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Autor: Vogelsanger, David
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Swiss National Anthem

Ambassador's Response to SwissInfo's Article on Proposed new Swiss Anthem (published in last Helvetia)

Switzerland needs a new national anthem like a hole in the head

A comment by the Ambassador to New Zealand

The Swiss Society's "Helvetia" has reproduced in its last edition an article about "Switzerland's Search for a New Anthem". Already the title is wrong. Our country is not at all looking for a new anthem. We have a beautiful anthem, and our citizens have too many important questions to consider to waste time on this non-issue. It is a small group of people in the so-called "Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft", a society with a great past and no useful present function, who try to show that they are still needed. Among them are a defrocked Jesuit priest and, I reluctantly say it, some retired diplomats. Nobody, absolutely nobody, neither the people nor any political authority, have entrusted them with a mandate to search for a new national anthem, but they have wasted half a million Swiss francs of their own club's money on that search. This money could have been used for a far better purpose...

I admit that I was in my younger years myself not a great enthusiast of our national anthem "Trittst im Morgenrot daher", the so-called Swiss Psalm. It is very religious, and as young military men we used to call it a sung weather forecast. I felt then that we should have an anthem that is a lot more patriotic, like the American one, or even a bit bloodthirsty like the beautiful French

and Italian ones. Older Swiss will recall the former Swiss anthem "Rufst du mein Vaterland" which is both very patriotic and bloodthirsty. It was abolished in 1961 for the simple reason that it used the exact same tune as "God Save the Queen" which led to permanent confusion.

But the more I learned about our anthem, the better I liked it. It is very old, dating from the 1840s. Our country was at that time torn between the liberal and protestant and the conservative and catholic cantons, on the brink of civil war. This war, the "Sonderbundskrieg", actually broke out in 1847 and led to the creation of our modern Confederation. It was a little miracle that during this troubled decade a conservative catholic monk and composer from Uri, Alberik Zwyssig, and Leonhard Widmer, a writer and liberal firebrand from Zurich, together created a wonderful song for all Swiss, whatever their political convictions or origins may be. Like our Constitution, they entrusted the fate of our nation to the God who does not belong to any group or faction.

The proposal to replace this anthem as part of our identity with something new and artificial is complete nonsense. It keeps the tune since the authors were unable to come up with a good one themselves. The proposed text is uninspiring, flat and boring. It smells of political correctness, which was exactly what the initiators had asked for. And, of course, "God" is totally absent from it.

The Federal Council has told Parliament, when confronted with a similar move a few years ago, that it sees no need at all

to change our anthem. I couldn't agree more. Let this "Schnapsidee" (liquor idea) be forgotten as soon as possible. May New Zealand discuss a flag change and decide on it as she sees fit, we Swiss like our flag and our anthem just as they are. Even if we may not be world champions at singing it...

I recently presented my credentials to the King of Tonga. As I inspected the Palace Guard, its band flawlessly performed "Trittst im Morgenrot daher" while our flag went up the flagpole against the beautiful background of the Pacific Ocean. I felt some tears in my eyes which I quickly wiped away before talking to the King.

David Vogelsanger

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