

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1965)
Heft: 1481

Artikel: What is the Swiss sense of national unity? [to be continued]
Autor: Frei, Daniel
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-693623>

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WHAT IS THE SWISS SENSE OF NATIONAL UNITY?

Lecture delivered to the London Group of the N.S.H.

by

DR. DANIEL FREI

PART THREE

Beyond the past there are, as was first pointed out, two other ranges of ideas patriotism is particularly concerned with, and the second one is the view patriotic eyes have at the present time. How do the Swiss see themselves? This question could be called one of national character. There are no better or more competent specialists for understanding helvetic characteristics than Swiss citizens abroad. They have the opportunity to observe, on the one hand, their hostess country from some distance, and the fact that they don't live in their own country enables them on the other hand to conceive simultaneously the particular characteristics of Swiss people. They know, however, that it is very difficult to evaluate the national character of any people. Every nation has two characters which often differ enormously: The character the people themselves believe to have, and the character foreigners see from outside.

How do the Swiss people see themselves? Not much time is needed to answer this. The Swiss songs, especially those written in the eighteenth and nineteenth century are most revealing. The image of the Swiss given there is always the same: the two main characteristics attributed to them are virtue and bravery. Beyond these two principal traits there are others considered typically Swiss: courage, heroic spirit, desire for independence, straightforwardness, fidelity, faithfulness, constancy, sincerity, honesty and a characteristic which cannot adequately be translated into English: "Biederkeit". Certainly, such an image of the Swiss is far removed from the modern Swiss as he or she really is, the inhabitant of a highly industrialised country and financial centre. But then, these ideas and ideals were not meant to give an exact portrait of everyday reality, but an idealistic picture forceful enough to stimulate enthusiasm in a whole population. And it should also be borne in mind that, as was pointed out in the short historical introduction, these ideas were created in the eighteenth and partly also in the nineteenth century. The stereotype of the ideal Swiss, in the shape of the peace-loving peasant and simple, but brave herdsman was but an expression of the ideal of that time in general. Rousseau, one of the main exponents of that movement, used to describe the ideal man as a "bon sauvage", and he very often states in his writings that in his contemporary Europe, the only place where it was possible to meet this ideal human type was Switzerland. Rousseau's Swiss contemporaries who read his books liked this idea very much and soon made it their own. One of the most important patriots of the eighteenth century, the Zurich-born clergyman Johann Caspar Lavater, wrote a poem describing the ideal Swiss in just the same terms as Rousseau did.

What was the role of such stereotypes in the context of the Swiss sense of national unity? What were their unifying and integrating functions? By saying that all Swiss have a common, collective character, the feeling of unity is strengthened. It is especially enforced in order to make the Swiss feel a contrast between their compatriots and strangers. One could expect that, in order to strengthen this unity further, a negative characterisation of

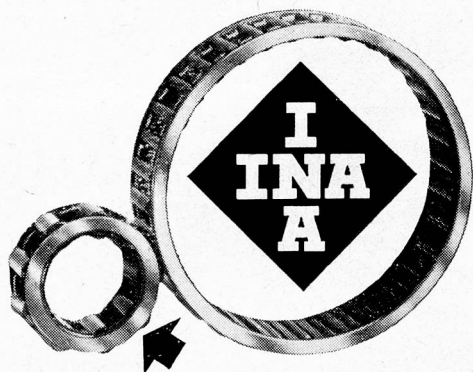
the foreigner is given. This, the negative view of foreign nations is indeed a strong means of integration; many of the new nations in Africa and Asia are held together by a common hatred and denigration of their former colonial rulers, and similarly, the mutual hatred between French and Germans was one of the most important aspects of French and German patriotism in the nineteenth century. But if we consider the Swiss sense of national unity, we seek in vain for such expressions of national hatred, and it could be called one of the most outstanding features of Swiss patriotism that there is practically no xenophobia. What is the cause of that striking phenomenon? The reason for this remarkable and happy lack of xenophobia in Switzerland is that the cantonal traditions have always been very strong, so that a common tradition of hostile feelings against a certain other nation could not emerge. There are even within Switzerland remainders of cantonal mutual dislikes, expressing themselves for instance in the harmless teasing between Basle and Zurich citizens, or, a little more seriously, between Jurassiens and Bernese. There were, as an exceptional case and only during the war, some xenophobic feelings against Germany, the Germans being called "sales boches" or "Cheibe Schwobe". And at present, there are some similar feelings against the Italian workers, unfortunately often called "Tschingge".

These feelings, however, are temporary. All those who feel responsible for the political and spiritual life of Switzerland, very vigorously fight against any growing mood of xenophobia, and there can be no doubt that so long as the Swiss Press does not support these xenophobic feelings, national hatred will never be able to poison any considerable part of the population. And at the present stage, the Press is unanimous in condemning all beginnings of such feelings.

