

# General Henri Guisan †

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## GENERAL HENRI GUISAN †



*"A veil of sorrow extends all over our country. A great and noble figure — the best known and the best loved — has just left us. General Guisan — our General — has passed away."*

With these words began the message of the President of the Swiss Confederation to the nation, a nation shattered by the news of what seemed to be the too sudden a death of our beloved General. It was known that influenza had weakened him; it was followed by an attack of his old enemy, bronchitis. However, with his usual determination he had refused to yield, went to his usual "Stammtisch" at the Central to meet his friends. He had to go to bed however; only on the Tuesday he got up for a while, but was obviously in pain. On Thursday night he became weaker; his beloved wife, his son and his daughter were called to his bed and as midnight was striking he passed peacefully away. I learned a touching story which perhaps illustrates better than any long article the profound love and constant admiration of Madame Guisan for her husband. Left alone, she went and fetched the Swiss flag and wrapped it around our General: in death, as in life, he belonged to Switzerland.

Next morning a stunned people heard the news and the old Vaudois peasant who shouted "... mais c'est pas possible, le Général ne peut pas mourir " expressed the shock, the immense sadness which everyone felt. "Ça ne sera plus jamais la même chose" said a sergeant of the "Landsturm" — how true! And within an hour all over Switzerland flags were flown at half mast on all official buildings, on ordinary houses, and people went about their business feeling sad, lost. Never in the history of our country can one recall a death which has caused so unanimous and so profound an emotion; never has a man been mourned in the same way in Basle or the Ticino, in Geneva, Berne or the Grisons; never has anyone commanded at the same time so much confidence, esteem and affection. Every soldier respected him — he was in some strange way his personal friend — and the nation at large felt somehow safe knowing that in case of a great

emergency he was there, felt indeed, that he would always be there. The country has lost her most distinguished and loved citizen; each Swiss has lost a friend.

Henri Guisan was born on 21st October 1874 in Mézières, a lovely village in the heart of that Canton de Vaud of which he was so proud. In a previous article, some years ago (on the occasion of his 80th birthday), I gave more details. Let it be recalled that he went to the local school, then the gymnase classique in Lausanne, attended the University of that town before going to Hohenheim in the Wurtemberg, where he attended the High School for Agriculture, followed by a similar stay in Lyon. Back in Switzerland he took over his large farm in Chesalles-sur-Oron, putting into practice the modern methods of farming. When he was 24 he married the delightful lady who was to be his great companion for 62 years; seldom has a marriage been so happy, so well matched. They had a son (who became Colonel Guisan) and a daughter (who became Madame Décoppet, marrying the son of the late Federal Councillor). When his father-in-law died he moved to "Verte-Rive", the lovely house in Pully with its entrance at the Avenue du Général Guisan and which goes right to the lake-shore. Madame Guisan was born there and it is where her husband died.

Henri Guisan, who might at one time have studied medicine or the law, was not a professional soldier, but a farmer. It is probably due to this that he understood the land so well, was able to mix with all classes of the population. It was his love of our soil which made him love and serve our country with such distinction; he owed to it also his wonderful common sense and very balanced mind.

Of course, he loved the Army. He became a Lieutenant of Artillery in December 1894, Captain in 1904, in charge of Battery 6. Soon he is transferred to the General Staff, appointed Major in 1909, becoming Commander of a Jura battalion in 1913. During the first world war he again rejoins the General Staff in 1916 as Lt.-Colonel and becomes Chief of Staff of the 2nd Division. He is made a full Colonel in December 1921, taking over the command of the 5th Brigade. The Government calls on him often for special tasks, but still Guisan refuses to become a professional officer. In 1927, however, he is made Commander of the 2nd Division, taking over the 1st Division in 1931, an appointment which made him especially happy. On 1st July 1932 he is appointed Commander of an Army Corps and takes over the 2nd Army Corps where he came in close contact with the "Suisses alémaniques" and established during these years very close friendships both with the officers and men and with the authorities. At the end of 1933 he is appointed Commander of the 1st Army Corps. During that time he becomes a great friend of Bundesrat Minger, for whom he had the very greatest of admiration. When war appears imminent the National Assembly, on 30th August 1939, appoints him by an almost unanimous vote Commander-in-Chief with the rank of General.

