

Franklin University Switzerland

2019 Honorary Degree Talk

May 19, 2019

Thank you Professor Pyka for your introduction.

I would like to begin by thanking President Gregory Warden for inviting me here today as well as the members of the Board of Trustees of Franklin University Switzerland, led by their Chairman, Kim Hildebrant.

I would also like to offer my congratulations to my fellow honorary degree recipients, Ambassador Wilfried Geens and Dr. Theo Brenner.

I am glad to see so many friends and colleagues and I am particularly pleased to receive an honorary degree from a university that I love and admire.

This talk is for the seniors who are graduating today, a short exercise in time travel. I am a historian and believe in the power of knowledge about the past. We do not usually 'learn' from the past, but we should always remember what has happened and we can certainly compare what was to what is now, in our world.

What follows are some thoughts on recent Swiss history and on how you may wish to approach Swiss realities and think about them. Switzerland claims that its history began in 1291 with a founding document, when the free men of the valley of Uri, the Landsgemeinde of Schwyz and the community of the lower valley of Unterwalden in order to preserve their independence declared "we shall accept no judge nor recognize him in any way if he exercises his office for any reward or for money or if he is not one of our own and an inhabitant of the valleys." (p. 21) What this pact meant is still a puzzle.

We know nothing else, no names, no details and no reason for this special treaty. All the rest is legend or guess-work. The idea that Switzerland was born of a medieval pact has never been revoked. In 2019 the three founding cantons continue to exist and maintain the sovereignty which they claimed seven hundred years ago – and that is astonishing. There is nothing like it anywhere else; everything Swiss follows from its mythical origins.

Switzerland fought wars, conquered territories, became a European military power, split between Protestant and Catholic, town and country, established a national government and developed its own special form of capitalism, surrendered to Napoleon who reorganized the structure of the Swiss confederation and created new cantons including Canton Ticino in which for the next 90 years Catholics and Secularists fought a civil war. These histories can be repeated in other cantons and communities to the present day. But the Swiss self-perception remains largely intact: ancient, fair, politically neutral and with a bottom-up democracy – a real people's democracy.

There is, however, an episode in recent history which should make us think - how Switzerland struggled between appeasers who wanted to surrender to Nazi Germany in 1940 and join the Axis and the Swiss in the Army who prepared to fight Nazism to the death. The Second World

War had affected most of the adult males, almost all of whom had served in the great mobilization that the Swiss had to undergo to deter the Nazis and Fascists who surrounded the Swiss Confederation and threatened to invade at any time after 1940. We now know that Hitler seriously planned an invasion but the strategy which the 'General' (the Swiss only have one General elected by government) devised involved a decision to withdraw the entire army to the high Alps. General Henri Guisan assembled the officer corps in the Rütli Meadow where the original cantons Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden swore that famous oath to remain free and repeated it for the crisis of the Second World War.

'Toward noon of a very fine day I had all my senior officers before me. On the Rütli meadow, where the flag of the Uri Battalion 87 fluttered, the officers formed a large-semi circle looking out over the lake. The Army Commanders in the first row, behind them in rows the divisional commanders, the brigadiers, the regimental officers, battalion and section chiefs.'

The General issued the order to: "resist any attack from without and all dangers on the home front, such as the sloth or defeatism. Faith in the value of resistance."

The Swiss situation created a new problem for a country surrounded by enemies but enemies who needed Swiss technologies and finance: this problem meant that interpreting neutrality and independence gained new importance practically. Federal Councillor Edmund Schullthess went to Berlin in 1937 to reassure Hitler that the Swiss press had not been *verjudet*. Federal police chief Heinrich Rothmund replied to a deputy in parliament who had accused him of anti-semitism that 'every Swiss from worker to intellectual feels that the Jew in general is a foreign element. He hardly takes him into his circle of friends.' Rothmund also went to Berlin and agreed to the introduction of the 'J' in the non-German passports and promised the Nazi General Staff that the Swiss authorities would refuse entry to German and Austrian Jews. The Bundesrat sent the highly placed head of the police and justice department Eduard von Steiger to make a speech to defend the Swiss anti-Jewish measures:

"Whoever commands a small lifeboat, that is already full, of limited capacity and with an equally amount of provisions, while thousands of victims of a sunken ship scream to be saved, must appear hard when he cannot take every one and he is still humane when he warns against false hopes and tries to save at least those he has taken.'

'Das Boot ist voll' – 'the boat is full' speech became infamous.

That is the other side to Swiss pride in its neutrality and independence. The gathering in the Alps to defend Switzerland was important but fundamentally symbolic. Switzerland would not have been able to withstand a German invasion, even less a joint Italian-German invasion. At the same time that the Rütli oath was being spoken again, the Swiss banks and companies were busy trading with Nazi Germany. Swiss banks acted as money laundering agents for Deutsche Bank, happily took gold that had been stripped from the Jewish victims in concentration camps and converted it to 'clean' gold that would secure the German war efforts and provide desperately needed currencies. How did the government's eagerness to sell raw materials and machinery to the Axis fit into the grand gesture of the Rütli oath? The government refused to acknowledge that its trade and financial policies tarnished the heroic defenses. In the meantime, one lone St. Gallen

police commander, Paul Grüninger, had interpreted Swiss independence in his very own way: he continued to let Austrian and German Jews into the country, and for that courageous act was dismissed and punished. He died neglected and unredeemed. Yet today he is considered a hero.

The Swiss economy prospered from the war and continued to do so after 1945. Swiss banks and the government agreed to undertake covert deals and barter heirless assets of the victims to satisfy its international debts. These trade deals came out in the early 1950s; even then the Swiss government tried to evade its moral responsibilities. A final reckoning on the Swiss role in the war became known in the 1990s when an official Swiss government inquiry produced the dreadful history.

With a good deal of hesitation, I have chosen a few episodes from ancient and modern Swiss history. Hitler withheld his fury and the Swiss defensive activity held. It produced a national solidarity almost unique in modern Swiss history. At the same time there exists the other side of the story – the support that the Swiss economy and national bank provided to the Nazis; in fact, Switzerland made money during and after the war.

The object of this little exercise has been to offer you, the seniors on the eve of their graduation from a remarkable university some existential issues to consider. The most difficult is the nature of democracy and the best way to defend it. Just as difficult is the question of how to behave in extreme situations. You will not be spared very challenging decisions. You should take them consciously, with sensibility and consider the choices that you have and that you make. You should remember the messy path to democracy that the Swiss took in 1291 and that they still defend. You have been witness to this process while you studied at Franklin University. You should take the stubbornness of the Swiss and employ it as an example of tenacity; you should remember their willingness to resist but also their willingness to surrender and take decisions that grew out of rashness or prejudice. There is the respect for different languages and different cultures, followed not as an ideal but a necessity that really deserves to become a model for modern societies. Yet there is also the example of deep intolerance and prejudice that has for centuries excluded any outsider, anyone too different in religious or cultural matters.

Therefore, courage with tolerance are perhaps the qualities that I hope you will acquire and practice above all else: tolerance paired with empathy with those in difficulty and less fortunate than you and the courage to speak out about injustice.

So I conclude this little survey with my best wishes to you all. You have had a genuinely Swiss education, full of variety, travel and study. You have climbed up and down the slopes of Lugano and Paradiso and now come to the sad moment when you must leave Franklin and enter the great world. I wish you luck and courage and wisdom.

Thank you for your courtesy.

Jonathan Steinberg, 19 May 2019