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A New Patriotic Song for Switzerland

Based on Brecht's Children's Hymn

by Elmar Holenstein

In 2013, the *Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft* (SGG / Swiss Society for Public Utility) announced a competition for a new national anthem.¹ Within a year, more than 200 entries were submitted. At the end of March 2015, six to be discussed nationwide were released. Once sufficiently distributed and found to be popular, the winning version was to be recommended to the federal government as the new national anthem.

In the context of patriotic sentiments that have recently reemerged, national anthems seem also to enthuse people of artistic and intellectual bent. Despite their differences, patriotic emotions, those felt toward family members and relatives, and religious feelings are comparable to erotic sentiments: they are all, though not as openly and directly, rooted in human nature. As natural dispositions, all four are common, though not without exceptions, to all people, but they are not appreciated the same way. Some, like the gifted of an artistic bent, will nurture them as something most valuable in their lives. Others are able to express them only in raw ways and insist on their right to do so. Still others fluctuate between mockery and respect toward all four types of feelings, at times even between disgust and discrete reverence, and people claim reasons for both postures. From time to time the second attitude needs to be refreshed. From that perspective, the call to a competition for a new national anthem is basically welcome. Perhaps it would have been better, however,

¹ See <https://www.chymne.ch/de>.

to initiate a competition for new patriotic songs instead for a new national anthem—in the hope that in a not foreseeable future one of them might emerge as an alternative anthem.

The SGG made the conditions for participating in the competition surprisingly narrow. The most questionable limitation was the demand that the anthem had to reflect in “content, meaning, and spirit the preamble of the federal constitution.” That preamble expresses indeed universal values that are also embraced by Swiss. It is rightfully a solemn text. It might be recited at serious events, but is out of place at sportive occasions. Sung by men and women athletes, the anthem would be perceived as quite pretentious and didactic. As globally televised, the manner in which the anthem is sung at sports event is for numerous people not only audible but also visible. In number those events far surpass occasions such as patriotic celebrations, military professions of loyalty, and official receptions of foreign dignitaries. One would welcome hearing the anthem of one’s own nation not only with an exhilarating melody, but also with an exhilarating text. Athletes should be able to sing it joyfully and credibly just as at international sport events anthems are seen and heard sung by members of many other nations.

A second condition for participating in the contest stated that the text had to be “worldwide unpublished.” Furthermore, “the melodic line” of today’s national anthem was “basically to be kept in the new anthem.” For this third condition one did not consult sportspeople. Television viewers are often disappointed that they join the singing of the present hymn but hesitantly, its melody being as much the reason as its words.² Finally, participants in the contest who did not have Swiss citizenship were asked to explain what motivated them to make a submission. In what follows, I refer to these four conditions directly or indirectly, and I also distance myself from them.

The text that I propose as a new patriotic song among those that others have submitted, clearly does not implement the contest’s conditions. Therefore, I did not send it in. Nor, do I suggest that it

² At the Davis Cup half-finals in Geneva 2014, Roger Federer acknowledged that despite his intention, he did not sing the hymn to the end. It was somewhat too slow and it was difficult to keep its rhythm. See René Staufer, “Der Baselbieter Roger Federer sprach über seine patriotischen Gefühle. ‘Wir sagten uns: Nun singen wir die Nationalhymne richtig’” in: *Tagesanzeiger*. Online, 13 September 2014.

nevertheless might have a chance to be selected outside those given boundaries as official national anthem. The main impediment, as I was told quite soon, was something else however: the author of the poem *Kinderhymne* (Children's Hymn) that serves as basis of my hymnal text was Bertolt Brecht: Marxist, defender of the DDR of the 1950s, East Germany's voluntary and privileged citizen, and winner of the Stalin prize. For Brecht, formed in his early decades by the ideology then dominant in Germany, democratic freedom had been neither a political right nor a matter of prudent policy, as it had not been neither for Ernst Jünger and Martin Heidegger, his contemporaries, who stood on the other side of the political spectrum. It is possible, however, to separate author and achievement as well as motives and meaning in historical texts. Otherwise all too many valuable scripts would have to be ignored.

