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WHAT IS THE SWISS SENSE OF NATIONAL UNITY?

Lecture delivered to the London Group of the N.S.H.

by DR. DANIEL FREI

PART FIVE

What has been said so far concerns the answer to the question: What is Swiss patriotism? Of necessity, this answer had to be given in abstract and sometimes rather dry terms. Yet, do these abstract ideas really represent the vivid reality, the daily dynamics of Swiss political life? The existence of such national ideas is not the cause of the Swiss nation holding together. What is and what was much more important is the fact that these national ideas have been kept in the minds and the hearts of the majority of the citizens. Only by being part of real life are they able to be politically active and to create realities. It can therefore not be sufficient to analyse national ideas as such. But in order to get complete understanding of Swiss patriotism, we have to ask how these national ideas are activated, and how they have become an inherent part of the whole nation's feeling and thinking.

If we ask how political ideas today are communicated to the people, taught or propagated, we would answer by referring to the Press and to broadcasting and to other media of mass communication. These have indeed also served to strengthen the Swiss sense of national unity. Just to mention one instance, when it was necessary during the last war to convince the Swiss people of their ability and their will to defend themselves against any possible aggressor.

But at the time when the Swiss nation was created, these modern means of mass communication were not known. This lack was indeed for a long period the main handicap in uniting the old Swiss Confederates into a single State. The Swiss nation is very much younger than Swiss patriotism. The latter had been developed during the eighteenth century. The honourable members of the Société Helvétique were all patriots and familiar with those ideas. But the number of such patriots having a common national feeling was small, too small to be politically effective. For the overwhelming majority of the people and also for those having any influence in politics, the Canton and the preservation of cantonal sovereignty was much more important than national solidarity. The events of the year 1798 when Switzerland, incapable of organising a common defence against the French invaders, collapsed within a few days, is salient evidence for this fact. The period in which the Swiss Cantons united into a single Swiss nation began after that event and ended with the year 1848 when Switzerland got its first Federal Constitution. That half century was a decisive one, specially regarding the way in which national ideas were taught to the people.

The first means for national education to be mentioned are, of course, the schools, particularly the primary school. Swiss schools were for a long time in a rather bad condition. Gotthelf gave vivid pictures of the pitiful state of primary school education in his novels. There were no particular school books, except the Bible. Nor did the teachers have any theoretical training. But in the 'thirties of the nineteenth century, a great and intensive endeavour began to improve this, and one of the moving forces behind this concentration on improving the school system was evidently the idea to use it as a means for national education.

How could the school inspire the young Swiss with patriotic feelings? First of all by teaching them Swiss

patriotic songs. The great bulk of Swiss patriotic songs in existence today were created in those years — all those songs narrating the heroic deeds of medieval Swiss warriors, of battles and victories, of mountains, herdsmen and lakes, all those songs, one of which the Federal Council has been trying to introduce as Swiss National Anthem, without success, however, so far. The Swiss patriotic songs are undoubtedly the best source from which to spread the national ideas.

Next, the school should inspire Swiss children with national feelings by teaching them history. If we look at the several hundred text books for Swiss history published in the nineteenth century, we find that all of them express the same great common aim in the preface: the implanting of national admiration, enthusiasm and glory, the strengthening of patriotic views and loyalties, the propagation of national ideas and feelings. Of course, these books did not intend to show the past merely as it had been. They emphasised the heroic aspects. Authors found themselves very soon in a conflict when, in the middle of the nineteenth century, some Swiss historians discovered that part of the traditional views on the history of liberation was found to be legendary. Usually, such criticism was resolutely rejected by the authors of historical text books, and thus the teaching of history was split up into two different ways; into a scholarly manner looking at the past critically, and into a popular manner continuing to take legends and traditional tales as the main source of historical knowledge. This tension between the two methods is still alive: it comes up year after year in the question of whether or not William Tell really did exist. The school teachers in Switzerland still suffer from this quarrel and find it difficult to tell what the truth is.

These, then, are some remarks on the way primary schools are able to contribute to the formation and inspiration of the sense of national unity. The continuation of what the school achieves in this matter takes place in the military service. General Guisan once said "La caserne est le complément de l'école. Notre armée est ce qui dure, ce qui nous unit. Elle poursuit en silence sa grande tâche d'éducation nationale". That is certainly true. The Swiss army was the first national institution, it was established even before the Swiss Federal State was founded. In its units, men from all social classes and geographical regions join in the pursuit of a single common aim: the defence of the nation. The army has always had a very important unifying and integrating significance. It is indeed a complement to primary school education, and it is certainly legitimate to call it a kind of "Schmelzriegel", a national melting pot.

(To be concluded.)

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