

Äplerchilbi at the Swiss Residence in Wellington on 4 March 2017 – address by Ambassador David Vogelsanger

Mr. Attorney General,
Members of Parliament,
Colleagues Ambassadors and High Commissioners,
Mayors and Councilors,
Leaders of administrative and military organizations and of the Police,
And most of all: dear fellow citizens and friends of Switzerland in New Zealand,

A warm welcome to you all at the Swiss Residence in Lower Hutt, a historic building that has been home to the representative of our country in New Zealand since 1954, the year I was born. It will undergo a thorough renovation in about two years' time and get ready for the next sixty years of Swiss-New Zealand relations.

These relations have started much earlier, exactly 240 years ago, on 12th February 1777. That day, the first Swiss citizen set foot on the soil of Aotearoa, not far from here, across the Straits in the Queen Charlotte Sound. He shook hands with the Maori people he encountered and sketched them. Many thousands of Swiss tourists and millions of New Zealanders board or leave a ferry in Picton every year at that very spot, without having an idea of this. Captain James Cook had recruited a young Swiss artist from London by the name of John Webber. He was to accompany him on the "Endeavour" to document landscapes, people, animals and plants encountered during Cook's third and final trip. Webber should become a witness to his Captain's death in Hawaii, but return himself safely to London. We owe to him a rich treasure of artistic documentation of not only New Zealand, but the South Pacific of the time.

By the way, another member of Cook's crew later became a household name. William Bligh was a sailing master on the "Endeavour's" sister ship "Resolution", commanded later the ill-fated "HMS Bounty" of Pitcairn fame and rose to the positions of Governor of New South Wales and Admiral in the wars against Napoleon.

In 2015, we have celebrated in this garden an important moment which stood at the outset of our own Swiss history, the battle of Morgarten in 1315. I submitted you then to some kind of a history lesson and promised to myself that this will not happen today, even if I have already slightly broken that promise. But just like New Zealand or any other nation, we Swiss are proud of our origins, our old democracy and our traditions. We are, like New Zealand, a small country, but we have never doubted that we are a great one, as you can read on the red hats some of us are wearing today.

You had the chance this afternoon to participate in few of these traditions such as shooting or bowling or listening to our music. As the world is changing and as our own European continent faces many critical and potentially very dangerous developments, these traditions become stronger, not weaker. The "Schwinget", or Swiss wrestling, you have just witnessed has been for many years a sport mostly popular in rural communities. In recent years, however, the whole nation has become fascinated by it, and its top competition, held every three years, attracts a lot more people than for example a European football championship final. And there is absolutely no drunkenness, no hooligans, no police action needed at all. Today, you have attended, thanks to our friends from Taranaki, a historic event, the first Swiss wrestling competition that has ever been held in the capital of New Zealand. Maybe the next one will take place in the rugby stadium in Wellington.

We also celebrate today, you have heard it from my friend and club president Roland Schütz, 60 years of the Wellington Swiss Club. When a Swiss newspaper reported my appointment to Wellington three years ago, I had the next day an envelope in the mail containing a kind letter and a calendar with photos of Wellington from an elderly couple living in the village next to mine. The husband had been one of the first presidents of this club. My wife and I have been proudly members since our arrival, and I want to congratulate and thank all those who keep it alive and ready for another sixty years. Whenever I attend an event, I enjoy talking to the older members and learning from them, but I am also very pleased to note the presence of young people, often freshly emigrated, and of children who are the future. I wish the Swiss Club another sixty years, at least!

The Wellington Club is, of course, not the only one, but there are others in Taranaki, the oldest one, Auckland and Hamilton. Together with the Wellington Club, they all have contributed to this day, and I wish to thank them for their music, food, sports activities and hard work. There is a Swiss Club also in Christchurch and some more informal circles even in Dunedin and in Timaru. Some of our compatriots from down south have made the trip to Wellington today. Thank you for being here!

I also wish to thank our good friends of the St Bernard and Bernese Mountain Dog Clubs of New Zealand who once again enrich our day with our furry Swiss emigrants, to the delight of children and adults alike.

