

Our Swiss Standpoint

Speech given by Carl Spitteler to the Neue Helvetische Gesellschaft on 14th December 1914 in Zurich*

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen

I do not eagerly step forward, out of my isolation into the public sphere, to speak to you about a topic, which seemingly does not concern me. It would in fact not concern me, if everything were as it should be. Since this is not the case, however, I fulfil my citizen's duty by trying to contribute with my words as a modest private citizen to working against an unpleasant and not at all harmless situation. On the occasion of the war between the German-speaking and the French-speaking regions we have allowed an antagonism in attitudes to develop. I cannot take this antagonism lightly. It does not comfort me if someone says: "If it comes to war, though, we would stand together like one man." The small word "though" is a bad linking word. Do we perhaps wish for a war in order to become more aware of our solidarity? That would mean to pay it too dearly. We can get it more cheaply. And nicer and less painful.

I cannot see anything positive in alienation; rather the opposite. Or do we want, as for example the foreigners do, ignore the mood of our confederates with different languages, simply because they are a minority? "Apart from the faction of French-speaking Switzerland, which is completely in France's wake ..." In Switzerland we disregard nobody. Even if the minority were ten times smaller, we would take it serious, nevertheless. There are no factions in Switzerland. It is an undeserved reproach that the French-speaking part of Switzerland was following "in France's wake". It is following in the same Helvetic wake as German-speaking Switzerland. This

has often been demonstrated. It even refuses to be called «French» Switzerland. Thus, I believe, we should take care of our relationship with our French-speaking confederates and should worry about the disproportion.

"Well, what actually happened?"

Nothing happened. We simply let ourselves go. If however two peoples walk into different directions, they will go apart. There is an apology. Its name is: Surprise. The sudden outbreak of war hit like a bomb; our mental and spiritual life as well as the remaining areas. Reason lost the reins; sympathy and antipathy bolted and ran away with us. And our sense dragging behind with its weak voice was not able to stop the vehicle. By the way, if I observe correctly, sense has finally prevailed, nevertheless. We now are, as I believe and hope, in the mood of reversal and insight. Thus the main thing is won and the worst has been prevented. However a certain confusion of opinion and a certain embarrassment still prevail. The task of the hour now is to introduce some order; so this is my task as well.

Do we want or do we not want to remain a Swiss state?

First of all we'll have to get it straight, what we really want. Do we want or do we not want to remain a Swiss state, which displays its political unity vis-à-vis the foreign countries? In case the answer is no, if everyone may let himself float to where his private inclination is taking him and where he is directed to go from outside, I do not have anything to tell you. In that case we let things slide, and let them be lose and slouching. In case we say yes, however, we must become aware that our national borders also represent guidelines for our political attitudes. All those who live beyond our national borders are our neighbours, and until further notice they remain kind neighbours; all those, who live on this side, are more than neighbours, they are our brothers. The difference between a neighbour and a brother, however, is tremendous. Even the best neighbour can shoot at us with a cannon, while our brother fights the battle on our side. A greater difference may not be imagined.

* *Carl Spitteler* lived from 1845 to 1924. The studied theologian worked as a teacher, editor, free-lance journalist and finally as a free author. 1905 he got the honorary degree from the University of Zurich and 1915 from de University of Lausanne. 1919 he was the first native Swiss to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

With his speech of December 1914 entitled "Our Swiss Standpoint" he took, at the beginning of World War I a stand in favour of a neutral Swiss attitude based on reason, which should strengthen the inner cohesion of the country.

We are friendly and neighbourly advised by others not to emphasize the political borders with so much emotion. If we followed this advice, the result would be this: In place of the bridged borders leading to the outside, other borders within our country would evolve, gapping the western, the southern and the eastern part of Switzerland. I think we should rather stick to the present borders. No, we must become aware that the political brother is closer to us than the best neighbour and race relative. It is our patriotic duty to strengthen that awareness. This duty is not easy to fulfil. We shall feel united, without being uniform. We do not have the same blood, nor the same language, we do not have a dynasty to mediate our conflicts, we do not even have a common capital. We must not be mistaken that all these things are elements of political weakness. And now we are looking for a common symbol, which might overcome the elements of weakness. Fortunately, we possess this symbol. I do not need to name it: the Swiss federal flag. Therefore we have to get closer and assemble around the Swiss federal flag and distance ourselves accordingly from those, who pledge obedience to another flag; we must feel concentric instead of eccentric.

Certainly, as a neutral country it would be the only correct way for us to keep the same distance in all directions. That is also the opinion of every Swiss citizen. But that is more easily said than done. We move automatically towards the one or the other direction, either nearer to the one neighbour or further away from the other, but always more than our neutrality permits.