My own concerns were diametrically opposed to this objection. If one merely envisioned the content of Brecht's song and left the second stanza aside which anyhow I did not use, his verses seem to talk the very language not of leftist circles but of today's nationalist conservatives.³

My song text hopes however to widen the horizon of discussions dealing with national anthems and patriotic concerns. It is time to perceive more clearly what unites sympathetically oriented patriots of all countries and not only to consider horrifying nationalistic lapses that recur all too often. It would be great if the poem proposed here would be sung together with other patriotic songs, or would at least be read and considered as a patriotic poem. It would be even more gratifying if it were sung as a patriotic hymn, with only minor adjustments needed, also in other countries, especially in neighboring German-speaking nations.

It would indeed not be surprising at all if the proposed adaption of Brecht's hymn would be considered more favorably in Germany than in Switzerland. In Germany, as in Switzerland, the present national anthem is being judged with unease as to their content and esthetic value. Brecht's *Children's Hymn* has been proposed quite regularly as a more apt German national anthem, but mainly by left

³ For Brecht's original version and an English translation see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Children%27s_Hymn

or previously left intellectuals. That made me wonder. In my view, Brecht's hymn needed to be modified also for Germany, not because of its supposed leftist bent, but because it remains tied to views that were common in the 19th and early 20th century and are no longer judged appropriate today.

Here then my proposal for Switzerland:

In German:

Freude spar'n wir nicht noch Mühe,
Leidenschaft nicht noch Verstand:
dass die Schweiz besteh' und blühe
wie ein jedes gute Land.

Und nicht unter und nicht über
andern Menschen woll'n wir sein
von den Alpen bis zum Jura,
vom Ticino bis zum Rhein.⁴

Und weil wir dies Land ererbten,⁵
mögen und erneuern wir's:
Gar das liebste mag's uns scheinen
so wie andern Leuten⁶ ihr's.

In English:

Neither passion nor intelligence,
neither joy nor toil we spare
that our land may be and blossom
just as others everywhere..

And not under and not over
other people will we stand,
from the valleys to the mountains
in beloved Switzerland

And because we got this country,
we renew and treasure it:
And for us as dear it's shining
as to other people theirs.

There is a time for everything. Times of political change and contexts that awake natural and festive common feelings seem to be favorable to composing new national anthems. Poems and songs that were made without such an historical embedding are recognizable as not having emerged out of high spirits but as being planned to awaken them. Such texts were often commissioned works at which even creative poets might fail miserably.

In normal times one better falls back on available texts of which the choice of words, the pathos, and the gradually grown patina are perceived as belonging to their time of origin. It is like with traditional coats-of-arms of a given region. It belongs to their very character that they are old-fashioned, and they better fit what

⁴ Variant: Von der Rhone bis zum Rhein.

⁵ Variant: *erhielten*.

⁶ Variant: As in stanza two: Menschen.

they are supposed to symbolize than many a smart new logo. It is not unusual that a song becomes the official national anthem that is being sung as a patriotic act and without government interference. It took over 80 years, that is, until 1922, when the *Deutschlandlied* (Song of Germany) “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles” (Germany, Germany above all things), became the national anthem. It was composed in 1841 by the Romantic patriot Hoffmann von Fallersleben on Helgoland, then a British isle. For the Swiss Psalm “Trittst im Morgenrot daher” (When the morning skies grow red), also written in 1841, it even took 120 years, that is, until 1961, to become the national anthem. The American hymn “The Star-Spangled Banner” of 1814 had existed nearly as long until it became the national anthem in 1931. Only the *Marseillaise*, “the mother of all national anthems” composed in 1792, became the national official song after three years already. It had not been written as such, however, but was penned on the spur of the moment for soldiers who planned to march singing into a war of liberation.

It seems hardly to matter if national symbols originate elsewhere, one simply ignores their foreign source. Decisive remains what they mean for one’s country, not where they come from. The Swiss national myth, the tale of William Tell, serves as classical example. Only few find it at all disturbing that the play that surpasses all others was the work of a German, of Friedrich Schiller, who is gratefully remembered and honored with memorials. Furthermore, many believe that the *Beresinalied* (Song of [the River] Beresina) with the famous lines “Unser Leben gleicht der Reise eines Wanderers in der Nacht” (Our life is like the journey of a wanderer in the night) had been composed in 1812 by the Glarnese officer Thomas Legler during Napoleon’s retreat from Russia. The song has also been repeatedly suggested as national anthem. Swiss continue to sing it with deep feeling despite being told that the Beresina song consists of the last four stanzas of the *Nachtreise*, (Night Journey), a poem by Ludwig Gieseke, published in the *Göttinger Musenalmanach* in 1792. In their view, the subdued and exhorting lines to endure in times of adversity seem to express “typically Swiss” sentiments. The song was rarely used in the 19th century. It became a widely known and beloved song only after a French war painter who planned a tableau of the song scene at the River Beresina asked a Swiss guest

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at a party in Paris for information about it.⁷ Today the *Beresinalied* is taken as a typical Swiss folksong, just as William Tell is globally perceived as a genuine Swiss myth.

