. While many pay lip-service to Mr. Villiger's valiant efforts to achieve a balanced budget by early in the next century, others point to the fact

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