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Autor:	Slater, Peter E.
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SWISS NATIONAL DAY GREETING FROM AN ENGLISHMAN

At the beginning of August, 1291, the people of the Cantons of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden took the first steps which have led to the establishment of the only example of true Democracy to be seen in the world today. To my knowledge, there is no other country on earth where the people's will reigns as certainly as it does in Switzerland.

As an Englishman, I find the Swiss ideals of personal liberty and absolute honesty remind me of my boyhood in rural Devonshire, when we too valued these things, together with patriotism and a sense of duty.

I am reminded of a true story about a friend of ours who was admiring a hat in a large store in Geneva but had almost spent all her foreign currency allowance.

"Never mind", said the shop assistant. "You can pay next time you come in".

"But I am going home to England tomorrow", said our friend.

The shop assistant seemed surprised that this should present any problems.

"There is the post!" she said. "You can send it to us."

There was no question in the mind of the assistant that the foreign stranger might not pay her.

The same attitude is apparent in the spaces reserved outside large stores in Switzerland where one parks one's loaded shopping bags. I regret to say that, in Britain today, they would be missing when one returned.

Anyone who knows me is soon aware of my unceasing efforts to find a way of returning to Switzerland to make my home. At heart I am a Vaudois, or more particularly an Aubonneois. I have lost my heart to the country and her people. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to put my experience and ability to work in Switzerland's service but, at 50, my chances of finding a job are getting ever more remote.

Having confessed my bias towards "la belle Suisse", let me say that I am not blind to her faults or her problems.

The turnout at the referenda is too small for comfort. Although I am sure that, on fundamental issues, the people would turn out to vote, there is always the danger that a freedom may be lost, or an undesirable change may be made, because of the apathy of the voters. I think it is unlikely, but not impossible.

Switzerland, like the rest of the world, is caught in the trap of industrialisation which demands ever more productivity, ever more raw material, and ever more energy. Anyone with a grain of common sense knows that unlimited growth is impossible and that a turn down must inevitably occur. I hope Swiss common sense will find an answer to the problem but I have no idea what it ought to be.

However, although Switzerland must inevitably change, I believe that the character of her people will ensure that the changes are good ones in the best interests of all concerned and with the least harm to man or nature.

Switzerland is frequently criticised for being a land where money is the most important thing in life, but I know that the Swiss value money but keep it in its place — as they do their politicians. It is valued for what it can do but not allowed to become their master. What foreigners do not understand is that the Swiss expect a man to make reasonable provision for himself and his family and not ask for help unless he has done so and it has proved to be insufficient. Henri Dunant and Heinrich Pestalozzi epitomise the attitudes of the Swiss and give the lie to the idea that money is all.

The Swiss are said to be cold, inhospitable people, but how many foreigners bother to get to know them? Unless one makes the effort, the Swiss think that the foreigner does not want them to intrude into his private life and they respect his privacy. Those who make the effort quickly find a warm welcome and true friend, as I know from personal experience.

It is to these friendly, warm-hearted people that I send my greeting and those of my family on their National Day. Long may they remain uniquely Swiss.

Peter E. Slater