Brecht's *Children's Hymn* might have a similar fate, although only with decisive modifications, such as the dropping of the second stanza and the replacement of several words.⁸ Brecht had written it in 1950 as a poetic counterpart to the *Song of Germany* and had it set to music by his friend Hanns Eisler who already before had composed the melody for the national anthem of the German Democratic Republic "Auferstanden aus Ruinen" (Risen from Ruins). From it too, though less openly, Brecht had tried to distance himself by his poem.

Unconditional Praise for Brecht's Children's Hymn

Right after the unification of the two German states, various groups recommended Brecht's *Children's Hymn* as a more appropriate national anthem than Hoffmann's text. In the opinion poll undertaken by the weekly *Die Zeit*⁹ several people favored it, in words worth to be quoted:

- Of the historian Ernst Engelberg: "A hymn also for grown-ups, poetic, simple, unsurpassed in the union of patriotism and of what unites nations."
- Of the journalist Peter Bender: "Brecht's counter-poem to Becher's DDR-Hymn says everything that was our hope and responsibility at the new start of 1945 and at this new beginning it should be it again."

⁷ See Bruno Zschokke, "Eine historische Reminiszenz," in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Erstes Abendblatt (May 16, 1919), p. 1.

⁸ In 2006, the Giordano Bruno Foundation proposed Brecht's *Hymn* as an "alternative and open to the world national anthem" for Germany, "sung in the slightly changed melody [of the *Song of Germany*] of Joseph Haydn." The proposal also dropped stanza two. See (and listen to): www.leitkultur-humanismus.de/hymne.htm.

⁹ "Symbole für das neue Deutschland: Welcher Name? Welche Hymne? Welcher Feiertag? Antworten auf drei Fragen der *Zeit*" (Symbols for the new Germany. What name? What hymn? What holiday? — Answers to three questions of the *Zeit*), 15 and 22 June 1990. See below under "Literature" online entries. For further assessments online see: <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinderhymne>, and: <http://globkult.de/gesellschaft/projektionen/441-nationalsymbole-und-pathos-in-deutschland-bert-brechts-kinderhymne>.

- Of Martin Walser above all: "I believe that there may not be a better text for a hymn than the text Brecht called *Children's Hymn*. Finally, and for the first time, there would be a hymn the singing of which would not produce hiccups. If I owned a newspaper, I would print this text for some weeks and invite readers to a vote; I can only imagine it being approved. For us there cannot be a more favorable text."

Wolf Biermann¹⁰ is perhaps the first who hoped in 1987 that Brecht's song would become the national anthem of a unified Germany, two years before and when it seemed all too early for it to become even possible—if ever. More important than the date, however, is Biermann's statement that he had become aware of the importance of national anthems in an American football stadium in Ohio: "I had to cry," he confessed. Later before the TV he, who had thought trans-nationally since youth, realized that he spontaneously felt delighted when a landsman he neither liked as to physique nor as to personality, "landed an ace against some nice Swede." He hoped that in time one could sing Brecht's hymn without soul twisting in celebration of a splendid athlete the way he had witnessed it among college students of Columbus, Ohio. He also meant: For a moment without having to think of national crimes of the past.

Earlier already, in 1975, the political scientist Iring Fetscher had praised the poem in an article for Marcel Reich-Ranicki's *Frankfurter Anthologie*, without realizing that it would be proposed soon after as the national anthem for a unified Germany: "There is probably no anthem," he stated, "that expressed the love for one's own country as beautifully, as rationally, as critically, and which ended with as conciliatory lines." One may agree with this judgment, although not with Fetscher's title "Passionate, but Controlled." One wishes that Brecht had been more discerning in his choice of certain words.

