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F O R E W O R D

by ex-Federal Councillor F. T. Wahlen
former President of the Swiss Confederation

The Contributory Circumstances

July 19th, 1937, is a red-letter day in the economic and social history of Switzerland. On that date was concluded the so-called Peace Agreement between employers and employees in the Swiss engineering and metalworking industries. The object of this agreement may be summarised as binding the parties to waive militant methods when negotiating general working conditions. Instead, the parties bargain as equals on a basis of mutual good faith. Since that date, other sectors of industry have followed the example with the result that strikes have become exceptional in Switzerland and there have been years in which not a single day was lost by reason of social disputes. There is no need to dwell on the advantages this has brought to both parties in industry and to the country as a whole.

It is impossible not to wonder just why this experiment was successful in Switzerland and — it may be hoped — will continue to be so for a long time to come. There can be no doubt that the main credit belongs to those two far-sighted negotiators, Dr. E. Dübi and Dr. K. Ilg. But even outstanding personalities cannot achieve major successes involving the collaboration of numerous associates unless the climate is favourable. It should therefore be pointed out that a series of circumstances contributed to the conclusion of the agreement, circumstances which also bear upon the climate of Swiss politics and business as a whole. Some of these are worthy of mention.

First and foremost comes the political education provided by a multilingual democracy based on a referendum system. The Swiss citizen is constantly being called upon to take part in decisions on political and practical matters, an activity which requires him to examine the arguments of the protagonists carefully. He thus learns, in connection with municipal, cantonal and federal business, the need for and value of healthy acceptable compromise and the senselessness of adhering obstinately to a preformed one-

sided point of view. The application of this balanced, middle-of-the-road attitude to labour relations thus merely represents one more step along an already well-known path. The trade union leaders, for their part, were additionally influenced by past experience which had demonstrated that conflict had seldom achieved more than could have been obtained by means of negotiation. It should furthermore be borne in mind that in Switzerland, with its paucity of raw materials, labour, and more especially high-quality labour, has always been at a premium as a production factor. Finally, the political situation abroad as it was during the thirties played its part. The external threat closed the ranks between political groups previously sharply opposed to one another, with a resulting constructive influence on the behaviour of the partners in industry.

Whatever the detailed motives may have been, the fact remains that the wonder was worked by the efforts of two powerful personalities. The results have surpassed anything that could have been hoped at the time. The Peace Agreement has been renewed over and over again, and the labour force has experienced an improvement in living conditions during the thirty-odd years since its signature capable of standing up to any international comparison.

The economic and social annals of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are full of hard and often bloody conflicts over the distribution of the economic product. The Peace Agreement in the Swiss engineering and metal-working industries may be regarded as a milestone, and I would express the hope that in its country of origin it will be cherished like a jewel and that it will prove capable of radiating an influence beyond the frontiers of Switzerland.