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SWISS NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION

1291



1956

on WEDNESDAY, 1st of AUGUST, 1956
at the BATTERSEA TOWN HALL

When I wrote last year's report about the 1st of August celebration, I started with the following words: "This year's celebration of the birth of our country falls into time when a glimmer of hope spreads over the world." (Four power conference at Geneva).

Alas — this optimism has not been realised. This poor world of ours is still in a state of turmoil, and Peace, which we so ardently desire seems to be further away than ever. Instead of finding a common ground where all countries, large and small, could work together to give us "Peace in our time", petty jealousies, mistrust, cunning and craftiness are filling our hearts with uneasiness and evil forebodings.

In many parts of the world to-day war and strife are still waged either by actual fighting or what is known as a "cold war".

How long will this madness prevail? Common sense, one would have thought, would have taught us a lesson, the lesson that war, with its untold miseries, sacrifices and utter destruction is no solution to our troubles, and that Peace alone can bring to a weary world its salvation. The Peace, in which mankind can work in perfect harmony, to better the economic and social conditions and deliver us from constant fear for the future has, unfortunately, so far remained an utopian dream.

Humbly to-day we cast our eyes heavenwards to seek guidance and enlightenment, and like our forefathers centuries ago, we will bend our knees and fold our hands to ask God Almighty to inspire us with that love towards each other which passes all understanding. He, alone can give us that Peace which millions of our fellowmen all over the globe so ardently desire.

* * *

This year's commemoration somewhat differed from previous one's, as for the first time since it was decided that the birthday of our country should be celebrated by the entire Colony, (years ago it was left to each Society or Club to meet on the 1st of August), not one of the Colony's Societies took part in the programme, which is to be regretted, but that is a disturbing sign of the times. Our Colony is badly in need of rejuvenation, and without a new influx, this at one time so active and flourishing Colony will slowly pass into oblivion.

More and more, we are depending on help from outsiders for entertainments on a big scale, this help has mostly come from our homeland, and whilst such collaboration has invariably been appreciated, it has become a very costly item, and the arranging of the

respective programmes has, to a great extent, been taken out of the hands of the organisers.

Fully aware of the many difficulties, which beset the 1st of August committee, and fully appreciating their efforts to present a suitable programme, I feel somehow, that this time it fell a little short of what one expects of a "patriotic demonstration", and if I shall make use of the privilege usually accorded to the Press to pass criticism on some of the programme items, I do so reluctantly and without malice, solely as a guidance for future occasions.

* * *

The Hall at the Battersea Town Hall has a full seating capacity for 1,100, the attendance on Wednesday, August 1st, numbered between 1,600 to 1,700, and as the tickets issued only covered the available seating accommodation a large number of the visitors had unfortunately to stand. Those who came along without tickets insisted on being admitted, hence the uncomfortable overcrowding of the Hall. The latter, was decorated with all the cantonal escutcheons, and with crimson and white flower decorations in front and at the side of the stage, presenting a gay and colourful picture. Both the Swiss flag, and the emblem of the canton Basle-County flanked the Union Jack, and the motto of our Ticinesi brethren "Liberi e Svizzeri" was conspicuously displayed.

The Swiss Minister, and Madame Daeniker, accompanied by his collaborators at the Legation, and the Mayor of Battersea, Councillor E. A. Cooper, J.P. were received by Mr. F. Streit, President of the 1st of August committee and Mrs. Streit, and were conducted to their seats, where the ladies were presented with bouquets of red and white carnations.

The community singing which figured as No. 1 on the programme had to be omitted owing to the late arrival of some of the VIP's. This was a pity as the rendering of our homely Swiss songs always creates the right "Stimmung" for such an occasion.

After a short prayer, there appeared, amidst tremendous cheering the members of the Società Ginnastica "Concordia" of Giubiasco, headed by their standard bearer.

Gymnastics being one of the principal and most popular sports in our home country, it was appropriate that for the first time a place on the programme should be allotted to gymnasts, and no better choice could have been made than asking our compatriots from the "sunny south". They started their performance with tableau pyramids of various kinds, faultlessly executed; although these young men are only of

amateur status, they could easily compete with professionals. Each formation met with tumultuous applause from the entire audience. No less admired was the Swedish drill.

