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NEWS FROM THE COLONY

SWISS NATIONAL DAY CELEBRATION

Wimbledon

Exactly 30 years ago, the first Colony National Day Celebration was held at the St. Pancras Town Hall. There had been individual smaller festivities, and the Churches had arranged a patriotic service. But up to then it had always been held by the "establishment" that no celebration could be successfully organised on account of *everybody being on holiday around 1st August*. How wrong they were! The celebration organised by a committee under the chairmanship of Mr. W. Meier, was such a success that the police had to close the doors behind the first 2,000, and several hundred compatriots had to be turned away. All language groups were given a chance, there was community singing and a sale of Swiss postcards and souvenirs of all kinds, and there was dancing.

Then the war came, and that brought about a different kind of National Day Celebration, carried by a spirit of patriotism prompted by the concern with one's country's fate; there was no merry-making. They were probably the best commemorations of 1st August 1291, and in that the London Swiss were not alone — at home, too, the character of the wartime *Bundesfeiern* cannot now be recaptured. Those were the times when a prayer came from the bottom of one's heart, and when one was conscious of what it meant to be Swiss, to be free.

On this year's 1st August I could not help wondering how many of the several hundred people gathering at Wimbledon Town Hall gave more than a fleeting thought to what it meant to be Swiss. The opening march played by Mr. Lennart Rabes, well-known pianist and organist of the German-speaking Swiss Church, set the right mood, (Elgar's Pomp and Circumstance Marches would always do that), but there were so few people present at the start of the evening's programme and such constant shuffling and talking that the fine music failed to make the impact its expert rendering could have achieved under normal circumstances.

The two films on Switzerland were of superb photography, but my criticism would be, and I know it was supported by many, that a picture which portrays Switzerland as the dairy farming and yodelling folkloristic country is too one-sided to give a really good impression of the nation as a whole. Whilst presentation and photography of the second film were of first-class quality, the accompanying noises — one just could not call them music — distracted the viewer to such an extent that the picture failed to penetrate.

The welcome (in English) by the M.C., Mr. C. de Maria, the prayer (in French) by The Rev. J. Hostettler and the reading (in German) of the Swiss Pact by Father P. Bossard gave a patriotic setting for the address by the Swiss Ambassador, Monsieur René Keller. He was surrounded by the Swiss cantonal flags carried by young girls.

Monsieur Keller began his speech (in English) by thanking Mr. V. Berti for temporarily filling the gap left by the illness of the congenial President, Mr. F. Streit, who was in hospital. The Ambassador sent Mr. Streit heartfelt wishes for a prompt and complete recovery. The wishes were sincerely seconded by the many friends of the Streit family, who were happy to see Mrs. Streit amongst the V.I.P.s, (a considerable number of them from the Embassy). Miss S. Streit, as in previous years, was in charge of the sale of tickets, and other members of the Committee were hard at work, too, perhaps this is the moment to impart the news that a Press Release had been issued a few days before by Mr. Berti and Mr. R. L. Thomas, Chairman of the Fête Suisse, with the following wording:

By mutual agreement of the two committees, the Fete Suisse is now merging into the First of August Celebration.

Both organisations pursue basically the same aim, i.e. to gather the Swiss community once a year on a festive occasion, and to give the participants an opportunity to meet. Thus the long-established tradition of the Fête Suisse will be maintained in the Celebration of the First of August.

No comment is needed. Those who remember the Fête Suisse will no doubt feel sorry, and others, will be glad and welcome the news. Perhaps the decision will prompt some of the residents who used to come to the Fête Suisse, but have kept away from the National Day Celebration so far, to support the valiant efforts of the 1st August Committee. As it happened, there were rather more of the residents this year than last time. The Ambassador referred to the "young" character of the National Day Celebration, which is different from any other Colony event. He said:

"Once more, our gathering is honoured by the presence of His Worship the Mayor of the Borough of Merton, now Councillor Philip Corbishley, and the Mayoress, and of the Deputy Mayor, Councillor Peter Gill, and Mrs. Gill. A past Mayor and great friend of Switzerland, Mr. Waller, is also with us. I wish them to know how very much we appreciate their hospitality, which year after year symbolizes the close bonds between our two countries.

