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# One hundred years of Federation

by Hans Rudolf SCHMID

VUE DE SUISSE



*Bern*

*The Federal Parliament House, seat of the Swiss Government, in its original form, after an old engraving.*

During the war, in the summer of 1941, Switzerland celebrated the 650th anniversary of the Pact which had first joined together the sturdy peoples of the « Primitive Cantons » in their bid for freedom, and out of which has sprung the Swiss Confederation. Had Switzerland not been in a very delicate political situation in 1941, surrounded as she was by the armies of the Third Reich, that commemoration might have been celebrated with slightly less ardour.

Today, in 1948, the country is commemorating the 100th year of its existence as a Federal State. In the Middle Ages, Switzerland was but a Federation of small states which had protested and fought against foreign domination, first that of the feudal princes and later, against the German Emperor; the breach with the Holy Roman Empire became a fact in 1499, although it was not recognized de jure until 1648, by the Treaties of Westphalia. For more than 500 years, the Helvetic Cantons were content to accept the loose structure of a Confederation which possessed neither an army nor a Treasury in common. However, when after the Napoleonic wars, Europe became a structure of nationalist states, and when, with the rise of industry and invention, life became richer and more intense, this ancient form of federation, like an old, patched garment, had to be cast aside. After a period of storm and stress, a unified and indivisible State was born, moulded on the pattern of France; it became once more a Confederation and finally assumed the present form of a Federal State after the Revolution of 1848.

The Jubilee solemnized this year, also celebrates the Swiss Federal Constitution, whose fundamental principles have been applied for one hundred years: equality of all men before the law; the essential

liberties — freedom of thought, speech, religion and the press. The Constitution is not a concrete, visible object, such as a mountain or a road; it is an abstract majesty and yet the ruler of all laws, of all decrees, all regulations, which have been built up around it in order to give to daily living a framework such as the Swiss nation has willed. The constitution of a country may be invisible, but its effects, on the contrary, are there for all to see. It is more than a play of words to say that a country enjoying a good constitution possesses a good Constitution.

The hundred years which have passed since 1848 may, on the whole, be considered as a happy period. Public life has evolved peacefully, equilibrated between two poles: on the one hand, the centralizing tendencies which seek to concentrate political power and the administration of the country and, on the other, the federal ideals, whose aim it is to keep intact for the historical Cantons that far-reaching autonomy which they formerly enjoyed. The army, the postal services, customs and coinage were unified one hundred years ago, on a federal basis. But, even today, Switzerland has no « Ministry of Education », because education is still the province of cantonal government. Among the great achievements realized by Switzerland as a Federal State, stand the nationalization of railways, the Federal Civil Laws, the Federal Penal Laws and, in quite recent months, the compulsory Old Age and Widows Pension Scheme.

In the course of its one hundred years of existence, the Swiss Federal State has developed beyond all expectations. Formerly an agricultural country of 2.3 million inhabitants, Switzerland has, in one century, grown into an industrial land having a population of

4.3 millions, and this without territorial expansion. Scientific agricultural methods have increased the yield of crops ; the cottage textile crafts have given birth to flourishing cotton and silk spinning and weaving industries ; in their turn, the textile groups have promoted a machine engineering industry which now has such wide ramifications that, today, Switzerland is a producer not only of cheese, watches and embroideries, but also of precision instruments, Diesel engines, power stations. Pioneering in the discovery and utilization of hydraulic power has built up an economic structure based on electricity, a factor of primary importance, seeing that Switzerland's only natural resource is her waterfalls which flow from the mountains to the plain.

The past century has witnessed Switzerland's organization on the economic plane. Trade and industrial associations share with the Government the task of organizing the national economy and are, in democratic fashion, incorporated, firmly anchored and welded into the administrative structure of the country. Similarly, the diversity

often misunderstood abroad. Switzerland will defend herself if ever she is attacked and, within the measure of her power, constantly attends to the modernization of her military equipment (the « Inner Fortress », built during the second World War at a time when the country was entirely surrounded by the Axis powers, is certainly the greatest mountain stronghold in the world), but she will never voluntarily compromise her existence by taking part in any war. Swiss neutrality constitutes a security for belligerents in wartime, for Switzerland allows no advantages to either side in conflict and firmly holds in her own hands, the international communications which cross her territory.

It is due to this neutrality and to the sacrifices which the people of Switzerland accept in favour of the national army, that the humanitarian work of the International Red Cross Committee in Geneva has been rendered possible in the course of several wars. It is clear that the second World War laid a very heavy burden on the shoulders of this small nation : apart from the military refugees which entered



*Jonas Furrer, the first President of the Swiss Federal State, with his family.*

of the nation is recognized in the equality allowed to the four linguistic groups. No minority problem has arisen in a land where freedom reigns and the rights of the individual and the group are protected.

Switzerland covers an area of 16,000 sq. miles and is a very small country. But perhaps it is precisely just large enough to be seen as a whole by well-informed citizens and magistrates. The Swiss themselves find that the size of their country is favourable to civic administration and consider it as a unique phenomenon, the result of an historical evolution. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Swiss should fiercely cherish and actively work for this State which they have built, for the principles which have been put to the test throughout the centuries. One of these basic principles is armed neutrality,

Swiss territory in 1940, at least 400,000 civilians and political refugees sought and received haven here at a time when the importation of staple commodities was wholly interrupted and, like a crew on board ship, the population had to share out the remaining stocks.

One hundred years ago — we believe that we can today make this affirmation — the small land of Switzerland adopted a durable and judicious form of government. Nevertheless, a political and constitutional structure is in itself insufficient : it must be accompanied by the will to conform to the doctrines such a structure implies. It is in this that lies the merit of four generations of a nation determined never to surrender the reins of government.