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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 SIX

Besides the school and the Army, there were and are other means for developing the Swiss sense of national unity. The most important means for uniting the citizens of the Cantons into a Nation and for creating strong patriotism are the large popular associations, especially the Swiss rifle associations. They are one of the most typical features of the Swiss way of life. In the nineteenth century, their purpose was, however, very different from that of our time. Today, the rifle associations afford an opportunity for practice and to prove the ability of the riflemen, and they are closely linked with national defence. In the last century, the festivals of the Swiss rifle associations were first of all political and social events and not sporting occasions. The Federal Rifle Association was founded in 1824, and the first paragraph of its constitution demonstrates this in a clear manner: "The aim of our association is first to bring together the hearts of all Swiss, secondly to strengthen the power of our fatherland by creating unanimous feelings and close links between Swiss, and thirdly (and lastly — obviously not so important!) to contribute to the further development of the noble art of firing". The annual festivals had one thing in common — the centre was not so much the rifle range as the banqueting hall. Here, more than twenty speeches were usually delivered every day, and all had a decidedly political character. None of the Radical or Liberal politicians failed to go to the platform of the banqueting hall in order to address the riflemen. Of course, the political style of these gatherings was a very crude one. The excited assembly used to shout down speakers who did not talk patriotism, and very often these gatherings ended with stormy and turbulent scenes, when glasses and bones were thrown around, resulting in general confusion and unruly scuffle. There were also scenes of demagogism: the assembly, for instance, passed resolutions against the Diet, accusing the responsible governors of Switzerland of being slow in uniting the country, of betraying the national interest to cantonal egoism.

In 1840, the Councillor of States Henry Druey of Lausanne, who later became one of the first Federal Councillors, explained: "This, the festival of the Federal Rifle Association, is the true virtual Diet of Switzerland and not that stubborn body of old-fashioned politicians sitting in Berne, Zurich and Lucerne!" Often, the rifle associations were compared with the Rütli and called "the new Rütli" or "the Rütli of our time". One of the most pertinent descriptions of the Federal Rifle Association festivals has been given by Gottfried Keller who himself was one of the keenest members. In one of his poems he writes:

"Halt! Steckt das Banner auf den Turm:
Hie Schweizerland zehn Tag,
Zehn Tage lang Gemütesturm
Und Vaterlandsgelag!"

These words can hardly be translated into English — "Gemütesturm" and "Vaterlandsgelag" are certainly the most characteristic expressions describing the atmosphere of that time.

They may be applied also to the festivals of the two other associations founded in the 'twenties of the nineteenth

century, both supporting patriotism, the Federal Gymnastic and Federal Male Choir Associations, the famous "Männerchöre". Both organised annual rallies similar to those of the Rifle Association. They, too, had great political importance. The "Männerchöre", still so typical of the Swiss way of life, played a particularly important part in the last century when they were much more popular than today. Nearly every Swiss was a member of these associations where he sang the patriotic songs already mentioned previously.

In addition to the main means of national integration, the schools, military service, the big associations, there are the national ceremonies, holidays and festivals which were all created in the nineteenth century. Some of the roots, naturally, went back further than that, for instance the various remembrance days, the "Schlachtjahrzeiten" for the battles of Sempach, Näfels and Dornach. But these early commemoration days had been purely local or religious events with no national implication. The Swiss national movement transformed them into national events by turning them into brilliant manifestations attended by large crowds from all parts of Switzerland. The main feature of these remembrance days developed in the nineteenth century when pageants and processions were arranged portraying glorious events from the country's past, and where scenes of national life, costumes and customs were shown.

The nineteenth century revelled in the celebration of as many festivals as possible. The patriotic people of that time not only observed annual festivals but celebrated centenaries, be it of the foundation of a town, the entry of a Canton into the Confederation, a famous battle or treaty. Centenaries, too, are a typical expression of Swiss patriotism. The culmination of all this movement was achieved in the celebration of the Swiss National Day on 1st August 1891, when for the first time bonfires were lit too.

The Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Atonement and Prayer, on the other hand, had been in existence in Switzerland for quite a long time. But because the common feeling of the Swiss was weak for several centuries, agreement could not be reached on a common national day of prayer. At the beginning of the last century, there were three different days of prayer, Protestant, Catholic and one for the Grisons. The unanimity of Swiss people, the common national solidarity, does not seem to have been strong enough to find a compromise for a common date until 1848. It is only since then that the Swiss celebrate a real Federal Day of Prayer.

1848 was also the year when Switzerland united into a single State, a landmark in the history of the Swiss. Now the fervently desired aim had been reached, the common national State had become a reality.

Finally, one should turn back now to the point which was made at the beginning regarding the tendency of certain people to compare European integration of today with the integration of the Swiss Cantons into a single State in the last century. A comparison can indeed be made, but the Swiss experience shows very clearly that integration of different political units into a larger political body

is only possible if it has a moving spiritual force, a common feeling, a sense of national unity. If we consider the present trend towards European unification, we may well question any underlying European patriotism. The French policy as represented by General de Gaulle seems to be determined more by French national considerations than by European forces and concern. The fact that European integration still has to overcome great difficulties and that national forces still prevail in contemporary Europe, may perhaps be taken as a reason and justification for considering the Swiss position as has been done here.

But the term "justification" is, at any rate in this context, a wrong term, particularly if we consider patriotism of today. The only pertinent word in this context would be "duty". Today, in 1965, there is a great need to reconsider Swiss patriotism. If we focus on the problem of contemporary evolution, the only starting point can be the statement that we live in a time of rapid change. There are few countries which experience this in such intensive and thorough a manner as Switzerland. The picture which the Swiss National Exhibition presented last year, was in many ways a startling one. The technical development has changed the face of Switzerland entirely: Rapid increase of population, little towns where lonely villages used to be, factories, motorways, hundreds and thousands of cars elsewhere. Social problems have arisen: More than 10% of the population living in Switzerland are foreigners who are not at all interested in integrating themselves in that community. There are also dangerous economic problems: Swiss money is depreciating in value slowly but continuously. The Swiss position in foreign trade with European countries is hampered, and with this the very basis of Swiss economic life. The Swiss Army has difficulties in being up-to-date in the present tremendous arms race, and in the "Mirage" case, this problem has also had serious repercussions on domestic political life. There are good reasons to assume that in the next decade these problems will even increase their burden. Switzerland of today faces an unknown and perhaps very difficult tomorrow,

All these problems share one common factor: they all, to some extent, challenge the existence of Switzerland. In such situations of rapid change it must be the duty of all Swiss to ask: "Why Switzerland? Why this group of six million men living together in the centre of Europe?" In asking and answering these questions, we focus on the very heart and soul of national existence, on the *will* and the *desire* of these men to live together. This can be defined as the Swiss sense of national unity. If it becomes lame and gets tired, the serious problems Switzerland is facing today and tomorrow, could be of immediate danger to the further existence of our country. But if, on the other hand, the Swiss sense of national unity remains active and vivid, no problem, even if it were ten times more serious, could really mean a threat to the existence of Switzerland. By emphasising that Swiss patriotism must be active and alive, one certainly does not mean that it should be stimulated to nationalist fanaticism and to a wave of chauvinist hysteria. Being active and alive means something else. It means being constantly reconsidered and newly and freshly acquired — acquired by well-founded and clear thinking about *what* Switzerland is, *why* it is and *how* it should be at present and in future.

(Concluded)

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