We must not reproach our brothers for their errors

The western Swiss are tempted to associate themselves too closely with France, and with us it is the other way. An admonition, a warning and a correction are necessary, both here and there. The correction however must come from within, in every region. We must not reproach our brothers for their errors; the consequence would be that they serve us our own errors, if possible with interest. In a spirit of mutual confidence we must therefore leave it to our French-speaking confederates to express the necessary admonitions from inside their region and concern ourselves with our own affairs.

Gaining distance is particularly difficult for the German speaking Swiss. The German Swiss are

even more closely connected with Germany in all cultural spheres than the western Swiss with France. Let us take a look at arts and literature. In a truly magnanimous way Germany accepted our masters, paid tribute to them without a shade of envy and jealousy, and even raised the one or the other above their own ones. Innumerable cases of business interrelations, of spiritual agreement, of friendship have been established, a beautiful unified relationship which in long times of peace made us completely forget that there is such thing as a border between Germany and German-speaking Switzerland.

Personal experiences

Do you want to accept me as an example and rebus?

I believe, some of you can sympathize with me. There was a period in my life, which was a period of noble juvenile foolishness, since I was looking across the Rhine yearning for the unknown, incredible Germany which seemed to me like a fairy tale country, where dreams come true, where the figures of poetry become real and are wandering about in the bright sunshine: the noble, ingenuous young men of the romantic writers, the sensuous virgins of the folk songs; where the people in their daily life talked in the same way as our classical authors wrote, where mountains and valleys, holt and wells greeted us with homelike eyes. Those were certainly naive, childish ideas. But today, when I am no longer naive or childlike: today sympathy and agreement come to meet me from Germany like spring, inconceivably, inexhaustibly. From the most distant regions friends emerge, hundreds and thousands. If on rare occasions I happen to go there, I meet with good-natured, kind, well-meaning, attentive people, whose modes of expression and feeling I immediately understand. When parting, I take beautiful memories with me and leave warm thanks behind.

My French friends however can be counted on the fingers of one hand and I do not even need my thumb and small finger. And I can bend the remaining three. In France I travel as a lonely nobody, surrounded by cold, distrustful strangeness.

"And now what!" Yes, and why: "And now what"?

Shall I let my political conviction follow my private, personal friendships? Cheeringly follow a foreign flag, the symbol of a foreign policy, from

individual motives, carolling and with open arms? Or does anybody object if a German Swiss calls the flag of the German Empire a foreign flag? Can you tell me for whatever reason our troops are stationed at the border? And why are they stationed along all borders, along the German border, as well?

Each state robs as much as possible

Obviously, because we do not trust a single neighbour in all circumstances. Why, however, don't we trust them? And why do our neighbours not feel insulted by this distrust, but regard it as justified? Because political states are admittedly neither sentimental nor moral powers, but violent powers. It is not surprising that states like to have a beast of prey in their coat of arms. Indeed, the whole wisdom of world history can be summarized in only one sentence: Each state robs as much as possible. And that is that. With some digestive breaks and fainting spells which we call "peace". The leaders of the states however act, as a legal guardian would act, who – out of sheer diligence – considers everything permitted, which is of advantage to his ward, no heinous crime excluded. The more ingenious a statesman is, the more heinous. (Please do not turn this sentence around.) Taking that into account, being touchy in view of distrust would definitely be inappropriate.

It is over for good with that arbitrary confraternisation

While some states bound by diplomacy, convention and alliances, are careful to some extent, we are lacking the protection of reinsurance. We do not pursue any high foreign policy. Hopefully; for the day we formed an alliance or shared secrets with a foreign country would mark the beginning of the end of Switzerland. We therefore lead a political life in darkness, in twilight, at best. In times of war, when we smell trouble, we find ourselves in the situation of a farmer, who hears a wild pig oink in the forest without knowing if or when or where from it will come. For this reason we place our troops all around the whole forest. And nobody should rely on the friendship, which rules between us and a neighbouring people in times of peace. Such things do not exist for the leadership. Those are harmless interactions among civilians. By means of military discipline the governments, particularly those with pseudo-parliaments, nowadays have a firm grip on their

subjects, including their heads and hearts, and it is over for good with that arbitrary confraternisation. Or can you imagine an army corps, denying obedience for the sake of us: "We do not march against the Swiss, because they are our friends." The sound of the military call to arms and the war trumpet silences all other tunes, including the voice of friendship.

