

# 1st August message from the president of the Swiss Confederation

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# 1st August Message from The President of The Swiss Confederation

Dear compatriots abroad,

We celebrate today the birth of our nation, and I am delighted on this occasion to send you the best wishes of the members of the Federal Council and of the Swiss people. Today we are thinking especially of our compatriots abroad — and I know that to many of you this day means even more than it does to some Swiss here at home.

For you abroad, this is the day when you remember your homeland. In the light of this remembrance, some things may appear more beautiful, more exalted even, than they really were. One's homeland is always associated with memories and nostalgia. Everyone has his own personal home, which he yearns to see again. And in this sense, home must not always be associated with political frontiers. Some may yearn after a certain landscape, others after their native village or town. One yearns after people — people you like and who still live where once you used to have your home. One longs perhaps for a favourite dish "that no one made like mother" — or even for a certain drink that only the landlord of your local tavern knew how to serve.

There's always something sentimental about one's home. Above all, it has to do with feelings. But that is nothing to be ashamed of. The hectic

world in which we live today lacks too much in true sentiment and feeling, and has become the poorer for it. We would have less neuroses today if, instead of laughing, we could be allowed to cry a little from time to time — as was usual, say, in the days of Goethe. But today we are ashamed if we have to convey sorrows, troubles and worries. Nowadays, our society recognizes only success.

One can, of course, get carried away by such feelings and nostalgia to the extent that one can no longer see, or is no longer even capable of seeing, reality. That is why many visualize their old homeland as something of a picture-book paradise.

I myself have often noticed visible disappointment among Swiss people who, upon returning home after years of residence abroad, discover that their homeland is not such a paradise after all. But this does not apply only to Switzerland. Most of the problems we face today are problems with which all the world's industrialised nations are confronted. We're told that the world is getting smaller all the time.

The age of air travel no doubt has brought people closer together physically. But has it brought us closer together in a spiritual, in a human sense? Reality shows us that this isn't so. Yet the differences

which separate us are perhaps not quite as marked any more as they used to be. The national clichés which developed during the 19th century are no longer quite as valid as before. The image of the Swiss is no longer of a fellow whose hands are stuck in his pockets — this would be impossible anyway with the tight blue jeans so many people wear today.

We Swiss are no longer a country of cowherds and farmers. We have become an industrial nation. Twenty-five years ago one in five Swiss worked in agriculture — today the figure is one in 20. In 1955 Switzerland had around one million apartments — today the figure is two and a half million. Many new factories have been built. The construction of our national motorway network started years ago. We ourselves in Switzerland hardly notice these changes — gradual changes often escape our attention — which is why we sometimes have difficulty in preventing the damage resulting from these developments.

Our area under cultivation is shrinking steadily. Many of us here in Switzerland would like to think that our world hasn't changed. But a Swiss returning home after years abroad finds those changes more noticeable — and often, all the more painful.

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Now and then we, too, experience shock in the wake of these occurrences. Because every desired-for change brings with it unwanted change as well. We have problems with our younger generation — a younger generation which is not quite the same as we were. We often make the mistake of blaming younger people for these very changes that we of the older generation either desired or initiated, or did nothing to prevent. This younger generation are beginning to realise that their inheritance from us could cost them more than it is worth.

It seems to me that the world which we have made ourselves, is causing us a lot of trouble. We have problems with our environment, with our regional planning, with our infrastructure and with our traffic system. We have problems of recession — just like other countries. There are political groups who try to stop development or even to turn back the wheels of time.

They are motivated by understandable nostalgia — but also by a lot of wishful thinking. In their time the so-called “good old days” were sometimes the “bad new days”. That is something we forget all too quickly. And some of the older people among you will perhaps recall that they were forced to leave our country because they were unable to earn a proper living here.

The world — and also the small world of Switzerland — has not become an easier place to live in. Nevertheless it has become for us in Switzerland a better world. A world with higher salaries, with social insurances and — if we think of the national old age pension — with a more secure future in general. I know that sounds optimistic. But looking to the future is what politics is all about. And to think of the future is in itself an expression of optimism.

Switzerland is now a rich nation. It has become so through hard work. But the reputation of Swiss industriousness was born not only here in Switzerland. A great share of the credit must go to those Swiss who left their homeland. Perhaps it is too often forgotten how much our compatriots abroad do for their country throughout the world.

As I have already said, we are living today in what I believe is a better world. If it doesn't often seem that way, it is because the world's problems have become more evident to us. No longer can we close our eyes to the social distress suffered by others, to the harmful side effects of industrial progress, to the human problems in general resulting from the growing mechanisation of our life.

Our world has become more problem-conscious and this, to me, is a positive development. But it also means that our country carries a greater obligation, a greater responsibility. Switzerland enjoys a reputation in the

humanitarian field — a reputation established by Henri Dunant and the Red Cross movement, by Pestalozzi, and by many other Swiss who entered into the service of the poor and needy.

Yet I sometimes have the impression that our country relies too heavily upon this reputation. We tend to draw attention to the fact that we are a small nation when we should be giving — and to our economic strength when there is something to be gained.

We have committed ourselves to placing our neutrality in the service of the cause of peace. But real peace can come about only when there is social justice. Peace is not simply a matter of putting one's army rifle away into a cupboard. Peace is a permanent human mission, and I hope that every Swiss will be constantly mindful of this task. Yet it is not for us to act like schoolmasters or assume the role of the know-all, but simply to contribute our share to what has to be done. The problems of the world are no longer national problems. But it is the nations who will have to solve them.

What we Swiss people need is international open-mindedness — something to which Swiss citizens throughout the world have much to contribute. And that is why we need you, why you are in our thoughts on this day. We thank you for all you are doing for Switzerland as well as for your host country.

Willi Ritschard

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