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In support of "patriotism light"

MANY SWISS MEN AND WOMEN often have an uncertain, somewhat masochistic attitude towards their homeland. The British, French, Italians and even the Americans behave very differently. In contrast to the Swiss, they have always been proud of their home country. And yet some Swiss often seem almost embarrassed about their origins.

I recall radio programmes on August 1st and reports by foreign correspondents who had been asked to find out how Switzerland was perceived by people in their host country. The Swiss always feel the need to know what others think about them. That's why tricky referenda are frequently preceded by dire warnings that the outcome will affect Switzerland's image abroad. The French wouldn't care less, nor would the British. Anyone who consumes foreign media quickly discovers that few people beyond our borders are interested in domestic Swiss policy – perhaps unjustly so.

It's also fashionable here to overlook the fact that Switzerland enjoys an outstanding image throughout the world, and that the alleged land of milk and honey is often even presented too perfectly.

Is it insecurity that blinds us to certain realities? Why do we feel inclined time and again to hide our light under a bushel although there is no reason to do so?

Fortunately, the mood has changed in our country in recent years. As I mentioned in my last editorial, the white cross on a red background has long attained cult status in all segments of our society. It's now cool to be Swiss, especially among young people.

Kurt Imhof, a sociologist from Zurich University, has spent years studying patriotism and related issues, particularly vis-à-vis the situation in Switzerland. We discussed the definition of "love of one's homeland" with him, its necessity and the dangers inherent in misguided patriotism. During the interview, Professor Imhof reminded us that the student movement of '68 is largely to blame for bringing the state into disrepute. It painted a picture of an exploitative nation, and pilloried it as the ugly face of capitalism and the bourgeoisie.

The political left was still preventing the Swiss getting to grips with the concept of "homeland" as late as the 1980s, since for leftist sentiments Switzerland was synonymous with immoral and incorrect political action. Intellectuals in particular were at loggerheads with Switzerland. Indeed, writer Max Frisch's statement that "My only link with my homeland is my passport" was more or less the acceptable position.

Even the FDP, the country's one-time standard-bearer together with the SP, campaigned under the slogan "More freedom, less state".

Those days are gone. Ever since the world became a global village, the nation state has been gaining in popularity and people have once more been allowed to express warm feelings about their homeland. Imhof therefore calls for what he terms "patriotism light": a form of patriotism free of religious, political and ideological connotations. We can and may be proud of our country's achievements and institutions, Imhof says. He also cites the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB), a well-functioning public service, the solid welfare state and direct democracy, describing them as masterpieces borne of generations of work.

In the light of this, there really are plenty of reasons to be proud of Switzerland.

HEINZ ECKERT, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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Tunnelers celebrate the first breakthrough for the new east tunnel through the Gotthard on 6 September 2006.

Photo: Keystone