And I want to thank my own Embassy staff who has worked so hard, once again, to make this day possible. I have not been here until yesterday, attending the funeral of the Queen Mother of Tonga, but when I came back, everything was perfectly under control. I cannot name them all, but one of them is not a permanent staff member, but an academic intern who came to us to learn about diplomacy. She became a successful event manager on top. Thank you, Derya!

Swiss citizens have contributed in many ways to this wonderful country that is New Zealand. They came first as adventurers, prospectors, explorers. A few months ago, I had the chance to see the places in the Southern Alps where Jakob Lauper, called here "Swiss Jake", and Thomas Brunner have explored the West Coast of the South Island during the second half of the 19th century, both of them enduring incredible hardships. Lauper Peak and Stream and the lake and town of Brunner remember them. Last year, I spent a day with the authorities of Lauper's village Giffers in Switzerland who has honored him with a monument, and with a number of his direct descendants. He died an old man in Napier and is buried there.

After the New Zealand Wars came the farmers. Their preferred destination was Taranaki. Maybe Mount Egmont reminded them of their native Switzerland which was then a poor country with not enough land for all its farmers. To this day, one third of the 1800 farms in Taranaki have a Swiss family link. Our good friend Barbara Kuriger, Member of Parliament for Taranaki and King Country, should have been here to tell us about it. Her husband's grandfather Johann Kuriger was one of the Swiss pioneers. He came to Kaonga in 1908, a dirt-poor young farmer from Einsiedeln, Switzerland. His descendants are very successful Taranaki dairy farmers to this day. Barbara wanted to be with us today, once again, but she had a speaking engagement in her constituency and afterwards there was no more flight to Wellington. She is co-chair of the New Zealand-Swiss Parliamentary Friendship Group. The other co-chair is our friend the Honorable Trevor Mallard, Assistant Speaker and our local Hutt MP, living not far from the Swiss Club in Wainuiomata. Trevor has saved the honour of that parliamentary group, worked his way around an engagement with the Leader of the Opposition and managed to be with us for an hour this afternoon.

After World War II, New Zealand was in bad need of skilled tradesmen. Together with the Netherlands and some other countries, many of them came from Switzerland. Mechanics, toolmakers, carpenters, cabinet makers, painters, plumbers, watchmakers were some of their trades. They didn't speak English and were housed at first in cold army barracks left over from the war. But they were among the best in their jobs, became successful, started their own businesses and founded families. I will mention one of them who stands for countless others. My good friend Hans Scherrer is 85 years old. He came to this country sixty years ago as a cabinet maker, founded with his wife Theres, whom we all remember very fondly, a numerous family and started a successful business. He lives in Whiteman's Valley and still works in his profession.

Swiss emigration to New Zealand continues to this day. We still have adventurers, but they do not face the hardships of the pioneers anymore, there are now artists, scientists, wine makers, young people eager to start their own business – the Swiss sausages you are eating are from a young butcher from Appenzell who just went into business in Blenheim – and also those who retire to this wonderful and safe country. We have now a community of 7'000 duly registered Swiss nationals, the majority also citizens of their adopted country, but at least 30'000 New Zealanders of Swiss origin. They are not formal citizens of their native land anymore, but I am often moved to see how many of them still nurture the ties to the old country and maintain its traditions.

They all contribute to the close relations between our two nations. The two countries couldn't be further apart on the world map, but they have so much in common: a decisive firmness to go our own way and remain masters of our decisions, while contributing, each of us in the fields where we are most competent, to international cooperation, a democratic tradition which is unshakable, parliamentary in New Zealand's case, based on direct decisions by the people for us Swiss, a respect for human rights second to none, a commitment to fair and free economic relations with all countries and, most of all, freedom. The fire we are going to light as soon as darkness sets in has symbolized for us Swiss, for centuries and to this day, precisely this, freedom.

Mr. Attorney General, the Swiss community in New Zealand is honored by your presence. The last word today will be yours. This is not our national day. On the First of August, we will remember the 726th anniversary of our nation's birth. But here in Wellington, the weather will most likely be cold and rainy. We therefore get together at the beginning of the southern autumn for this "Äplerchilbi", the traditional gathering when people return with the cows and the goats from summer in the mountains as it is celebrated in many of our valleys to this day.

May God continue to bless our two countries, New Zealand and Switzerland!