"No more keeping with the times"

It is not surprising that to this day Brecht's poem is proposed as being a far more befitting national anthem than the *Song of Germany*

¹⁰ Wolf Biermann (1990), pp. 237-238, 256-257.
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which is burdened with embarrassing historical associations. Strange however is the lavish praise offered by the text's proponents. None of them calls for emendations. And, furthermore, the *Children's Hymn* clearly does not belong to Brecht's strongest poems.

One of the rare critical assessments is to be found in a proposal for a German lesson.¹¹ Volker Schneider, a teacher, assesses Brecht's *Children's Hymn* as negatively as the commentators quoted above view it positively. As far as his critique remains related to poetic quality (and to the content of the second stanza), his view deserves attention:

In relation to form, Brecht's stanzas offer in their traditional shape little that is revolutionary in the sense of an artistic new departure that one could rightfully expect. Here Brecht offers nothing that was not all too familiar: No trace of 'epic' distance, all is stated in as banal a vein as it is said simply. ... Brecht's linguistic instruments are but ordinary: Antitheses, anaphoras, parallelisms, and whatever else the junk drawer of rhetoric might offer. ... Brecht's ordinary neo-patriotic rhyming is as disappointing in form as it is in content.

In regard to Schneider's criticism, however, one needs to keep in mind that using parallelisms, anaphoras (repetitions of the same words), and antitheses belong in very many languages to an archaic and known poetic practice. They are older, more widely known, less used up and, above all, usable in a new way.¹² They are better than the rhyming and the specific stylistic elements of European classic and romantic poetry which "modern" poetry strives to leave behind.

In my view, more than its form also parts of the poem's content are disappointing. What Walter Jens criticized about the *Song of Germany*,¹³ the present national anthem, also pertains to Brecht's text: Several passages are "unspeakable" and no longer "befitting the times." And one needs to add: There are verses in Brecht's poem, that are, if not "partially incomprehensible," as Jens found some

¹¹ At the Gymnasium Hermeskeil near Trier, possibly of 2008, available on the internet; see Volker Schneider (2008).

¹² Compare Paul Celan, *Death Fugue*: <http://www.celan-projekt.de/todesfuge-deutsch.html>.

¹³ Quoted in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* No. 137, (16 June 2006), p. 1.

of the verses in Hoffmann's Song to be, at least not immediately understandable. In any case, children, for whom the verses were written, could not immediately grasp their meaning.

First the "no more befitting" and "unspeakable" passages: As already mentioned, the whole second stanza of Brecht's hymn is best wholly omitted and not replaced. Its first two lines—"That the peoples don't grow pale / just as before a robber thief"—point to the political Darwinism of the second half of the 19th and early 20th century. Political scientists taught at that time that a nation was only proving its strength, even assure its survival, if it conquered the living space of another. At least for the time being one assumes Western Europe to have been cured from such madness. The next two verses—"But to us their hands extend / just as to other peoples"—bring to mind the tasteless form of ritual greetings customary in previous socialist member states.

In this stanza, the term "Völker" (peoples) is also being used twice, in the two that follow once in each. Constitutional states do not understand themselves as based on ethnicity, however, and even far less on race.¹⁵ Switzerland did not do it in the formative stages of the Confederacy, nor when the present federal state was formed in

¹⁴ "Who in the world knows what is 'des Glückes Unterpfand' (fortune's mark)?"

¹⁵ About Brecht's reluctance not about using the word "Völker" but the singular "Volk," see Gerhard Müller (2010), p. 12.—The Swiss Constitution uses "Volk" as the term has been traditionally used, as for example in the Constitution's Preamble and in the first article "Schweizervolk" and in later articles "Volksinitiative" and "Volk und Stände" (member states). It stands for the inhabitants of Switzerland who are able to vote and participate in elections. In the phrasing of the new federal constitution in the 1990s, the reformers replaced the outdated historical term "Stände" at least in the beginning of the Preamble by "Kantone." But they did not find, or perhaps not even look for, a replacement for the word "Volk." One did not pay attention to the occasionally questionable possible implications of its use, in that "Volk" and "Schweizervolk" could be ethnically construed and nationalistically and racially abused in regard to the great numbers of South-European or non-European immigrants. While the German language text of the constitution reads "dass die Stärke des Volkes sich misst am Wohl der Schwachen" (that the strength of the people is to be measured in regard to the well-being of the weak) the French version formulates more carefully "la force de la *communauté* (the strength of the community) se mesure au bien-être du plus faible de ses membres." In German, one might formulate "dass die Stärke eines Staates sich misst am Wohl seiner schwächsten Bewohner" or "dass die Stärke einer Gesellschaft sich misst am Wohl ihrer schwächsten Mitglieder."