"Tonight is the second occasion on which I have spoken in these present surroundings. I know my audience better this time, thanks to "The Swiss Observer", the newspaper of the Swiss colony. This is how its Editor, Mrs. Mariann Meier, to whom I should like to pay tribute for her tireless work on behalf of the Swiss abroad, described the scene here on the First of August 1968:

"*Whilst the Town Hall at Wimbledon was packed, the bulk of the audience was made up by young people, here today and, more often than not, gone tomorrow. A relatively small number of residents was present ....*"

"From this I deduce that our National Day comes at an awkward time for the resident Swiss, the majority of whom are on holiday — for that reason, incidentally, the Swiss in Paris celebrate the First of August during the month of June — but I gather that it falls on a convenient date for the young people who come here in summer to improve their knowledge of the English language and of English life. I, for my part, am delighted to see this young audience. Their presence here shows that they are not unaware of the profound significance of the National Day and confirms the impression that absence from one's native land makes one appreciate it all the more. Small communities feel the need to get together more than big ones, but if a reunion is to have any meaning it requires a motive, either religion — as with the Churches — entertainment or deep emotion. This last motive is the very essence of the First of August, the indispensable focal point of the Swiss abroad and the Swiss in transit. For we all draw on our common memories of the story of the three Waldstätten, of the Rütli, and of the bonfires at home. It is true that the folklore aspect of our National Day no longer arouses in the Swiss of 1969 the raptures of former days, but that doesn't matter so long as our hearts are still moved by the remarkably modern message of the Pact of 1291. The purpose of that document was to ensure peace and security. It denounces violence and rejects submission to a foreign judiciary — in short, it inscribes on the banners of the oldest democracy in the world the notions of liberty, justice and human dignity.

"To these ideals, which are nearly seven centuries old, we undoubtedly owe our best quality, namely, the spirit of tolerance and mutual understanding which has made possible the close association of four languages and two Christian denominations, and

which ensures the remarkable harmony prevailing in industrial relations today.

"But are justice and human dignity really sovereign in our country? We may doubt that as long as women do not have the vote and we are prevented, for that and other less important reasons, from adhering, without express reservations, to the Convention on Human Rights drawn up by the Council of Europe at Strasbourg. How can we explain this contradiction except by realizing that direct democracy, as we practise it, has a highly conservative effect and that, having been spared by war, we have escaped the influence of that terrible accelerator of history? We must therefore develop our imagination so that, while remaining true to ourselves, we can at the same time face up to the problems which are posed now by the Common Market and those which will one day be posed by our adherence to, or continued absence from, the United Nations Organization. We are already displaying this imagination in the field of science and technology. You know that one of Apollo XI's tasks on the moon was to fix up a sheet of aluminium invented by the University of Berne in order to collect atoms of what is called the solar wind. In addition to these particles, Berne University is going to examine specimens of lunar rock and dust.

"Moreover, there are two sides to prosperity. The over-heating of the economy makes us dependent on too many foreign workers and brings with it the threat of inflation. Material well-being is accompanied by noise, by water and air pollution, by congestion of all kinds. Disputes are beginning to crop up, and in this field the United Kingdom, where we are living, can teach us a great deal. You know that this astonishing country has had neither revolution nor civil war since the 17th century. It is a past master of the art of evolution; indeed, the hands of the British clock may now even have jumped ahead, whereas they once lagged behind the rest of the Western world. Only 15 years ago, during my first term of office here, London was still living in the post-Victorian era. The first coffee bars were making a timid appearance in Knightsbridge, the few young men with long hair were called Teddy Boys, but the bowler hat still dominated St. James's.

"Then, with a veritable explosion, the affluent society produced the permissive society.

"One after the other the taboos fell, and we were steeped in an atmosphere of what its admirers called ultra-liberalism and its detractors called licence. It is not my place to pass judgment, but I am bound to say that under a luxuriant growth the roots remain firm. The amused tolerance of the establishment, which, moreover, is open to reform, and the caution of the activists before the point of no return, are a good omen for a smooth passage into the 1970s.

"I will end on a note with a specifically "Swiss of London" flavour.

