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After-Dinner Speech on board the ship "Ville de Neuchâtel"

Neuchâtel, 21 August 1991

Ladies and Gentlemen,

please allow me to entertain you for a while with another 2-dimensional system. But I must ask you not to misunderstand me: I do in no way wish to enter into competition with the very fine talks we have heard, as well as those still before us, at this stimulating meeting on the physics in two dimensions. My talk is not serious; the 2-dimensional system I propose to review for you is the geography you see when you look out of the windows of this ship. And I am mainly interested in the dynamics of this system, more precisely, I wish to tell you a few historical facts and fancies.

Let us start with our meeting place which carries the name of Louis Agassiz (1807-73). He was a man of this region and a teacher at the collège de Neuchâtel where he wrote the works that made him famous, in particular "Recherches sur les poissons fossiles" (5 vols., 1833-44) and "Etudes sur les glaciers" (1840). Invited to the United States in 1846 Agassiz chose as his permanent home the newly established Lawrence Scientific School of Harvard University ¹. Several places in North America bear Agassiz' name still today, I remember in particular some points in the Rocky Mountains.

Another famous scientist I wish to mention in passing is Jean Piaget the childrens psychologue who was born in Neuchâtel in 1896 and was a professor at Geneva University from 1929 to his death in 1980. He got his first honorary degree also from Harvard University in 1936 ². Much earlier Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) had spent several months in Val de Travers just west of Neuchâtel when he was banned from France and from Geneva.

Proceeding now to our time, one name stands out: Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the playwright and author of detective stories who for well over 30 years lived in a house hidden by the woods above the city of Neuchâtel where he died this year. Born in 1921 he spoke a broad Bernese but wrote a sophisticated style of high German. He also was a connoisseur of Bordeaux wines (all the other wines he would classify as "beverages"). The oldest Bordeaux I drank in his house was from 1899; it had a brownish colour and the taste of a dignified old lady. Apropos old lady, this is the title of Dürrenmatt's most famous play, "The visit of the old lady". The play is situated in a village on the railroad from Neuchâtel to Bern which he calls "Güllen", meaning liquid manure in Swiss German.

While this last name shows Dürrenmatt's liking for the grotesque, he also was a fascinating and deep thinker who had a keen interest in the sciences and particularly in physics. On the occasion of the Einstein centennial at ETH, Zürich, in 1979, Dürrenmatt was asked to give a speech. As preparation Dürrenmatt got a briefing on Einstein by our regretted colleague from ETH, Res Jost who died last year, in an extended nightly telephone conversation. In his opening Dürrenmatt said (my translation) "...the reason I agreed to give a talk on Einstein resides in the fact that today, mathematics, the natural sciences and philosophy are entangled with each other such that also laymen must cope with this Gordian knot. For, if we leave the physicists, mathematicians and

the philosophers to themselves we drive them definitely back into the Ghettos of their specialities where they are prey, helpless and unnoticed, to the raids of the technicians and the ideologues..."³.

As physicists our curiosity of course is directed mainly towards Dürrenmatt's play "The physicists". In this detective story out of the Cold War, the "greatest physicist of all times" Möbius is a patient in the psychiatric clinic of Doctor Miss von Zahnd. Two other patients, Beutler called Newton and Ernesti called Einstein, eventually are identified as well-known physicists turned agents of opposing secret services trying to get Möbius' secrets. The latter, however, have already been secured by Miss von Zahnd who has turned Möbius' discoveries into a huge industry.

For the 2-dimensional system I am describing here the interest of this play "The physicists" resides in its location which is an old pavilion of the psychiatric clinic of Marin, situated at the lower end of lake of Neuchâtel. In the introduction to the play, Dürrenmatt gives a hilarious description of its surroundings and of Neuchâtel which, I hope, is not lost by my translation: "... The near vicinity: First, natural then constructed lakeside, later a middle-size, almost small town. The once neat nest with its castle and its old town now is decorated with horrible buildings of the insurance companies and lives essentially from a modest University with developed theological Faculty and estival language courses, further, from a commercial and a dental technicians' school, then from girls' boarding schools and from a barely significant light industry, and hence lies already off the bustle. In addition and quite superfluously, the landscape also tranquilizes the nerves, anyway, there are blue mountain chains, humanly forested hills and a considerable lake, as well as a wide plane in the immediate vicinity, fuming in the evenings - a once sinistre swamp - now traversed by channels and fertile, with a penitentiary somewhere and associated agricultural superfarm so that everywhere silent and shadowy groups and grouplets of hacking and laboring gangsters are visible..."⁴.

Dürrenmatt's ambivalence towards his country which is reflected in the name "Güllen" chosen in "The visit of the old lady", takes the form of a love-hate affair in his "Swiss Psalm", whose first verse reads (my translation) "There you lie now, a country, ridiculous, to be traversed in Two, three paths, In the middle of this unlucky continent,"⁵. When Vaclav Havel, the president-playwright from Czechoslovakia visited Switzerland last year Dürrenmatt was asked to give the official speech. To the dismay of the Swiss authorities present he started by saying, in essence, "Vaclav, you are lucky, you are free. But we in Switzerland we are permanently in prison ...".