Therefore I say: "And now what!" And here is what I mean:

Given all the cordial friendship that links us in our private lives with thousands of German subjects; and all the solidarity that we reverently feel with the German spiritual life; given all familiarity that the common language makes us feel, we may not take any other position towards the political Germany or the German empire than towards any other state: the position of the neutral restraint in friendly and neighbourly distance on this side of the border.

Our German neighbour

The necessary reservation towards the German neighbour, which is difficult for us, anyway is made even more difficult by a more or less well-intentioned approval. First of all there is the well-known appeal to our racial, cultural and linguistic relationship. This should lead to eagerly taking sides with the German cause in this war, as we are told. As if this was a matter of philology! As if the entire mass of cannons of all peoples did not talk the same abominable Volapuk [an artificial language]! As if this war did not exactly preach the inferiority of all national federations in relation to the state federation! As if it was a fact that the cultural values of a people rise and fall with its political power-position! – Moreover, there is the dangerous hissing of an evil temptation, which in the name of friendship and thanks tries to seduce us to do something which even the best friendship and the warmest thanks must neither force nor permit us to do: to refrain from our terms of truth and to lie about or to counterfeit our convictions of right and wrong for the sake of somebody else. – Another bad and dangerous thing: Taking sides will be answered by immeasurable reward whereas impartiality is threatened by severe punishment. With base six lines of unconditioned partisanship everyone who wishes can easily gain fame, honour, popularity and other tasty delicacies in Germany, today. He only needs to go there and bow to collect them.

With a single line you can lose your good reputation and respect. It needs not even be a thoughtless or inadvertent line. A resolute, true statement will have the same effect.

We are not at all indifferent

We must be aware that basically no member of a war-waging nation considers a neutral conviction justified. They can make an effort and try to apprehend it but they cannot understand it in their hearts. We seem to them like an indifferent person in a mourning house. However, we are not at all indifferent. I call on the feelings of all of you to bear witnesses that we are not indifferent. However, since we do not move, we seem indifferent. Therefore our bare existence is a scandal. Initially it seems unpleasantly strange, gradually provoking impatience; finally it appears disgusting, infringing and insulting. Even more so a word of non-approval! An independent judgment! The patriotically involved is deeply convinced of his good cause and also of the rogue character of his enemies. Everything within him that does not hurt, hope and fear, that does not cry and mourn, cries indignation. And now there is someone, who calls himself neutral and takes sides for the rogues! This is because a fair judgment is seen as partisanship with the enemy. And no merits, no good reputation, no name will save him from condemnation. Quite the contrary, even more so! Apart from disloyalty and betrayal you will be accused of ingratitude.

Just like the officers who are shot at on the battleground, famous people are shot at in their scriptoriums. Soon there is none left, who has not been demonized and solemnly excluded from any temple. You get totally confused. You do no longer know if you are a blessing for humankind or are you scum. But how can we counter those dangerous threats? Those who are allowed to be silent may consider themselves fortunate. Who may not keep his silence may act according to the proverb: Do as you must, and do not care for the consequences. In order to save our neutral souls, we are provided with propaganda brochures. Usually they are written in an over-loud tone, very often like commands, every now and then almost furibund. The more they come in a scholarly manner, the more radical they are. Such things often miss the target. It doesn't appeal to us, if we get the impression that the authors would like to gob-

ble us. Have those gentlemen lost their tentacles so that they do no longer know how to speak to other peoples and how to avoid speaking to them? In view of such impositions we appeal to the friend that has gone wild and to the normal, peaceful and friendly person whom we hope to find again when the war is over, as well as to the entire past and our beautiful, trustful and unbiased spiritual exchange.

The correct neutral attitude

Unfortunately our region did not know how to refrain from the other temptation, i.e. an unfriendly attitude towards France, sufficiently. I have repeatedly heard this question from some painfully surprised Frenchmen: "What harm did we do to the Swiss?" Really, I do not know what they did to harm us. Do you know? Or do we have any other reason to distrust the French in particular? To distrust them more than any other neighbour? I do not know any such reason. This unfriendly attitude is by no means based on reasons of a patriotic kind, but on instinctive feelings. These instinctive feelings, however, were sometimes expressed in such a way that in the first weeks of August I was hoping for a potent political speaker to imprint the principles of neutrality into the minds of our people, besides those mild field lectures. Well, now the press office of our army staff is having the word. And as there is so much talk about mutual relations, we must ask ourselves whether we are not related to the French, as well. The commonness of political ideals, the equality of the systems of government, the similarity of the social conditions, is this not a kind of relationship, as well? The notions "republic", "democracy", freedom, forbearance and so on, are they only marginal to a Swiss citizen? There was a time – I experienced it – when these words meant everything in Europe. Today they are treated as almost nil. Everything was too much. Nothing is too little. Despicable, anyway. Do the Swiss people reject the French, because they lack the emperors, kings and royal princes? It almost looks like it.