What has made this man so immensely popular, so respected amongst a nation where unfortunately gratitude is so rare? of course, he completely reformed the too Prussian attitude which existed in our Army, which forgot that soldiers are human beings. He brought back *the dignity of man* and gave strong orders to all officers that they must never forget that they are dealing with husbands, fathers, brothers, and citizens of equal rights. Then he created this close contact between himself and all men; his daily correspondence included very large numbers of personal letters, appeals for help, guidance, understanding and *every* letter was answered. The Army would have followed him to the end of the world. His extreme politeness with everyone on every occasion was an example, an inspiration, which was widely followed. There are thousands of true stories and anecdotes which testify to this.

But the greatness of the General was shown in the terrible decision *he* and he alone had to take, on his own responsibility, with only his faith in God and his love of his country to strengthen him. Just 20 years ago, in May 1940, Hitler unleashed his armies. Everything seems to crumble as he advances. On 2nd May 1940 the Swiss Minister in Berlin is called by Ribbentrop and strongly warned that the Führer is most displeased by the attitude of the Swiss Press; he demands immediate measures to stop it, adding:

"If not, Germany will take the necessary action and in this will be supported by Italy". A few weeks later, while the German Armies are marching over Belgium and Holland, the German Ambassador in Berne, von Bibra, informs our Government as a "friendly gesture" (!!!) that the reason why these countries had been invaded was that their Press had been so unfair as to create a "casus belli" which meant war. He felt Switzerland ought to listen to this final warning! Such was the situation and perhaps it should not be entirely forgotten! Guisan had nearly one million men under his command, but to his horror — as shown in his report to the National Assembly of 1945 — when he took his command no plan had been prepared in case of invasion. He had to deal with this, but as important was need for confidence, unity and, above all, morale. This was to be proved even more seriously when in May 1940 Government and Army had to face threats mentioned above. The civilians were not wonderful. Car loads were leaving Eastern Switzerland for the West and many felt that poor little we could do little against the all-powerful Hitler. Not the General though! On 11th May 1940 he gives an *ordre du jour* which shows that there is to be no weakening; recognising the damnable work of the 5th column everywhere he ends it with these words: "Any news which may appear by radio, pamphlets, the press or any other means which would create any doubt about the absolute will to resist on the part of the Government or of the General must be considered as sheer lies prepared by a defeatist propaganda". But the terrible advance of the German troops which nothing seemed able to stop, the fact that Switzerland was now completely isolated and encircled by the German power, was having a nasty effect on the morale of the nation. How could we ever survive? It was in that period that the General worked day and night to counteract this influence. He visited the troops, the various authorities of the cantons, he issued day orders which were virile, courageous, inspiring. He did not hesitate to clean up some of the H.Q. and replace old men by young vigorous ones. He entrusted Colonel Gonard, a brilliant young officer, with the preparation of the plans for the realisation of a complete new tactic which was to revolutionise a great deal: the creation of the "réduit", that piece of Switzerland we would and *could* defend for a very long time, in the very heart of our mountains. "As long as a small part of our soil remains in our hands we shall not be defeated," had explained the General, and he set out to make it a reality. Of course, it meant abandoning many cities, industrial and agricultural land, but Liberty was worth these sacrifices. Only the people, indeed the Army formed of men who had to leave their homes, had to be told, but told in a way which would ensure their acceptance, their understanding. There is no doubt that this plan which was put into execution by an Army order dated 12th July 1940 was in itself a call which was to Switzerland (and in this way to the free world) what the call of Winston Churchill had been in his famous "We shall fight in our villages..." No wonder these two men, born within a few weeks of each other, became such friends.

By the end of July 1940 the situation was very grave. General Guisan had decided to take an historical step which will for ever remain one of the greatest pages of our history. On 25th July he assembled on the Grütli the whole of the General Staff, all superior officers from all over Switzerland. It was a tremendous risk, but he never hesitated and disposed of all opposition. There he told them that he had wanted to speak to them on this historical soil at this serious hour so that they could all be inspired by the spirit which had been shown by our ancestry on this very spot. He explained the reasons for his plans, why each commander had had to move in the last 14 days. He told them that it was only in the way the enemy would realise that a great deal of time and force would be needed to overcome our country that he would hesitate and probably refrain from taking such an action. "Our duty is to safeguard our independence. Hitherto our neighbours have respected it, we shall see to it that it will be respected to the end. Disown those who have doubts. Trust not only our absolute rights but also our force and if all of you have enough will: believe in the efficacy of our resistance". To each officer was handed an *ordre du jour* explaining this and asking them to convey it "also in the spirit" to all troops. Never before had so many superior officers of all parts of the country met. The greatness of the hour at this tragic stage was felt by every-