These are some remarks on the first national stereotype, on the image the Swiss people have of themselves. But there is a second national stereotype, namely the impression Swiss patriotic eyes get from their country. What is Switzerland? How can it be understood, grasped at one single glance? Most countries have some kind of characteristic which makes it possible for human imagination to recall a particular country in a simple and easily understood image. There is the notion of "The British Isles", or "la douce France", the Finnish woods, etc. But Switzerland is a most heterogeneous country composed of innumerable kaleidoscopic landscapes. It was therefore difficult to find one single common image valid for the Canton of Basle as well as for the Grisons, the Ticino or Geneva. But there is a common image of what the patriotically minded Swiss considers as the most typical landscape of Switzerland: the mountains. They play a very important role in the Swiss sense of national unity. They are indeed one of its main elements and leading factors. Of course, the manner to see the mountains as the most important element in Switzerland is a generalisation which tries to reflect the complex reality as much simpler than it actually is. The major part of the Swiss population does not live in the mountains; the main industries and commercial centres which form the very basis



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furthermore, there are other wonderful landscapes in of Swiss economic life are not situated in the Alps. And Switzerland, which could claim to be as typical as the mountains, like for instance the lakes and their shores or the vineyards of Vaud and Geneva. Why were the mountains chosen as the typical Swiss image? The first reason for this choice is that the image of Switzerland as the country of mountains coincided with the picture of the Swiss as farmer and herdsman. Lonely mountains, rocks, alpine pastures are the natural and convenient surroundings of what had been pictured as the ideal Swiss, rural, modest and straightforward. The second reason is a more historical one. As suggested before, the period when all these concepts of the Swiss national ideal were first given expression to, was the period of the so-called enlightenment. The ideal of the writers of that period consisted of what Rousseau called "Retour à la nature", in a kind of counter-movement against the over-fine, over-civilised artificiality that century had brought. The picture they gave was, of course, an idealistic one, it was the dream of a life full of sunshine and harmony, a life in a natural environment, a life with cattle and sheep, and a life full of music, joy and dance. Poets and writers like Rousseau and Voltaire who, described in their poems, such an idealistic Swiss landscape, were all very fond of the mountains; they loved the wild, uncultivated and untouched atmosphere of the highlands. At that time, too, the first paintings of mountains began to appear, and for the first time, mountaineering became fashionable.

In this connection it is interesting to note that the British in particular contributed a great deal to this movement. In the late eighteenth century, a school of thought existed in Britain, called "Philhellenism", and many British poets, like the Duchess of Devonshire, wrote enthusiastic poems about the Swiss mountains, and many British painters, like William Turner, used to go to Switzerland to portray the mountain landscape. And let us not forget either that the first man to make the Swiss mountains really famous all over the world, was also British, namely Edward Whymper, who, exactly one hundred years ago, succeeded in climbing the Matterhorn for the first time. All this had an enormous impact upon Swiss thought and Swiss self-consciousness. The idea of Switzerland as the country of mountains was quickly adopted and put in the centre of the whole range of ideas forming the Swiss national image.

And the third reason for the formation of this concept is the fact that the simple shape of mountains is the easiest form to keep in mind. Mountains are monumental

and impressive, and they lend themselves in many ways much more easily as symbols than lakes, vineyards or pleasant valleys would. The whole image of Switzerland as a country of mountains was effective during the whole of the nineteenth and also in the twentieth century. The concept of national defence which General Guisan designed during the second world war, the "Alpenréduit", undoubtedly received additional strength by emphasising the symbolic centre of Switzerland, the mountains. And it is sure that the determined will of the Swiss people to defend the country against any aggressor was, to some extent, also buttressed by the emotional forces emerging from this "alpine redoubt" concept.

(To be continued.)

WORTH THINKING ABOUT

Es gibt auch heute noch Leute genug, die immer Alpenrosen im Munde führen, aber nie gemerkt haben, was schweizerisches Recht und Freiheit eigentlich sind.

These words were written by Gottfried Keller who was born on 19th July 1819 and died on 15th July seventy-five years ago.

COMMENTS FROM READERS

Mr. B. Albertolli writes from Portsmouth:

"As one who has pride in his dual nationality and whose family has conducted the Continental Café Restaurant in Portsmouth (63-65 Commercial Road) for over 72 years, thus knowing the difficulties of the trade both here and in Switzerland, I should like to say how grieved I am to hear recent criticism of Switzerland by English visitors. In former years there was always praise of Swiss catering and hospitality."

Mr. Albertolli then goes on to say that perhaps the reason for recent criticism lies with some of the tourist agencies' "all in" quotations which may be rather low, and then such important things to the English visitors as a cup of tea has to be charged at rather a high price. *Another item we could add here is the daily bath charged extra to the annoyance of many visitors. Ed.*

Mr. Albertolli would like to have comments, and he hopes that the discontent felt by some visitors may only be a passing phase and "that the praise we have so often heard of everything Swiss will soon return again".

* * *

An anonymous reader has sent the Editor a cutting from the "Daily Express", telling of Yul Brynner having given up his U.S. nationality because America will not grant citizenship status to his Swiss wife and daughter. The famous actor was born in the Far East as a Swiss citizen 47 years ago.

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