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SWISS NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION

My childhood memories of our National Day are very vivid and stand out as special occasions usually during our holidays at some lakeside. Coming from a town, it was exciting to be able to mix with the villagers and become one of them for a day. I still clearly remember the feeling of anticipation which pervaded me all day and I am still aware of the tremor which ran through me when the church bells rang before the big moment, the starting of the celebrations with the brass band playing a march in the village square. I can hear the speeches by the local dignitaries, which, though not masterpieces of rhetoric, filled me with something like proud awe. The village gymnastic society, the mixed choirs, the children carrying their red paper lampions marked with a big white cross and lit by a candle, the blazing bonfires burning on the hillsides around the lake — I felt instinctively that there was more to it than just a patriotic commune festivity, I suppose I sensed the fundamental urge to give thanks and was dimly aware of some deep undercurrent of true patriotic affirmation.

It is a far cry from a village in Central Switzerland all those many years ago to a First of August Celebration of the large and heterogeneous Swiss Colony of Metropolitan London and the Home Counties in the sixties. Often have I looked back nostalgically and regretted that I could not recapture the emotions felt then. Last night as I was sitting in the gaily beflagged Wimbledon Town Hall, where a vast gathering was celebrating the Swiss National Day, that special feeling suddenly gripped me again. A group of young people, students at the College of the Swiss Mercantile Society, produced an historic sketch "The New Federation". It was not the words, giving us a brief outline of our history, or the way each flag was added as history was unfolded and more and more Cantons joined the Federation — it was the fact that these young people did not find it beneath their dignity to walk on the stage carrying a simple flag and standing there for so many minutes. I was deeply touched and filled with respect for these youngsters, who, by such a simple act, showed convincingly their own willingness to affirm our country's history and all it stands for.

I only regretted that the patriotic address by the Swiss Ambassador, Monsieur Armin Daeniker, could not have been delivered at the end of that sketch, with the performers making a background more fitting to the occasion than was an empty stage. The atmosphere, too, would have been better and the audience less restive than at the beginning when the curtain went up on the "Chairman's Table" and both the opening prayer, spoken in French by Pasteur Ph. Nicole, and the speech by the Ambassador were frequently spoilt by latecomers. Perhaps the committee could in future find a better background for the delivery of prayer and patriotic address, which, after all, are the highlights of the Celebrations.

The Ambassador began by welcoming the large assembly of compatriots, many of whom had to stand as every seat was occupied. He also welcomed the English friends, and expressed gratitude to the local authorities for receiving us. Monsieur Daeniker then brought a message of good will from the Federal Authorities and our people at home. He referred to the message sent to the Swiss abroad by the President of the Confederation.

The Ambassador then looked back to the events of 1291 and reminded us that "the birth of the Swiss Confederation was a moral challenge, a determined act of political will against a hostile and malignant world". It was an alliance for mutual aid against foreign overlords. It was also a co-operative act which derived its strength from resolute and responsible support of all its adherents.

"This spirit of co-operation", the Ambassador continued, "has ever since been the distinguishing mark of our democracy. So it is built up organically from the smaller units to the larger ones, from the township or valley to the Canton, from the Canton to the Federal State; our Cantons have never been in danger of being swallowed up by the Confederation. Because they were federated they were able to maintain their individualities. Consequently, they have been the sources and pillars of our cultural wealth, forming a strong bulwark against intellectual uniformity. The Swiss discovered very early that they could never be a European power, unwilling as they were to sacrifice their liberties on the altar of centralization. They preferred their own way of life to the lures of power. Of their own free will they accepted neutrality as the guiding maxim of their policy. How beneficial this has for centuries proved to be for the harmonious development of our nation and its mission in the world!"

Monsieur Daeniker asked us to make this anniversary a day of thanksgiving that a benevolent providence has guided our nation and allowed it to preserve its integrity through centuries of Europe's troubled history. We could also be joyfully proud of our precious heritage and full of admiration for our ancestors who laid the foundations of the Confederation and for those who have guided its destiny since. "How well", Monsieur Daeniker said, "they understood how to bring its inner substance into harmony with its outer shape, to give it the strength to resist pressures from outside or from internal tensions. How grateful are we that at the right moment they acted with moderation and tolerance to prepare the way for a stable future."

The speaker then alluded to our peaceful activities and development, our technical and economic progress, our much respected foreign policy of neutrality and our country's endeavours to act as "a platform for international understanding, a bridge between nations at variance, mitigating as far as possible the horrors of war and to offer skill and funds to such young nations as might appeal for guidance".

At the same time, the First of August should also be a day for meditation and of stock-taking. He warned against the fatal danger of drifting along, specially at this time of unprecedented prosperity. He called for a re-appraisal of our traditional institutions in order to come to terms with the New Europe.

"We think", the Ambassador concluded his speech, "that the characteristic values which Switzerland represents should add to its strength, and not hinder our association with the New Europe in whose heart we shall be located. These are crucial decisions which our authorities and people have to take, and every citizen should examine them with the utmost conscientiousness.

