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Speech given by the President of the Swiss
Confederation before the Parliamentary
Assembly of the Council of Europe,
Strasbourg, 20th September 1991

This year it is the Swiss Confederation
which has been singled out for special
distinction by your Assembly, and the honour
of addressing you at this solemn session
falls to her President. I am, moreover,
moved to note that this is the first time in
the entire history of the Council of Europe
that this honour has fallen to him. Thank
you for this, for the privilege which is
mine today, but above all for the
exceptional opportunity you have given
Switzerland to let her voice be heard in the
chorus of European nations.

My presence should, above all, bear witness
to Switzerland's gratitude to the Council of
Europe for the extraordinary commitment it

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has shown, over a period of more than forty years, in the service of European unity and the promotion in Europe of human rights, democracy and a whole series of other essential values. Please permit me, Madame Catherine Lalumière, to offer you my country's special gratitude for the remarkable work you accomplish with such strength and perspicacity as Head of the General Secretariat of our great, ancient European institution. I am also keen to express my joy at the idea that the Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, will soon be playing a full part in your work. I should like to proffer special greetings to those countries' representatives, and to the delegation from a renewed Soviet Union, moving witnesses to the great changes we are going through at the present time.

So here is the President of the Swiss Confederation, here in Strasbourg. But isn't this something of a paradox? Your attention

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is focused less than a hundred miles up the Rhine from here, on a prosperous and peaceful country, whilst the thoughts, hopes and fears of all Europeans are following the courses of some of the other rivers of our continent, away to the East. With all the upheavals which have kept us on the edge of our seats for over two years, with half of Europe pulling down the structures built by the greatest hypocrisy in history, and even breaking down inherited and long-accepted frontiers, might you not have wanted to hear from this platform a different message from mine?

In your wisdom, you thought otherwise. You wanted to celebrate with Switzerland the 700th anniversary of the alliance signed in August 1291 by three mountain communities to withstand "the malice of the times", that alliance which, expanding little by little, was eventually to found a country, and later on, in 1848, a federal State. Seven hundred years it has existed, in the heart of Europe: you are paying homage to a long history of stability on which it is certainly not inappropriate to reflect at

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this present juncture. You are paying homage to 700 years of our active presence in Europe. For neither our independence, nor our later neutrality, has ever meant separation from the affairs of this continent, of which nature and history have made us both the watershed and an important pivot. You are paying homage, now more topically than ever, to the fact that within a single small country there live happily side by side four languages, three major European civilizations, two great Christian faiths; to the trusting and genuine respect for minorities within one and the same nation. The reality of this respect I can confirm in person, as a President of the Confederation who is a member of the small Italian-speaking minority.

We do appreciate your demonstration of friendship, your recognition of the testimony of our history. We appreciate them all the more because we need them. For this

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anniversary we are celebrating is not characterized by all the serenity or all the confidence in the future that we might have wished. First of all because Switzerland, along with all the peoples of Europe, and indeed the whole world, has to face the daunting problems of society: grave damage to the environment, the increasing burden of our infrastructures, drugs, AIDS, and the breakdown of values which is disconcerting to some and upsetting to others. The very spirit of consensus and participation which is the foundation of our entire political culture is being eroded by the egotism and increasing short-sightedness of private interests.

But above all, our anniversary coincides with a fundamental questioning, with major decisions that we shall have to take. Questions and decisions for which our recent history (bearing the stamp of an isolation which may be legitimate but may also be unjustified), not to mention our comfortable lifestyle and routine, have ill prepared us: what place should Switzerland occupy, what

place can she occupy, in the Europe of tomorrow?

This is by no means a simple question.

It is not simple because it is viewed in a different light by the Swiss and their partners. The Swiss are certainly willing to play a full and active part in a Europe joining together to enjoy peace, democracy and the spread of its civilization; and they are at the same time jealous of their dignity as citizens called upon to have their say on the major and minor questions put to the nation; jealous of the traditions they have taken seven centuries to build up and neither will nor can give up with a stroke of the pen. But the Swiss will also have to be ceaselessly reminded that their readiness in principle to assume European responsibilities presupposes a real desire for harmonization and hence a real willingness (where absolutely necessary) to abandon certain elements in their common heritage, however venerable that heritage may seem. Finding a balance between these two stipulations, participating in the

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various institutions and safeguarding our diversity; that is the political work of art our generation will have to accomplish. And I mean what I say: a whole generation. Because the process towards European unity will not be completed in a few months, whatever some impatient people - and there are too many of them in Switzerland, as well as in the rest of Europe - may say.