A martial press is no elevating literature at all

The correct neutral attitude towards the remaining states would actually be an easy thing for us German-speaking Swiss, since there are no temptations for partisanship. Yes! If only we could always feel and judge as Swiss! If only we

did not think with foreign minds and spoke in foreign tongues! If only we would not allow our opinion to be influenced by foreigners! In times of war, we can only savour the thousands and thousands of mental ideas, which inundate us every day from Germany like a beneficial Nile fertilizing our districts, in case they have been filtered before. A martial press is no elevating literature at all. Whatever big thing the patriotic frenzy may produce, its influence on our linguistic centre is definitely unfavourable. Can't it be avoided that the bloody wound a war causes will be further poisoned by ink? Anyhow, those who die for their native country have a nobler role than those who rant and rail for their native country. I do not mean to judge and I do not say these things from a snobbish point of view. In times of war we would not act differently. I only say it as a warning. The enemies of the German Reich are not our enemies likewise. We must not allow the neighbour who speaks the same language, whose newspapers we read, we must not allow him to dictate his belligerent key words and orders of the day, his patriotic sophisms, his artful judgments and wrenched terms into our notebooks. And we are not to judge the enemies of the German Reich, who are not our enemies, by the mask of hate and anger they have put on, but by their real face. In other words: As a neutral people we owe the rest of the world the same justice in our judgment which we grant the Germans, so we do not allow the French to force their distorted picture of the Germans on us, either.

Let us have a glance on the enemies of the German Reich from our own perspective, without tinted eyeglasses.

Currently the Germans direct a special hatred against the Englishmen, as you know. They have special reasons for that which we do not share. On the contrary, we owe special gratitude to the Englishmen. More than once England protected us in great danger. England is not the only but the most reliable friend of Switzerland. And if someone points out to me that this was "mere egoism!" I will ask for more such egoists, who assist us in times of emergency. More historic instruction would do good. It must not always be Sempach or Morgarten, since the Sonderbund war and the Neuenburgerhandel are also part of Swiss history. At present I consider this to be one of the coming tasks for the Swiss press: to finally do away with this picked-up

gossip of England's insidiousness that intoxicates our people.

Italy, by contrast, is a country where milk and honey flow. If one day, the milk suddenly turns sour, we do not need to ferment along. We have our own account with Italy. To date the balance has been pleasant. We have already spoken about France. Can a western European Christian be glad about his education without experiencing a cultural shudder with regard to Russia? I do not want to rely merely on my own observations, as I have lived in Russia for eight years. I point to the reference of the Germans. For almost a century Prussia has reveled in courtly marriage with the same Russians, who they today describe as rather Asian, including the devilish Cossacks. And if the alliance were obtainable again tomorrow ...? And if you compare them to the Turks and Bulgarians, the Croats, Slovaks and so on!

We Swiss people have a different understanding of the small states' right to exist. For us the Serbs are not a "gang", but a people. They are a people that have a right to live and to earn our respect as every other people. The Serbs have a glorious, heroic past. The beauty of their folk literature is on a par with that of other peoples, their heroic poetry even more. No other nation has produced such beautiful epic poetry as the Serbs since the times of Homer. Our Swiss doctors and nurses who returned from the wars on the Balkans have told us about the Serbs in a mood of sympathy and praise. We are to form our opinion from these credentials, not from the biased war propaganda inflamed by passion.

Belgium by itself does not concern us Swiss; however its fate should indeed concern us. Originally, the offenders openly admitted that Belgium experienced great injustice. Subsequently Cain was black-washing Abel in order to look whiter. I think this fishing for documents in the bags of a flinching victim is an emotional indecency. To strangle the victim was quite enough. To mock the victim is too much. A Swiss person, who contributed to mocking the Belgians, would commit both an indecency and a thoughtless action. The same small pieces of evidence of our guilt would creep out of the darkness, in case our lives were threatened. War ammunition unfortunately includes the spitting of hatred.

What finally concerns the indignation about the sinister ancillary people: in a duel we distinguish between fair and unfair. A war is not a stu-

dents' duel as some higher military officers want to make us believe, but a bitter fight for a nation's the life. When it is about life and death, however, each helping hand is welcome, regardless of his reputation or skin colour. If a burglar threatens you with a knife you do not hesitate to call your dog for help. And if the burglar addressed you in a noble way by saying "Don't you feel ashamed to make use of a senseless, four-footed animal against a fellow?", you would probably answer him "Your knife prevents me from feeling ashamed."