one; such unity of purpose, and in comradeship, had never been achieved before. They all returned to their various H.Q.'s with immense faith and the feeling that they had as their chief a great man, a grand leader. The next day the whole population was made aware of this; so were the Germans (who could not be named in those days), who realised that they could not overrun Switzerland without meeting terrific resistance and suffering heavy losses. To this historical and momentous decision, taken alone by the General, we probably owe our having been spared the horrors of war. It is because the whole nation felt it at that tragic moment that for ever the Swiss will be grateful to "our General", who safeguarded peace and honour when they were much in danger.

The war ended. On 20th August 1945 General Guisan handed back his command. At the "Journée des Drapeaux" in front of the Government Building in Berne, where he had ordered the flags of all Swiss battalions to gather so that he could take leave of them, the General said good-bye. This ceremony was one of the most impressive of the after-war. He had meanwhile presented his Report to the National Assembly, which has been the main base for the reorganisation of our Army since. When he appeared before the united National Assembly to hand over his command, the whole Assembly rose as one man and gave him the greatest ovation ever witnessed in this otherwise not very demonstrative circle. Once again he was back at "Verte-Rive", his beloved home. His famous horse, "Nobs", went with him and never left him.

Henri Guisan had served his country well and felt that at the age of 70 he could take it a little bit easier. He had expected no gratitude, but this was his one great but wonderful error. The love of his compatriots everywhere, the respect he commanded, grew if anything. No occasion was really great without his presence. I remember going through his diary with him two or three times; it was incredible. His correspondence was on a national basis and his influence was immense. Youth always was one of his main interests and he never spared himself. He was invited everywhere. He first came to England to launch, in Hartlepool on 19th June 1947, the "General Guisan", which had been built for Messieurs André & Cie of Lausanne. His stay was extremely short; indeed only very few people saw him. We all felt it was a pity. An invitation by two Presidents of our Colony had failed for reasons for which the General was certainly not to blame. When the famous Fête Suisse of 1948 was being prepared I suggested that it would be a wonderful thing to have the presence of our General. Having met him at the end of 1944 at his H.Q. "somewhere" I agreed to see what I could do. In this I was much encouraged by Minister Paul Ruegger. I wrote to him asking if he would be kind enough to receive me, stating at the same time the purpose of my visit. I got a very friendly answer and so set off on the appointed hour for "Verte-Rive." Of course, the traditional "bouteille de blanc" was brought from the cellar "...quand on est Président de la Confrérie vaudoise, cela se doit" said the General. But his first question was about the Colony, how we had fared, how they all were, our feelings. Such was the man. We came to the practical details, he was to be our guest with Madame Guisan; the diary was consulted, the dates duly bracketed... he would let me know in a few days. He did so, and I was glad, because this meant the first of many meals in their charming home with Madame Guisan as the most delightful hostess. And they came. On the last Sunday of May 1948 a very proud Swissair plane arrived in Northolt, where the "Etat-Major particulier" I had constituted was waiting. The sun, le soleil du Général, was shining and Lieutenant Wasmer's children in Swiss costumes presented the customary flowers. When we arrived at the Dorchester Hotel, where they were to stay, the Swiss flag was flying; for a few days London and Oxford were to greet our great Commander-in-Chief.

On 2nd June 1948, the big Banqueting Hall plus all surrounding rooms at the Dorchester opened for the biggest gathering the Swiss Colony has ever known. Only a few days before, restrictions had been lifted and so the whole Colony was able to come and honour General and Madame Guisan. I was very kindly entrusted with the Presidency of this great occasion, which the General always qualified as one of the most moving moments of his life. Madame Guisan, tears running down her cheeks, was saying, "...in Switzerland, yes, but here, so far away..." It was one of the

great hours of gratitude and pride of the Swiss Colony. Even Winston Churchill nearly came but, after much understandable emotion, it was agreed that in lieu the General and Madame Guisan would lunch with him the next day.

