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BONFIRES, FIREWORKS, FLAGS — AND SPEECHES

(By John Trevor)

AUGUST 1 celebrates the birth of Switzerland nearly 700 years ago. It's an occasion for formal and lengthy oratory, as bonfires blaze on mountain peaks and children parade with lanterns. But it's not even an official holiday in some parts of the country. And furthermore the celebrations themselves were first introduced less than a century ago.

The Swiss are fond of stressing that they are a nation made up of many different cultures, creeds, languages, dialects and local traditions. This is certainly borne out by their approach to their National Day.

To start with, August 1 is not even an official holiday at national level. Only one or two of the 22 cantons forming the Confederation have made it a public holiday. It's true that employees of the Federal administration are given a half-day off. And in some places, like Lausanne, civil servants get the whole day. But generally speaking, factories and offices merely shut down a couple of hours earlier than usual as a token gesture.

This doesn't mean that the Swiss aren't patriotic. It's just that they're a practical bunch who don't see why you can't work during the day and do the celebrating in the evening.

Alliance And Arbitration

Furthermore, while some countries can historically fix the date of their independence, saint's day, liberation or whatever occasion they select for their National Day, Switzerland's birthday is not so easy to pin down. Popularly it is held to be the day in 1291 when the delegations from the central cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden met on the Rütli Meadow overlooking the Lake of Lucerne. They are said to have solemnly concluded a pact of eternal alliance and agreed to settle all their disputes by arbitration and not by force.

The German dramatist Friedrich Schiller used this version for his famous play "William Tell". But many historians say that the 1291 pact was simply a confirmation of an earlier agreement of which no record exists. In addition, the document, in Latin, does not mention the Rütli Meadow or specifically refer to the first of August—it speaks only of "the beginning of the month of August".

When visitors see bonfires flaring on the hills and mountain tops and watch the children carrying their lighted lanterns, they may think that they are watching a tradition as old as Switzerland itself. In fact, National Day celebrations were unknown until less than a century ago. In 1891 big festivities were held in Canton Schwyz to mark the 600th anniversary of the Confederation. In the following year, Professor Ferdinand Vetter of Berne University put out the suggestion that the Schwyz celebrations should be taken as a model for an annual National Day commemoration. Some time later, the Federal Government issued a request for church bells in every part of Switzerland to be rung to mark the occasion.

Incomplete Without Speeches

The present-day festivities have evolved from these rather uncertain beginnings and although for most of the year the Swiss stress their cantonal and local loyalties, sometimes quite forcefully, on August 1 they feel proud of a state of Swissness which is a bit more than the sum total of all their cantons. In some places the celebrations include special ceremonies at which young people who have reached the age of 20 are welcomed to their new citizenship status.

No National Day would be complete without the speeches. The Swiss are not usually particularly communicative and some of them, like the Bernese, are reputed never to say a word more than is absolutely necessary. So it is truly amazing how many of them feel moved to orate at length on August 1 and give their fellow citizens the benefit of their considered opinions about the state of the country.

If you remember that Switzerland has about three thousand local authorities, known as communes, and that celebrations are held in practically all of them, you will appreciate how much speechifying goes on.

Remember, too, that the main speaker has to be introduced by another speaker and thanked by a third, and these two auxiliary orators also feel they cannot let the occasion pass without delivering some well-chosen remarks.

Past, Present And Future

The Swiss are well aware of this tendency to drone on interminably, and the long-winded August 1 orator is an easy target for cartoonists and satirical writers.

He can spend quite a lot of time reviewing nearly seven centuries of known history. Then there's the present. The country's going to the dogs — he warns — and will sink further unless the younger generation pulls it socks up and turns back to those traditional Swiss virtues of thrift and hard work. All those un-Swiss "isms" have got to be avoided, unhealthy foreign influences kept out, and the country must remain in a state of

strong armed neutrality. At the same time, Switzerland must be open to the world, never besmirch its proud record of humanitarian aid, and in the midst of its own prosperity must not forget less fortunate peoples.

Could Be Livelier

It's easy of course to make fun of over-serious speakers. Easy, too, to overlook the fact that somewhat pompous cliches may still contain a good deal of truth.

A recent public opinion poll showed that although quite a lot of people would like the August 1 celebrations to be a bit less serious and a little more lively, hardly anyone, not even members of the younger generation apt to reject their elders' conception of Switzerland and its recent past, wants National Day to be done away with.

And for looking at this beautiful country, still a relative oasis of tranquillity in a troubled world, who can doubt that its people have a great deal to celebrate as the bonfires pierce the darkness and the fireworks light up the night sky on August 1?

—From Swissair Gazette

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