When calm was restored, the Tramway Mixed Choir from Basle, under the conductorship of Mr. Barth, made their appearance. They sang two songs, "Abschied vom Wald" by Mendelsohn, and Lavater's "Die Nacht", both items were competently sung, although one missed somewhat the tenors. (I understand that these had to be left behind, as otherwise the tramway service of the ancient Rhine town would have had to come to a standstill). They received the applause they fully deserved.

The first patriotic note of the evening was struck by the Swiss Minister, Monsieur Armin Daeniker, who received a cordial reception on appearing on the stage. He said:

"I am glad that so many of our compatriots have responded to the appeal of your Committee and have joined our patriotic reunion. It gives me particular pleasure to greet amongst us large groups of visitors from the most southern corner and from the northern border of our country. I always felt it to be a most edifying experience to think that on this same evening, when the church bells are ringing through our home valleys and the bonfires are lit on the mountain crests, the Swiss colonies all over this vast Commonwealth and around the world will feel united in remembering their common kinship. It is from this invisible bond that we derive our strength and the certainty that we live and still grow as one Nation. As for an individual, it is also appropriate and beneficial for a Nation, on an anniversary day like this, to remember its origins, its main features and the values which are responsible for its growth as a living organism. History reveals us that the birth of our Confederation was a moral challenge, a determined act of will against an adverse world.

Let us consider the particular historical setting under which the Swiss Covenant of 1291 had been concluded. In that remote period towards the end of the Ghibelline wars, the three forest cantons had suddenly entered the political scene of central Europe on account of the opening of the Gotthard Pass and particularly of the passage through the Schöllenen after the building of a bridge; the Gotthard pass was the shortest and most convenient route to Italy over which an important traffic was soon to develop. The policies of the German Emperor and of the market

communities in the adjoining valleys to the passes went then parallel; it was in the interest of both that no feudal lord would annex these valleys to his personal possessions. Thus, since 1240, the people of Uri were able to acquire some autonomy and to be placed immediately under the Empire; Schwyz was soon to follow and the privilege to fly the Imperial banner was conferred on its people, a white cross on a red field, which was to become the flag of Switzerland. When, however, after the interregnum, a period of great unrest and insecurity, Count Rudolf of Habsburg was made German Emperor, these communities were in mortal danger that this most powerful overlord of Eastern Switzerland would try to make their valleys subservient to the personal interests of his household. The necessity of common defensive action led to the origin of our country.

It was then, in 1273, that the first defensive League of original Switzerland was concluded; every valley had so far acted on its own, but their covenant implied solidarity and collaboration; in this way the forest cantons reacted against the attempts of the House of Habsburg to aggrandize its personal domains at the expense of their liberties. We do not know the contents of this first treaty. But when, in the middle of July 1291, Rudolf von Habsburg died without having secured the succession to his son Albrecht, the time had come for the secret brotherhood among the leaders of the forest communities to act quickly. Any new attempt of the Habsburgs to instal their administration in their territories, which were subjected

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only to the Emperor, had to be repulsed; therefore the bailiffs were disobeyed and driven from the valleys; their citadels were destroyed. Already in the beginning of the month of August 1291, the representatives of the three communities renewed the pact formerly concluded; this is the Bundesbrief of 1291 which bears the seals of each community but no signature and no mention of the place where it was concluded. It is the Magna Charta of Swiss liberties and it is still conserved in the Federal Archives in Schwyz.

Such is the sequence of historical facts, a story to which the Swiss people hold fast. Similar happenings were nothing uncommon in those times of emerging cities and peasants' leagues rising to protect themselves against the malice of the age and the encroachments of mighty princes. If, however, the league of the three alpine communities was alone to survive, this may lie in the fact that, very soon after, their fierce resolution was put to the test and that they had to defend their union with their life-blood against and overwhelming hostile coalition. But no doubt it was far from their minds that this pact should be the foundation of a future state; nor did they reach for the stars to bring down a new social order; nothing was to be changed in their private position, but they fought realistically enough for the preservation of guaranteed public rights.