As for our European partners, they are justly proud of the progress already made along the path of European unity, largely thanks to the 1957 Treaty of Rome. They are proud of having turned upside down, in its final years, a millennium full of wars, conflicts and imperialist ambitions; of having finally decided to unite, in peace, democracy and respect for human rights; of having established mutual trust and solidarity between age-old enemies. It is to be sincerely hoped that this remarkable success story will not lead them to prejudge the place that Switzerland and the other countries, the newcomers, ought to occupy. The Europe of tomorrow, ladies and gentlemen, representatives of the countries

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of our continent, will be the result of dialogue based on trust, of reconciliation between the ambitions and interests involved, of course, and of equality of status, in spite of the inequality of power.

Another reason why the question is far from simple is that we are uncertain about the identity of the Europe of the future.

Outlines which were apparently secure and straightforward, in their tragic rigidity, just three short years ago, have suddenly become blurred. A situation which we scarcely dared believe would come about, and at which we all, needless to say, rejoice. The countries of Eastern Europe have recovered their independence and their national dignity, Germany has spontaneously reunited, we have all sung the praises of a really freedom-loving Europe. Even the Soviet Union has broken free from her former totalitarian system. For this fact, homage must be paid to the perspicacity and perseverance of President Gorbachev: without these the historic upheavals we have all witnessed could not have taken place.

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But the blurred outline of Europe has its down side too. Far from solving the material problems, it is exacerbating them. Refound freedom, going hand in hand with prolonged poverty, is awakening instincts of intolerance to minorities, those old ethnic and nationalist reactions, frontier disputes and other dramas which we thought had been consigned to the history books. The order of totalitarianism, in Yugoslavia and elsewhere, is giving place to the disorder born of uncontrolled emotions.

Whether we find this new state of affairs reassuring or worrying, it is also of very direct concern to Switzerland and to her people's perception of her European vocation and responsibility.

My compatriots, you see, look upon Europe in terms of a number of concentric circles, rather like those Russian dolls that fit one inside the other. To them, Europe is first

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and foremost the land around our borders, on our doorstep. It consists of those plains and large towns to which and through which our rivers flow. We have always had close ties with these neighbouring countries, even though they may have become blurred and strained when certain regimes, now banished, threatened our freedoms. We have shared food and ideas with our neighbours. We play our part in their great cultures and in their creativity. On all sides of our frontiers, we have set up trading links and constructed areas of regional co-operation, and we feel that in the Europe of the future these will offer a middle way, a mediating influence, between nation States and the continental edifice which is destined to be built.

The next Europe, as seen by the Swiss, is the European Community of the Twelve, with whom we feel and know that we have much "in common", though we are still not formally members; for instance, our common industrial and service economies, our common sensitivities, the identity of our civilization. At the College of Europe in Bruges, in a few days' time, I shall have an opportunity of

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referring to this great rôle as a driving force assumed by the European Community.

But the Swiss are attached by both the head and the heart to your Europe, which is also ours; I mean that of the Council of Europe: that is a Europe to which we already belong fully. We see in it the natural framework for the assumption of our overall responsibilities as Europeans. For that reason we should like to see a two-fold expansion of the Council of Europe. An expansion in its area, so that it corresponds - and at last this is a realistic possibility - to the geographical Europe, from the Atlantic to the Urals, and an expansion in the service it renders. Our Council of Europe: an essential forum for welcoming, and integrating, the new democracies: what a fascinating fact that is! And who knows, the future shape of the continent - which is far from being definitively drawn as yet and which will probably be less monolithic than some people imagine - might confer more extensive functions on the Council of Europe. I myself have no doubt about it: in the coming years

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the good offices of the Council of Europe will be very much in demand. It will in any case be the privileged forum and the appropriate laboratory for testing the ideas, visions and prospects of the long process of union among all Europeans. It is my wish that this political rôle should be reinforced within the Council of Europe, should assume once again the scope and importance of former times. Pre-eminence should once again be given to political debate and to the joint evaluation of the major questions of concern to our whole continent. This rôle takes on a special significance in the present circumstances.

