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A Word by the Ambassador on our Federal Day – and farewell

My fellow-citizens and friends,

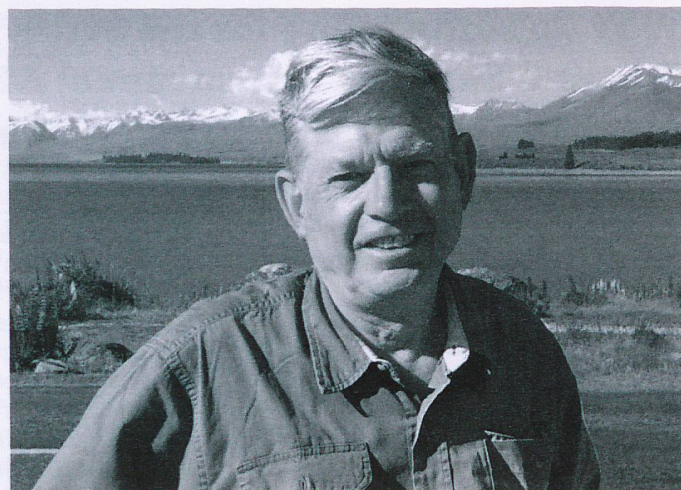
This is the last time I have the honour to address the Swiss community in New Zealand on our Federal Day. I will spend it this time with our citizens on the South Island, in Dunedin, in Christchurch and in Timaru, but soon after there will be a farewell to the Governor General, to many friends in Parliament, to a great Embassy team, to this wonderful country, the second best in the world, and then packing up and going home.

When I arrived in Wellington five years ago, I knew very little about New Zealand, except that there were a lot of sheep, beautiful mountains, Swiss farmers and tradesmen, and that I wanted to go there. Based on this wish, my principal diplomatic superior harboured some doubts regarding my mental sanity... Now, after these five years, New Zealand has become a second home to my wife Laura and to myself. If I wanted to tell you about what I have experienced in this country and on the Pacific islands, I would have to write a thick book. It would cover the countless encounters with interesting people all over the country, Prime Ministers, other political leaders, key personalities of your economy, the military and policemen that keep New Zealand safe, scientists at the frontier of human knowledge, but most of all ordinary New Zealanders who work hard, take care of their families and enjoy this wonderful little country. What will remain foremost in my mind, is the deep-rooted decency of this nation, something I believe we Swiss share.

Most of my countless trips throughout New Zealand have been linked to your communities, starting with the five organized Swiss Clubs and some looser, but no less important local gatherings, and of course the Swiss Society of New Zealand. But even more important have been the times I felt privileged to share with you in your families, on your farms, in your workshops and in your rest homes where I have met so many of you who had reached the age of ninety or more. I have heard many impressive stories of fellow Swiss who worked incredibly hard as share-milkers until they proudly owned their own farm, of tradesmen who accepted unpleasant jobs in the freezer-works until they could be successful in their own field, of others who didn't speak a word of English when they came here, had to live in unheated old military barracks left over from the war, but were so good at their trade learned back home in the old country that after a few years they owned their own business and offered jobs to New Zealanders. Or I think of one friend on the South Island who after having been successful with his own company then transferred his professional knowledge and Swiss work discipline to young Maori boys in trouble who later became themselves successful.

Of course, we have also faced some thorny issues, by far the most important among them being the Superannuation deduction. No other question has kept me busier during these five years. I have at first encountered arrogant inflexibility of some, but with time more and more understanding by political leaders who realize that New Zealand's old ways in this field are more and more at odds with a modern world where people move, during their professional lives, from continent to continent. We have found allies in Parliament and I believe the front of the nay-sayers is now steadily eroding. I wish I could say the problem has been solved during my term, this is clearly not the case, but we have made progress. That the infamous "spousal deduction" has been quietly dropped as from 1 July 2020 is a very encouraging sign, and possible further steps are visible on the horizon. It has been good to work on this issue hand in hand with your representatives, above all Peter Ehrler.

An important memory for which I am particularly grateful are the many hours I have spent with many World War II veterans, close to or well over a hundred years old. They have told me of New Zealand's contribution towards the liberation of Europe from tyranny.



Only one of them is of Swiss descent, but they all have generously opened their homes and shared their memories with me, about Spitfire dogfights in the sky over the English Channel and France, about challenging fights in Crete, North Africa, Italy and elsewhere, about almost incredible escape stories. I realized once again how much we owe to this generation whom the Americans call "the greatest". What impressed me most in these Kiwi veterans has been the extreme modesty they all have in common. – One of the things I intend to do when I have more time, will be to write about the many New Zealanders who were hosted by Switzerland during the war after having escaped from German captivity.

On our Federal Day a year ago, when we celebrated with the young soldiers of our Army Band in a huge tent in our garden, I said I would leave quietly during the coming year, borrowing and adapting the famous quote "old Ambassadors don't die, they just fade away". I did not know then that I would have another First of August in New Zealand and a farewell party in Kaponga at the invitation of the Taranaki Swiss Club. But after this, the time will definitely have come to fade away.

It is now also the moment to say thank you to all those who have supported me during these five years. We at your Embassy could not have done much if we had not known that the Swiss community stands firmly behind us. I want to thank a very special team at the Embassy, they were all great, but a special thank goes to my reliable deputy Jürg Bono who has kept the ship on a steady course throughout my term. Our very best wishes accompany him in his new mission in Tokyo. I also want to thank my wife Laura who could not accompany me on trips as often as we would have wished due to a health issue, but has always been a charming hostess to our many guests.

Well, fading away, certainly, as far as New Zealand is concerned even though I firmly intend, simply as a friend, to come back. But our own country is waiting, and there are many challenges. Those among you who know me well are aware of my worries regarding our nation. We will have to fight in the coming years to keep her prosperous, proud and sovereign – in one word: Swiss. I intend to be part of this fight.

But today I wish you and your families once again a joyful First of August and thank you from the bottom of my heart for your part during some of the best years of my life.

May God bless both New Zealand and Switzerland!

Your Ambassador – and friend, *David Vogelsanger*