Looking close into this Covenant which was written in polished latin, we find in its clauses some striking affinities with the political problems of our own time. It is amazing to see how those peasant

leaders knew how to deal with collective security, the principle of immediate and unrestricted assistance in case of a threat against one of the confederates; they also introduced a procedure for compulsory arbitration in case of conflicts amongst the confederates themselves and for the common prosecution of criminals.

We have therefore to admire as much the courage, firm resolution and unswerving devotion of our ancestors as also their clear insight and common sense, their perseverance and remarkable consistency. Slowly indeed, in the course of a long and arduous history, and always keeping faithfully to the structure of their common bond, the Confederation grew, forging a strong link of alliances between rural communities and free cities, which was favoured by common economic and strategic interests and supported by a slowly evolving feeling of kinship; these proved indeed stronger than the differences in languages and confessions. In fact a happily stabilising factor was the sense of moderation shown throughout the centuries by the responsible leaders. On the height of their military prowess, it made them abandon an expansionist policy which would have been a danger to their unity and accept neutrality as a guiding line in their relations with the outer world. The same sense of moderation was manifest in their internal relations; at a time when the whole continent was torn in two by the religious cleavage, their coherence was not broken. In order to safeguard the political individuality of the cantons, a central government was not to emerge — until a hundred years ago. But it was not the difference in ideological reasons, but complicity with an outworn social order which eventually proved to be a fatal danger to the integrity of the Confederation.

Such are some of the values and virtues which, I think, we should emphasize to-day and which we moderns should always and again awake and keep in our hearts.

The chronicles on the ancient history of our country hardly mention the role of women in its development. It is a common belief abroad that Swiss men are — to say the least — not generous to the women by withholding their franchise. Yet in his dramatic account of the birth of the Confederation, F. Schiller gives us a picture of Getrud Stauffacher, which seems to me to be so truthful and almost highly symbolical of the role of Swiss women of all times. It shows us the large influence Swiss women have on

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4 & 5, Charlotte Street, London, W.1.,** wish to inform the members of the Swiss Colony, that owing to alterations being carried out in their Butcher Department, the Restaurant will close, and not be carried on after August, 4th, 1956.

They wish to take this opportunity of thanking all past Restaurant customers for their support, and trust that they will transfer their support to the shop.

public life through their families, sharing their husbands' concerns and encouraging them to act for the common cause. Our critics also do not appreciate enough the wide emancipation and equality in positions which Swiss women have gained in the economic and cultural fields; it is hardly surpassed in any other country. We are therefore glad to hear that this year the sale of the 1st of August badges will benefit the education of young Swiss women in domestic economy and their furtherance in any cultural and social respect. Let us hope that the result of the sale will bear testimony to the generosity of our whole population at home and abroad towards their womenfolk.

Per concludere vorrei rivolgere qualche parola ai nostri ospiti del Ticino ed assicurarli che essi sono particolarmente benvenuti a questa manifestazione patriottica. La loro presenza richiama alla nostra mente piacevoli ricordi di giornate di sole trascorse nelle valli ed in riva ai laghi, nei frutteti et nelle vigne del nostro cantone meridionale. Noi siamo tutti convinti che solo la coesistenza di tre lingue e culture permetterà al nostro paese di assolvere la sua missione nel mondo e siamo fieri di avere nella nostra colonia una comunità di confederati ticinesi così fiorente, prospera ed attiva.

I nostri ospiti del Ticino ci presenteranno una dimostrazione di ginnastica svizzera e questo sport bianco è in vero tipicamente svizzero e caro ad ogni connazionale. E, se non sbaglio, l'unico sport nel quale ci possiamo vantare di raccogliere regolarmente allori olimpionici. Anche a Londra noi avevamo una Società Ginnastica la cui attività tuttavia è ora sospesa; ciò non vuol dire che l'interesse per le prestigiose esibizioni alle quale assisteremo stasera sia estinto. Noi auguriamo ai nostri confederati un piacevole soggiorno in questa metropoli ed una quantità di buoni ricordi da portare con se nel loro bel cantone.