That is the fundamental rôle being carved out for the Council of Europe. This will all require institutional and cultural means just as much as economic or financial means. Switzerland intends to make her contribution, commensurate with her resources. She sees this as her duty, and as an honour. Because Switzerland is a daughter of Europe.

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Switzerland, the daughter of Europe: in terms of the way she was first peopled. In the past waves of migrant populations rolled through her valleys from all directions, were trapped by her mountains, and took root. This initial diversity gave birth to tolerance, to the vocation of Switzerland as a land of welcome, of exchanges, of encounters. A vocation to which she wishes to remain faithful, among other things in her traditional humanitarian initiatives.

But above all, Switzerland, the political daughter of Europe. Since, from the beginning, it was the ambition of the princes who built up territorial powers that sharpened the desire for independence of the first Swiss and inspired them with the idea of collective liberty. Real or legendary, William Tell remains the universal hero of all peoples smitten with this idea of liberty

The cantons soon found themselves the pivot between the two great rival powers on the continent, the Germanic empire and France. They could not prevent the confrontation.

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But they did represent a solid, permanent balancing factor in Europe, owing their stability in part to the status of neutrality which they have observed since the 16th century.

And Switzerland, the economic daughter of Europe. For she was set up in the first instance on the Saint-Gothard road, a major route between the countries of the Mediterranean and those of the Rhine; she soon expanded along the roads of the Helvetic plateau, making a real trading crossroads for the continent.

Switzerland was thus able to participate directly in the technical and industrial progress of the last two centuries, serving it, despite the mediocrity of her natural resources, by the quality of her workmanship, the selection of a few specialities, up-market products and services which she was able to make available on worldwide markets. But this effort and this success would not have been possible without the considerable contribution of our friends in Europe:

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technicians, engineers, creative entrepreneurs, or the armies of workers called upon to lend us their labour, under conditions which did not always redound to our honour.

Finally, and most important of all,

Switzerland, the cultural daughter of

Europe: three of its cultures meet there, sometimes clashing, but more often producing a cross-fertilization. Not in uniformity, but in the familiarity they achieve, in their creative force. More than the economic and more than the political encounters, the encounter between cultures has forged and sustained the tolerance of the Swiss, their curiosity about things diverse, their friendly respect for the minority.

Many of my compatriots have come to regard their own country as the navel of Europe and thus as a special case. This attitude could be understood in times of war and when faced

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with dictatorships. Today it would be merely an aberration, a failure to face up to our responsibilities, a way of challenging Europe without daring to look it in the face. Ostriches are always wrong.

Switzerland is no more a special case than

any of your countries. No special case,

then, except on one point which is at the same time our strength and our weakness.

Switzerland is a "nation of will", to use the well-turned phrase of Denis de Rougemont. That is to say, it does not, like other nations, consist of a clearly-defined geographical area, an area unified on the basis of a common language and culture, or one centred around a single power bringing land and people together. Switzerland's only reality is in the will of her citizens to join together to form a nation of differences. This is her strength, insofar as that is the way the nation exists in the mind of the Swiss. But it is also her weakness insofar as the mind may be changed and the will blunted.

This may seem to be the risk Switzerland is running today. Our wills need to be

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strengthened. And it is in the friendly challenge, or the call, that Europe is issuing to Switzerland that I see our best opportunity lying. Switzerland will be proud to fulfil her European vocation, she will find in it once again her whole identity, called in question by some people in a moment of tiredness, after 700 years...

Europe will help Switzerland, by welcoming her while at the same time respecting her.

Placing demands on her, too. Isolated in her ivory tower, misunderstood by her partners, Switzerland would run the risk of moral disintegration, and perhaps political disintegration as well.

That would be a misfortune for her people. I should like to think that it would also be a great pity for Europe. Because for Europe the stakes are no difference from those which marked the long epic history of little Helvetia: either it will be conscientious and respected in diversity (a diversity which is precisely both a strength and a weakness); or it will not be. All of us, together, want it to be!