I cannot end this perhaps too long article without mentioning the funeral, as it was my sad and yet wonderful privilege to be in Switzerland. Never before has anything similar been witnessed. At 1.30 on Tuesday, 12th April, the bells of all churches in every part of Switzerland rang. In almost all factories five minutes' silence was observed and only the flapping of the flags at half mast could be heard. It was the exact moment at which the body of General Guisan was leaving — for the last time — his beloved home of "Verte-Rive". The procession which was to walk 5 kms. was amazing, so simple, so true, so worthy of the man who for the last time would pass through the streets of Lausanne. I will only mention a few notable incidents. On the steps of the University the 458 flags of all the Swiss battalions were grouped. As the coffin passed they all dipped in salute. At Berne, in August 1945, the General had saluted all flags; to-day it was the flags which saluted the Commander-in-Chief for the last time. There were also 25 cantonal flags, all preceded by the "huissiers" in the cantonal colours representing the whole united nation. The wreaths, hundreds of them, were carried by soldiers. In front were those of the Swiss Government, the Diplomatic Corps, the 1st Army Corps (in charge of the funeral), of President Eisenhower. The one of our Confrérie vaudoise was also there, our final tribute. Madame Guisan had insisted on attending the whole funeral in spite of her immense grief and her over eighty years.

One very moving thing was that all men in Switzerland had been allowed to wear uniform on that day and thus pay homage to the General. A place had been reserved for them at the Place de la Riponne... and there were thousands. Attending the procession were of course the Conseil fédéral in corpore, representatives as said of every Canton, the Diplomatic Corps, etc., but a body of men, in uniform or in civilian clothes, from Colonel to Private, all men of a certain age and looking overcome by emotion followed the carriage: they were the Etat-Major particulier of the General, his family as he used to call them, who every year had met and who now would be disbanded.

The ceremony at the Cathedral, where nearly 2,000 people had assembled, was impressive. Loudspeakers outside relayed it, as they did also in the Church of St. François, the second largest in Lausanne, where old people had been invited to come and listen to the whole proceedings.

General Henri Guisan was buried in the cemetery of Pully, near his home, near C. F. Ramuz, amongst his people. The ceremony was private, but so moving. It ended with the playing of

"J'avais un camarade, le meilleur d'ici-bas..."

Our respected General has left us. We have all lost a friend. His example remains, which should inspire us and make the rising generation look up to him. Perhaps in years to come Swiss mothers (even in foreign lands) will, in the evening, tell their young sons stories which will start: "Il y avait une fois un grand et bon Général que tout le monde aimait..." God bless his memory.

Alfred Renou

**NEW ARRIVAL AT THE SWISS EMBASSY**

We have much pleasure in announcing that Monsieur H. Gallusser, 1st Secretary of Embassy, has recently taken up his post in succession to Dr. Hans Müller, who has been transferred to Budapest.

Monsieur Gallusser came to London from Tel Aviv, where he was for nearly four years at the Swiss Embassy as 1st Secretary. He had been previously posted in Germany, Lisbon, and French North Africa.

We wish Monsieur Gallusser, and Madame Gallusser, a happy stay in this country.

**ADVANCE PRESS NOTICE**

In October 1957 the children of the town of Rapperswil, on Lake Zurich, presented the stag, "Goldie", to Prince Charles to celebrate a successful exchange scheme of secondary school children with London.

On its arrival at the Zoo, the stag was found to belong to a species not generally known in this country, and the Zoological Society, therefore, felt it might be kind to provide it with a companion. This suggestion found enthusiastic support in Rapperswil, and a doe, "Michèle", in fact arrived at Liverpool Street Station on Thursday, 7th April 1960, at 9.13 a.m. She will first go into quarantine before being transferred to the Zoo.

At the same time arrangements have now been

completed between the education authorities in Manchester and Salford and the Swiss Consulate in Manchester whereby ten orphans from Manchester will fly to Zurich on 28th May to be the guests of Rapperswil until 10th June. The town of Rapperswil is inviting the children to dinner, and various excursions are planned by ship and rail, as well as a visit to the training quarters of the famous circus, Knie.

**SWISS MERCANTILE SOCIETY**

**MONTHLY MEETING**

ON

**WEDNESDAY, 11th MAY 1960 at 7 p.m.**

AT

**SWISS HOUSE, 35, Fitzroy Square, W.1.**

followed by a talk by

**Dr. R. FAESSLER**

Commercial Counsellor

at the Swiss Embassy on:

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