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FRIDAY, 9th SEPTEMBER 1966

1966 THE YEAR OF "FIFTH SWITZERLAND"

SWISS FEDERAL DAY OF THANKSGIVING

Sunday, 18th September 1966



By courtesy Swiss National
Tourist Office

In a small chapel in Sussex there stands a wood carving of a Madonna and child, impressively simple and serene. A Swiss wood carver, Beat Gasser from Lungern

on the Bruenig Pass, fashioned it out of an Arolla pine over 600 years old, and the people of Zermatt gave it to the Bowles Mountaineering Centre where it was dedicated

and blessed by the Chaplain of the Swiss R.C. Community in London. The Chapel is a replica of the Schwarzseekapelle near Zermatt, built practically by hand by English craftsmen, Jim Barton and Bill Barham. The original of the statue is in the Church of Our Lady of Minster at Tonbridge. But the Bowles Chapel is not only used by Roman Catholics; Protestants and Anglicans, and others worship there, men and women of many nationalities, but passionate lovers of mountains all. The first man who climbed the Matterhorn over 100 years ago was an Englishman, and his great-nephew John Whymper was among the congregation on that Sunday in July last when the Madonna was presented by Mr. C. Cachin of Zermatt's Tourist Office.

You may well ask what all this has to do with the Swiss Federal Day of Thanksgiving, Atonement and Prayer on 18th September. Perhaps nothing very obvious — Anglo-Swiss friendship expressed in a rather unusual way. Yet somehow, the frail figure with its eternal message and carrying a dove, the symbol of peace, means more. It makes us halt and reflect on the happenings which have brought the statue to its resting place. John Walters was inspired by the majesty of the Alps and the desire to initiate others in the wonderful art of mountaineering. He brought into being the Centre in the heart of Sussex. Once it was established, the wish for a communal place of worship was as great as that for a Club House. Both exist now. The stonemason who built the Chapel worked according to photographs of the Schwarzseekapelle, as did the wood carver on the Bruenig Pass who created the statue. The modern camera provided the help needed, but the work was carried out with devotion and love. The stones from which the Chapel were built and the wood from which the Madonna was carved were there six centuries ago, when the first Confederate Cantons were fighting to establish their independence, and Britain was ruled by the last of the Plantagenets, when the Black Death raged and the Peasants' Revolt was imminent. Over a thousand years had gone by already since Christ had lived and been crucified, and the Bowles Rocks and the Matterhorn had even then been in existence for hundreds of centuries, witnesses to God's Creation.

And here we are today in 1966, the year dedicated to us Swiss living abroad, on the threshold of a new phase in our history because our rights and duties are to be recognised by a special Constitutional Article. Thus the Federal Day of Thanksgiving takes on a new significance. Humbly we count the many blessings that a kind God has bestowed upon us, citizens of a free country, living in this hospitable island which, though troubled and in economic agony at the moment, is still the keeper of a proud heritage and a stronghold of essential freedom. We Swiss abroad are grateful for the distinct recognition the representatives of our compatriots at home, i.e. Parliament, have given us with the *Auslandschweizerartikel* which the citizens at home will be asked to place decisively in the Federal Constitution on 16th October next.

The Constitutional Article has been called the fulfilment of our wishes, the crowning of our efforts, a monument to our loyalty. Yet in reality it will only be a starting point. We must realise that this new chapter in the history of "Fifth Switzerland" cannot be written gloriously and be of lasting value, unless we contribute substantially. For every one of us it is a question of conscience what we are going to do with the Article which, as we con-

fidently trust, will be firmly anchored in the Federal Charter in a few weeks' time. It will be a kind of blueprint for us, but it still depends on our love, and our skill and, yes, our sacrifices to make something out of it, something which will be hailed as good as the Bowles Chapel and the wooden Madonna.

We cannot but ask ourselves where we have failed in the past to support and keep untarnished the image of our country. Inevitably, the question arises of how we can best harness our personal strength and abilities to the tasks ahead. Such reflection is essential. Did not Max Huber say in 1915 — the Central President of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique reminded us at the Jubilee of the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad in April — "the highest command for all deeds and thoughts are clarity and truth. Big words which are not based on clear conception are means to self-deception and to deceiving others". Once we arrive at seeing the truth clearly, we are able to admit our failures as individuals and as patriots, and we can then pray for help and guidance in our resolve to do better. And then perhaps, the Constitutional Article will become the means in our hands to fashion something of permanent value for many.

We have received our talents, and however modest they may be, we are responsible for their proper use. The former Federal Councillor Wahlen, one of our greatest statesmen of recent years, said in one of his famous speeches that with this fact alone our responsibility starts *vis-à-vis* the community which is entitled to a contribution towards its development, according to the size of the entrusted talents. "Right at the beginning of the biblical history of humanity stands the pregnant question: Shall I be my Brother's keeper? He who affirms this by his action in everyday life, takes on the most direct of all responsibilities which life gives us, however narrow or wide its outer contours are drawn.

F. T. Wahlen says that two people or presences are needed in responsibility, one that is responsible and the other to whom one has to account. "But whatever the two poles are upon which responsibility rests, and whatever their size and importance, *that* community is best off in which the largest number of citizens and as such all responsible people, recognise in God a last pole of responsibility and, in their decisions, take their bearings through the magnetic field of conscience from Him as the highest authority."

And thus, on the Eve of *Bettag* in this "Year of Fifth Switzerland", the little Swiss Madonna in the Sussex Chapel reminds us of where we stand as sons and daughters of Helvetia, as *Auslandschweizer* and as human beings, with all our failures, and our hopes, our responsibilities and our endeavours in the future.

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