In order to maintain justice and neutrality

And now the main issue: our relationship to French-speaking Switzerland. Once more: We hope and expect that a similar confederate clearing of the mind will happen there, just like the one in our part of the country, in favour of our unity and in order to maintain justice and neutrality. One thing is sure, we must team up more closely and therefore we will have to understand each other better. In order to understand each other better, we will have to come to know each other better. What about our knowledge of the French-speaking part of Switzerland? And its literature and press? Everyone may answer this question for himself. Salvation has always been sought in tri-lingual magazines. So be it! However, not only what has been written is important but also who reads it. I do recommend something else: our German Swiss newspapers should, in my opinion, publish selected and translated articles out of French-written papers. They would well deserve it. The different contents of ideas could serve as completion to and refreshment of our own ideas. We have been much too cautious in one direction. An article like "Le sort de la Belgique" (The fate of Belgium) by Wagnière would also have befitted us. The style of writing, I dare saying, is really "comme il faut" very often. During the last few weeks, I have occasionally read the "Journal de Genève", which I had never heard of before; I read six issues altogether. In these six issues, I came across four leading articles whose literary quality commanded my astonished admiration. Articles by Wagnière, Seippel, Bonnard. To put it briefly, a drip of French in our serious objectivity would do no harm.

Let us be modest

Finally I would like to suggest a rule of conduct, which should be equally applied towards all for-

ign powers: modesty. By being modest we pay our polite thanks to the big powers for dispensing us from their bloody quarrels. With modesty we pay tribute to deathly wounded Europe, which we owe her in view of the pain: our reverence. By being modest we apologize. "Apologize? What for?" Those who have ever stood next to a sick bed know what for. An emphatic fellow human being apologizes for his well-being while others suffer. Above all, no tunes of superiority! No reprimanding! It goes without saying that we, being impartial, see many things clearer and judge many things in a juster way than those who are caught in the passion of fighting. This is an advantage of position, not a spiritual advantage. An honest dealing with distressing events should be spontaneous and passionately vigorous, bad language should be banned on its own behalf. It does not sound good if, from the secure position of inviolability, a big European power is attacked in some small paper with bar-room clichés that would suit an idyllic city council election. If in such a case censorship assists with a muzzle, it is an act of decency.

Scorn and rejoicing are to be rejected on neutral ground

The tune of rejoicing and mockery should not be heard among us. Mockery is in itself a rude expression of the mind which can hardly be observed among military personnel. Only wrath excuses mockery. We are lacking this excuse. The winner's companions may allow themselves to rejoice over a triumphant message, when they feel relief from embarrassing tension. We do not need any relief. Both, scorn and rejoicing are the loudest expression possible of partiality and thus they are to be rejected on neutral ground. If two people hear a message of victory and one of them mourns it while the other rejoices, the one who mourns will develop a strong hatred against the one who triumphs. For a long time I have been convinced that derision was the worst comment. But there is something even worse: the viciously tittering malicious glee which occasionally appears in sardonic editorial parenthesis and exclamations. There are quick prayers and deep sighs. These are quick belches. The usual scorn on fraudulent battle reports actually includes arrogance. Who is lying in battle reports? Not the one or the other nation but the one who has been defeated. For the winner, it is easy to say the truth. However, we cannot ask the defeated to

clearly and loudly announce the complete extent of his defeat. This goes beyond the strength of a man. Even we, the deriders, would not be able to do so.

And as we are talking of modesty, I have a shy request: The patriotic fantasies of an exemplary (or arbitral) Swiss mission, please express them as quietly as possible. Before we can serve as a model to other countries we must solve our own tasks in an immaculate manner.

To retrieve the right attitude from our hearts

Ladies and gentlemen

Preserving the right attitude is not as strenuous as it sounds if we apply logic. Yes, if we had to use our heads! But we do not need to use our heads; we can retrieve it from our hearts. What would you do if a funeral procession goes past? As a spectator of a tragedy, what do you feel? Shock and devotion. And how do you behave? You stand there in quiet, devoted and honest silence. We do not have to learn that, do we? Well, fate's favourable exception has allowed us to be spectators of the dreadful tragedy that is currently going on in Europe. Mourning prevails on the stage, behind the scenes there is murder.

Wherever you listen with your heart, be it to your right or to your left, you hear nothing but moaning and sobbing, and it sounds alike in all nations, regardless of the different languages. Well, let us fill our hearts with silent emotion and our souls with devotion in view of this enormous amount of international suffering, and let us take our hats off.

Then we take the right, the neutral – the Swiss Standpoint.

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