In conclusion he addressed the members of the Basle choir in "Schwitzerdütsch". The Minister's oration was much cheered.

Then appeared two attractive young ladies, Mlles. Carmen Puiati, and Anita Traversi, who sang various songs accompanied at the piano by Sig. Mario Robbiani, both the ladies, I understand are connected with the radio Monte Ceneri, and have good voices and a pleasant delivery. Their songs were of a mixed bag, I for one would have preferred to hear them sing some of the lovely canzonette which we always so

much enjoy when sung by the "Corale" of the Unione Ticinese. The items rendered were more in keeping with a typical radio entertainment, with which we have become familiar in this country, but had little in common with a 1st of August patriotic demonstration. This is, of course, a personal opinion, and the applause accorded to them may put me in the wrong. The accordeon solo by Sig. Robbiani was much applauded and rightly so.

The reading of the Swiss pact, is one of the principal features at all 1st of August celebrations in our homeland, and is always listened to with due solemnity. I am glad that this custom has been adopted, and kept up at all celebrations in Swiss colonies abroad.

As on a previous occasion, the committee was lucky enough to procure the service of our friend Mr. William B. Sigerist. Dressed as one of the three "Eidgenossen" who took the oath on the Rütli, he read the pact from the parchment with impressive clarity, and great solemnity, thus creating the right atmosphere. The audience listened to the Magna Charta of our country upstanding, and was visibly moved by the fine rendering of these simple and yet so grave words. This item on the programme was one of the high lights of the evening, and Mr. Sigerist is heartily to be congratulated on his fine performance.

The deep impression which the reading of the pact had created, was unfortunately somewhat spoiled by the immediate rendering of a comic song. It would have been more appropriate if the choir could have sung one of our patriotic songs.

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Once more the gymnasts appeared on the stage with martial strides unanimously cheered from all corners of the Hall. This time they gave an amazing performance of various exercises on the parallel bars and the vaulting horses, with very efficient piano accompaniment by Sig. Robbiani, finishing with a most impressive tableau of pyramids. Seldom have I seen, not even at a Federal Gymnasts festival, such a fine performance which rightly "brought the house down". The comical interludes on the parallel bar by one of the members was greatly enjoyed.

The next item consisted of two songs by the mixed choir, amongst them "In Aargäu sy zwöi Liebi", sung with great vivacity.

Then all the performers of the evening assembled on the improvised stage. The standard bearer took his place in front of them, and the entire audience sang upstanding two verses of the Swiss Hymn with deep patriotic feelings.

In conclusion, Mr. Streit, President of the 1st of August committee, warmly thanked all the performers who had taken part in the programme. He expressed thanks to Mr. P. Jacomelli, President of the Unione Ticinese, and Miss S. Morosi, Secretary, for their collaboration. He also voiced his appreciation to Mr. W. A. de Vigier for the help given in the erection of the special platform.

For this purpose he made use of the microphone, but with traditional Bernese slowness it did not occur to him, until it was pointed out to him, that in order to make himself audible he must speak into this gadget. May I humbly suggest that next time he hangs the "mike" round his neck, so as not to lose sight of it.

The following also deserve thanks, : first of all Mr. F. Streit for the hard work he has rendered, Mr. J. Eusebio, who acted very efficiently as announcer, and Mr. D. Paschoud, who was in charge of the catering, and Monsieur A. Albertini, who was instrumental in getting the Società Ginnastico of Giubiasco to take part in the programme, and the firms and individuals, who by their generosity have enabled the Colony to celebrated our country's birthday in a dignified manner. The dance which followed appeared to be a big success.

And so, once more the London Colony's 1st of August celebration has passed, and if it was perhaps open to some criticism it was nevertheless successful; at least as a display pure and simple it has fulfilled its object.

Let us hope that next year we shall be able to celebrate our National Day in brighter days, and under less disturbing circumstances.

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