"You all know the Swiss Centre, between Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square. Most of you have heard of the plan to establish a "Forum of Switzerland" there, as a meeting-place for the Swiss and a setting for cultural functions. The idea originated in the Swiss societies in London and received the support of the Confederation. At the beginning of this year I launched an appeal which aroused the whole colony's interest in the project, and its generous financial contribution has fulfilled my expectations. But the total sum collected from various quarters is still not adequate. However, I have high hopes that we shall reach our goal.

"Another building will be of interest to you. The former Embassy at Bryanston Square and Montagu Place is being reconstructed. In two to three years we shall be installed and looking forward to welcoming a great many of you there."

The Ambassador's speech was well-received. He was followed by a yodeller, Miss Dora Salzmann. The applause accorded to Urs Boeschenstein of Radio Zurich showed that the latter was more appreciated by the audience than the yodeller, and probably not only because the microphone behaved better when he sang his catchy songs.

One of the items on the programme was called "Schnitzelbank". A group of the Swiss Churches Association sang a new National Anthem. The truth of some of the rather sarcastic but well-conceived verses is such that the writer has no doubt at all of the song's failure to win a place in the sun. The Swiss don't like to be reminded of some of their lesser qualities.

1.
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und hab die Berge lieb,
Sie bringen uns Touristen und Ferienbetrieb,
Das Matterhorn, die Eigerwand, rentieren fuer das Vaterland!
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und hab die Berge lieb.

2.
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und liebe unser Land,
Verkaufe Grund und Boden und schwoere mit der Hand:
Mer waend wie d'Vaetter zaemestoh, wenn froemdi Foetzel settid cho!
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und liebe unser Land.

3.
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und liebe unsern Sport,
Drum bleib ich von zu Hause fast jeden Sonntag fort.
Die Ehre liegt in einem Kranz, das gibt der Heimat Ruhm und Glanz!
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und liebe unsern Sport.

4.
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe, bleib schmutz'ger Arbeit fern,
Drum sehe ich im Lande die Fremdarbeiter gern,
Doch kommt mal einer in mein Haus, so schmeiss ich ihn zur Tuer hinaus!
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und bleib der Arbeit fern.

5.
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und hab die Frauen gern,
Drum halt ich mit Entschlossenheit sie von der Urne fern.
Wenn Mutter haett die Oberhand, dann waere es kein Vaterland!
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und hab die Frauen gern.

6.
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und bleibe stets neutral,
Ich hab ein gutes Bankkonto und keine andre Wahl.
Ich gen nicht gern ins Militaer, drum liebe ich den Frieden sehr!
Ich bin ein Schweizerknabe und bleibe stets neutral.

7.
Ich bleib ein Schweizerknabe in Englands Koenigreich,
Der Wohlfahrtsstaat ist teuer und das ist mir nicht gleich.
Drum kritisiert mit Herz und Hand, was man nicht kennt in unserm Land!
Ich bleib ein Schweizerknabe in Englands Koenigreich.

The last item of the official part of the evening was the appearance of the Unione Ticinese Choir. As ever, they managed to reproduce some of the happy Southern atmosphere with their light-hearted songs. I believe they have never been as strong in numbers or in voice as on this, the tenth celebration at Wimbledon Town Hall. There were over 30 members, and all in beautiful national costumes and by the sound of it all in excellent voice, led skilfully by Mr. Luigi Bruni and his accordion. How they manage again and again to find new songs, is surprising; there must be some very good public relations work with someone back home!

After the singing of the National Anthem, the real (temporary) one this time, the large crowds dispersed for a while until the floor was prepared for dancing to Harry Vernon's Band. The *Romands* had complained earlier that all the singing on the programme had been confined to the German and Italian languages, and they saw to it that French came into its own during a dance interval. The likely singing and a kind of modern folk dancing was pleasant to watch and certainly preferable to the noisy antics we remember from some of the previous years' celebrations. That was definitely a positive mark of this year's event; there was no rowdyism, at least not by the time the writer left, and that was not long before the end of a pleasant and well-spent evening. It was different from the one 30 years ago and all the wartime gatherings. It is difficult to suggest how it could be improved. Perhaps some of the Fête Suisse features could be included, such as using more local talents (children's dancing etc), and community singing which would contribute much to welding the floating population of young Swiss to the residents.

(*M.M.*)