"Last but not least, this First of August should be a day for taking a solemn vow. The passport which you carry is more than a certificate of identity. It is a recommendation, and as such a certificate of probity. As

President Eisenhower once said, every citizen abroad should be an ambassador of his country in his own way. In this great country which accords us its hospitality we must all, by the way we behave and by the respect with which we treat its laws and customs, live up to our reputation. But the mother-country needs us too, not only those who, as the message of our President says, are privileged to live at home. If I may address myself to the younger generation in particular: we need you as pioneers, as the vanguard of our country. We need the skill, the professional knowledge and the experience of the wide world which you acquire, extend and improve during your stay abroad, but, above all, your patriotism and devotion. We call upon you all to contribute your share to the common heritage. In this way you can best honour the deed of those men whom we are here to commemorate."

After his address, which was deservedly much applauded, the Ambassador re-joined the other Guests of Honour, our special English friends who were in company of Madame Daeniker and a number of diplomats from our Embassy. The party included His Worship the Mayor of Wimbledon, Alderman Tom Hirst Metcalf, J.P., accompanied by the Mayoress; Alderman Sidney Black, High Sheriff of the County of Surrey; and Alderman G. Waller, accompanied by Mrs. Waller. Several presidents of Swiss Societies, Swiss ministers of religion, and the editor of the "Swiss Observer" were also amongst the guests.

The programme next brought a sound film, "Symphony of Switzerland". Judging from the applause each time the picture of a Swiss town appeared on the screen, the audience must have been fully representative of our 22 Cantons. The film contained some beautiful colour photography, portrayed a mixture of town and country life, folklore as well as music of the highest order, ancient and modern, showed the bears of Berne and the Basle carnival as well as the superb manuscripts at the Abbey in St. Gall, the antics of clever musical dolls, but also the priceless art treasures at the Basle Art Museum. If the film had a fault, to my mind it was that of being too fragmentary in places — this is common to many documentary pictures. But it was a production above average and well away from the usual tourist propaganda.

The sixth item on the programme was the appearance of the mixed choir of the Swiss Mercantile Society's College under the direction of Miss R. Harrison and Mr. D. Bonsall. Their rendering of Swiss and English songs was a most creditable effort and speaks well for students and college staff alike.

The choral singing was followed by a piano recital by Miss Ruth Huggenberg. She is too well known in the Colony to need an introduction and I can only say that to her artistic talents she has added a valuable attribute — that of being a real "sport". To an artist of her calibre it must have been agony to play to such a noisy audience. The programme, though wisely chosen (Chopin is usually popular even with less particular audiences), was wasted on the gathering and I felt thoroughly ashamed at the lack of discipline which marred the excellent performance. Not only was there constant coming and going, but also clattering of plates and cups at the rear of the hall and inconsiderate talking. Through all that noise, which must have been very disconcerting, Miss Huggenberg played Chopin's waltzes in C sharp minor and G flat major and the not so well-known Polonaise Fantaisie Op. 61 in A flat major,

with another Chopin waltz as an encore. I hope the knowledge that in spite of the disturbances many members of the audience enjoyed her playing will console Miss Huggenberg.

I trust the committee will be able in future to keep doors locked while a performance is in progress, so that the artists are spared discomfort and those in the audience who appreciate their art can enjoy it to the full.

The Corale of the Unione Ticinese under the spirited leadership of Mr. Luigi Bruni received tremendous acclamation. The group, though sadly depleted in numbers, looked most attractive in their picturesque costumes, and their singing was, if anything, even better than on previous occasions. They have added new attractive songs to their repertoire and I sincerely hope that their problem with regard to the number of singers will be solved and that any Ticinese, man or woman, with a voice to his or her name, will come forward and join. The members of the Corale are almost entirely second-generation Swiss, which makes their effort even more commendable.

Community singing is usually an attractive item in any programme of this kind. Unfortunately, this time it consisted of a great deal of repetition as two of the songs previously sung by the SMS Choir were repeated in extenso, and it became monotonous to hear the first verse of "Là-haut sur la Montagne" sung over again and again — no audience ever knows more than one verse of a song, anyway. But the assembled choirs looked gay and colourful, carrying the cantonal flags, and the audience responded well enough.

Mr. F. Streit, popular Chairman of the organising committee, thanked the performers for their contributions, and the new Swiss National Anthem, "Schweizerpsalm" (that, too, unfortunately lost by being repeated), brought the first part of a memorable celebration to a close. The guests of the committee were invited to a reception backstage and a happy crowd soon filled the assembly hall, dancing to Harry Vardon's Band up to one o'clock in the morning.

If we talk about the Official Celebration of the Colony we should almost say it with reservations. Of the several hundred participants, probably nine-tenths belonged to our "Floating Colony", the young students, stagiaires, domestic helps, nurses and "au pair" girls, who will return to Switzerland and, with very few exceptions, will never "belong" to the Swiss Colony here. And yet, they are part of it, and the resident Colony is very conscious of its duties and obligations towards the young compatriots. If we as a Colony have succeeded in making them feel happy on the First of August, all the hard work which goes into the organisation of such a re-union was well worth while. And those who have contributed have paid their homage to Switzerland by the very act of their labours. Thanksgiving can take so many forms. It was done on Sunday, 29th July, in the bilingual (French and German) Church Service of the Protestant Swiss Church in London and in the Roman Catholic National Day Service in Westminster the same evening. It was done, no doubt, last night at Wimbledon, one way or another, while we were listening, watching and singing. But our gratitude to Divine Providence which has preserved our country can be no less impressive in a tangible way by deeds and actions in everyday life. That, I believe, would be real thanksgiving.

Mariann.