So, what is this country which Dürrenmatt and many other Swiss intellectuals, including the other famous writer, Max Frisch, who also died this year, criticize so vehemently, particularly in this year of the 700 th anniversary of the Confoederatio Helvetica? In order to understand a few features let us go back some 700 years. In 1273 Rudolf of Habsburg becomes German king and he buys the counties of Schwyz and Unterwalden. When he dies in 1291 the people of Schwyz and Unterwalden and those of Uri who control the Gotthard pass over the Alps feel insecure and conclude a pact.

The Gotthard pass which is the shortest connection between Italy and Germany opened earlier that century after a bridge over the Schöllenen canon had been built in the upper Uri valley. This is the famous Devil's bridge (see Fig.26 in Ref.6) which, according to legend, the devil agreed to build in exchange of a soul. But when the bridge was finished the people of Uri chased a goat over

the bridge. Before the Devil's bridge was built, the Grand Saint Bernard to the West, over which Hannibal had passed with his elephants in Roman times, and the passes in Grisons to the East had to be used (Ref.6, p.28).

The mentioned pact between the three peoples living on the shores of lake of Lucerne which defines the beginning of the Swiss confederation was not an isolated event. Indeed, it was rather fashionable in the 13 th century to establish written pacts or letters of privileges; several others may be seen in the Bundesbriefarchiv in Schwyz and in other Swiss museums, particularly a letter of privileges for the city of Zürich in the Landesmuseum in Zürich and a similar one for the city of Lausanne in the Musée historique de l'Ancien-Evêché in Lausanne. But the pact of 1291 was important because it was enforced in battles against Habsburg expansionism which during 200 years, starting with the battle of Morgarten in 1315, essentially were all won by the confederates, a fact that earned them a tremendous reputation all over Europe.

Coming back to this region around lake of Neuchâtel it was the scene of the greatest tragedy of the 15 th century, the Burgundy wars that the confederates fought against the expansionist plans of Charles the hardy, duke of Burgundy. By this time the confederates were siding with the king of France, an alliance that lasted essentially till the French revolution. Two important battles were fought in this region in 1476, the first at Grandson at the upper end of the lake where Charles lost his considerable treasure and the second at Murten on the smaller lake connected to the former by a channel where he lost his army. Soon after in 1477 he also lost his life and this was the end of Burgundy (Ref.6, pp.51-57). The loot taken by the Swiss was spectacular, it may be admired in many of the Swiss museums even today.

It is interesting that in these battles against Charles of Burgundy Swabians from Constance and other cities of that region fought on the side of the Confederates and even exchanged the red cross on their standards by the white cross of the Swiss (Anm.107 in Ref.7). In fact, during the 15 th century Constance plaid the role of a federal tribunal for the Swiss. But in addition, the latter also came to the city to sell their cheese, butter and cattle. Towards the end of the century, however, the relationship deteriorated, mainly because the raids of gangs of jobless young Swiss attacking the towns in Thurgau near Constance became a serious nuisance. Thus the Constancers also got increasingly irritated by the smell of cows that the Swiss merchants spread, and it was a small step then to call them "Kuhschweizer" or cow-Swiss. That, of course, was an unacceptable insult for the Swiss who were proud of their peasant-warrior reputation; they had to retaliate, and they did it by calling the Swabians "Sauschwobe" or pig-Swabians. These designations are still alive today. Indeed, any Swiss-German-speaking Swiss will call any German, not only a Swabian, a "Sauschwob" when he is furious and any Swabian will use the term "Kuhschweizer" in a similar mood ⁷.

Apart from cheese, butter and cows the Swiss from the mountainous regions had not much else to offer in the European market of the late Middle Ages. They were poor but their reputation as the toughest soldiers of Europe was firmly established. As illustrated by the mentioned events in the Thurgau, many of these young peasant boys were jobless. So the exportation of soldiers was the natural issue. It came about mainly in the wake of the mentioned association of the confederates with the kings of France who hired whole regiments with their officer corps and infrastructure, as can be seen in the marvellous Musée des Suisses à l'Etranger at Château de Penthes, Geneva,

whose director is Jean-René Bory, the author of Ref.6. The last Swiss regiment was annihilated defending king Louis XVI in the French revolution. Other rulers of Europe had followed the French example, among them of course the Vatican which even today maintains a Swiss guard.

This development added to the prosperity and commercial privileges already achieved by the cities belonging or being associated to the confederation. Several trading families from these cities gradually established commercial centres all over Europe (see Fig.39 of Ref.6) and thus led the foundation for the Swiss banking tradition.

Quite a different tradition of modern Switzerland may also be traced back to history, namely the Swiss neutrality. 1515 was the fateful year the Swiss lost their first battle after 200 years (except St.Jakob an der Birs in 1444, see Ref.6, pp.25-26). This was the famous battle of Marignano near Milano confronting a confederate army reduced by dissent and a superior French force under king François I which lasted two days and finally forced the Swiss to retreat (see Ref. 6, pp.102-108). This battle traumatized the Swiss for a long time as may be seen from the many paintings of the confederate warriors of Marignano by the Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler which are exhibited in the Fondation Pierre Gianadda in Martigny on the occasion of the 700 th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation. In the wake of this battle François I and the confederates concluded "the perpetual peace of Fribourg" (Ref.6, pp.111-112) which may well be considered the precursor of the neutrality as it is formulated in the present-day Swiss constitution.

Charles P. Enz

Postscriptum:

I hope that the above text may compensate the missing spontaneity of the spoken version by a greater accuracy.

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