

Swiss National Day

# Swiss diversity in unity

by Patrick Schneider



Patrick Schneider, this year's speaker in Guntershausen TG. (Picture Ch. Avanzini)

*Ladies and gentlemen, dear children*

It is a great honour for me to hold a speech to you today on 1 August.

Many thanks to the "men's sports association Guntershausen", the organisers of this 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebration, who have invited me to say a few words to you today.

First of all, I would like to take this opportunity to express my pleasure that a 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebration can take place in Guntershausen again this year. In this gym hall, even the bad weather can't affect us.

In one way or another, we have all experienced a sometimes much changed everyday life in the past 18 months. Today, it is not the moment to talk about these Corona times. However, despite the festive mood, I ask you to pause for a moment out of respect for all those who have suffered – in one way or another – from this pandemic.

As a child, I was once asked a trick question at school: "Do they have a 1 August in other countries?" Without hesitation I said: "Of course, the 1<sup>st</sup> of August only exists in Switzerland." Only Switzerland celebrates its birthday on 1 August. Only in Switzerland there are bonfires, fireworks, grilled sausages, everything is decorated with Swiss flags, and in the evening we are allowed to carry lanterns and blazing torches. That only happens in Switzerland. That's what I thought as a child.

Naturally, we all know that 1 August exists everywhere in the world ...

ed. "Swiss Standpoint" had the opportunity to participate celebrating the Swiss National Day – 1<sup>st</sup> of August – in a district of the political municipality of Aadorf in Eastern Switzerland. This text is the slightly revised festive speech of an active citizen of this municipality. Patrick Schneider is a non-party municipal councillor (executive), local tradesman and father of two.

**What does**

**the 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebration symbolise?**

But what does a 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebration actually symbolise in this day and age? Personally, I don't have such a clear idea of any other celebration as I do of this one.

On 1 August, young and old get together. Even if not everyone takes part in the celebration for the same reasons, it unites the generations. At a 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebration profession, income, political views do not play a role. At a 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebration, all people simply belong – there is no difference across the whole country. For me, this also reflects Switzerland.

As diverse as we are, urban or rural, progressive or traditional – one thing always unites us: we are all proud of this country in one way or another. This is true not only for staunch patriots, but also for people who take a critical attitude towards our country.

**Often, we are contradictory**

We, the Swiss women and men are a strong, but also complicated society. Often, we are contradictory. Perhaps this stems from our politics, goes right through society and ends in economy. But there is no country in the world where there are so many possibilities to make a living and shape one's life in such a small space. We are not in a closed mind about anything new, but we are also critical enough not to immediately see the new as the ideal. That is unique, that is Swiss.

I would like to give you a few examples:

*Community*

Let's start with Aadorf. The political municipality of Aadorf exists for some 25 years, all the districts are integrated, including Guntershausen. Nevertheless, each district organises its own 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebration. Therefore, in the municipality of Aadorf there are five 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebrations. One could also – for reasons of "efficiency" – have one big celebration for the whole community. But we do it differently – and are quite happy with it. Possibly contradictory, but nevertheless it works very well.

### *Education*

It is common knowledge, that education is our most important resource. And indeed, in Switzerland people are very well educated. But that doesn't stop us from shaping education a little differently in each canton: for example, some cantons start with foreign languages earlier, others later. There are numerous examples, not only from the cantons where they speak another language, but even our next cantons differ. For someone from a neighbouring country, it might seem very contradictory that education, even in close proximity, is sometimes provided quite differently. Perhaps we occasionally feel the same way. And yet, we are in a very good position internationally when it comes to education.

### *Politics*

You can vote for one party in an election with full conviction, but that doesn't stop you from supporting a referendum a few months later that your regular party might oppose. It couldn't be more contradictory. But it works. In Switzerland, politics works for precisely that reason, among other things.

For a long time we have had a system of concordance in government in Switzerland, which means that our country is in fact governed with changing party majorities. That also works. When in Germany, our neighbouring country, about three years ago, the idea of a minority government came up, there was a big outcry because this kind of government was considered unstable. You could not govern and lead a country with changing majorities. Well, it works for us and we have had a stable government for a very long time, even though this may seem contradictory from the outside.

### *International organisations*

At times, we find it difficult to join an international community – Switzerland only joined the UN in 2002. Membership in the EU is still not an option for Switzerland. Nevertheless, we are an important international mediator, our good offices are gladly called upon. We often host sensitive political meetings. That's exciting: we don't like to be integrated and yet we are an important mediator. Contradictory once more.

### *Economy*

In Switzerland we have very liberal labour laws compared to most European countries. Never-



*The local duo "Sylv and Dölf" has been part of every 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebration in the village for years. (Picture Ch. Avanzini)*

theless, we still have a stable labour market, hardly any disturbances of industrial peace and very low unemployment. Definitely one of our greatest assets. Again, a contradiction: no tough labour laws and yet industrial peace.

### *Finances*

We have one of the lowest VAT rates in Europe. Nevertheless, we still have our public finances under control – or rather, precisely because of that! Low taxes and yet decently managed public finances. Seen from the outside, this is certainly contradictory.

According to the *Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE), Switzerland is the country with the lowest shadow economy of all its members. And this despite the fact that we do not have by far the strictest controls and our tax authority and the tax and financial authorities are not nearly as extensive as in other countries. Few controls and yet correctly working companies and citizens. In other countries this would certainly be a contradiction.

### *Culture*

In our four language country, the culture is extremely diverse and varied. We have a great variety of customs and traditions that could hardly be more different. And all this in a country small in area. Nevertheless, we have a distinct national identity – again quite contradictory.

### *National anthem*

I don't want to deprive you of a humorous example: our national anthem. It already starts with the fact that some people sing along and others don't. But it goes one step further. There are probably few countries where there is so

much discussion about whether the text is still suitable, still in keeping with the times, or whether a completely new anthem should be created. Here, too, it is apparent in an amusing way just how critical we Swiss can be.

#### *Professionalisation*

In today's modern world, everything is professionalised, specialised and economised. There are professional armies, professional fire brigades, professional politicians, and much more. In Switzerland, a great deal is still organised and regulated in the militia system. I am personally convinced that this is a fundamental pillar of our Switzerland that is functioning very well. Although many people are convinced of the great importance of the militia system, it does not always and everywhere correspond with the current "zeitgeist". So, there we have another contradiction.

#### **Concluding remark**

Finally, I come back to our celebration here in Guntershausen. I see a wide variety of people in this hall, undoubtedly with different ideas about shaping the future, different convictions and also contradictions in their actions. But this

does not stop us from pausing and celebrating together for a few hours in the best of moods. No matter who you are, no matter what you own, no matter what you think. And that is typically Swiss. Today, the 1<sup>st</sup> of August is part of our customs and has become a kind of Swiss ritual. It doesn't matter whether the celebration of the founding of Switzerland goes back to 1291 or only to 1848, when the federal state with 26 cantons was founded – the time when the hard-earned rise from an impoverished little Swiss country to today's prosperity and peace began.

And now the last little contradiction: the 1<sup>st</sup> of August celebration officially took place for the first time in 1891. So that year is the actual birthday of the federal celebration.

And should I be asked the trick question again right now: "Does the 1 August only exist in Switzerland?" I would again answer with conviction: "Yes, the 1st of August, it only exists in Switzerland!"

*Stay critical, stay contradictory, stay political, stay traditional, stay modern, but also stay sociable – or in other words, stay Swiss!*

Thank you very much for listening. I wish us all a very happy 1<sup>st</sup> of August!

*(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")*