1848. The earliest known documents pertaining to the league simply talk of “humans” or “Lüte” (“Leute,” people): Of the “homines vallis Uranie” (the humans of the Valley of Uri)¹⁶ in the document dated 1291, of the “Lantlüte (people of the lands) von Ure, von Swits und von Unterwalden” in that of 1315. “Leute” means humans who happen to reside or just to be present in a particular area. The word refers to the “common” and not to a limited ethnic meaning like the ambiguous term “Volk.” In German the corresponding English word “people” may be translated in most contexts as “Leute”¹⁷ as in the preamble of the United States constitution: “We the people of the United States.”

Annotations to Individual Stanzas

About the First Stanza

Brecht’s opening “sparet nicht” (don’t spare) of the *Children’s Hymn* sounds like an order of the day issued in the morning at a semi-military youth camp. The impression deepens if one becomes aware that in Brecht’s initial version the first word was not “Anmut” (grace) but “Arbeit” (work).¹⁸ One is also easily tempted instead

¹⁶ Current German translations of the Latin expressions are “Leute der Talschaft Uri” (people of the Uri valley) and “Talleute von Uri” (valley-people of Uri). It must not be overlooked, however, that in these documents only men are meant. Given the ethnic and linguistic homogeneity of the inhabitants of those valleys, the not ethnically defined membership in the political community may not be considered a special achievement. Yet the words used (“homines,” “Leute”) are not to be taken lightly either since they could be interpreted without social, ethnic, or sexual limitations. Their unlimited understanding gained, however, historical agency for the Jews only under pressure from abroad and only in the late 19th century and for women only in the course of the 20th. See Elmar Holenstein, *Kulturphilosophische Perspektiven* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998), pp. 53–57.

¹⁷ In contrast to “peoples,” that may refer to separate ethnicities.

¹⁸ See the manual correction of the poem’s typed copy in Thomas Naumann (2000). In the DDR hymn, Johannes R. Becher begins the first stanza with “Lasst uns pflügen, lasst uns bauen, / Lernt und schafft wie nie zuvor” (Let us plough and let us build, / Learn and work as never before). Thus Volker Schneider’s remark about Brecht’s first stanza becomes moot: “As a kind of reference to Schiller’s ‘Anmut und Würde’ (Grace and Dignity), Brecht replaces the latter term with (*werktätiger*) ‘Mühe,’ workers’ ‘toil.’ The artificial integration of the classical heritage that Brecht otherwise views most critically by the moralistic buzzword ‘gut’ (good) fails him, however, to serve to a new start.” While Schneider only hears a moral buzzword, Gerhard Müller (2010), p. 13, sees the hoped for aim — ‘a good Germany’ — expressed cautiously, modestly, and succinctly.”

of hearing the line “not to spare ‘Anmut’” to hear the phrase “not to spare ‘an Mut’ (in courage).” But this misunderstanding easily vanishes because the next line does not read “an Mühe” (in toil). In the context of the first stanza “Freude” (joy) is also meaningful and not as easily misunderstood as “Anmut” (grace).¹⁹ Athletes as well as patriots, most often the performers of national anthems, may frequently experience joy. As a delightful side effect, the choice of the word “Freude” (joy) at the beginning of the anthem of a European country may also bring to mind Schiller’s *Ode an die Freude* (Ode to Joy) and even the *Anthem of Europe*.²⁰ More than simply charming, it would be most suggestive for many, if in addition to the first word also the first beat of the Swiss national anthem would relate to the European hymn.²¹

To replace the imperative with the common acknowledgment “spar’n wir nicht” (let us not spare) has the advantage that thereby all three stanzas contain the first person pronoun in the plural which strengthens their cohesion. Despite the change from “Anmut” to “Freude,” however, the first two lines remain slightly unwieldy, not only because of Brecht’s possible double meaning that one is not sparing either “Anmut” (grace) or “Mut” (courage), but also the double “nicht noch” (neither) makes one hesitate. For a moment, one has to pause to grasp what is actually meant. On the other hand, the two verses with their double “nicht noch” and the shifting between “unter” and “über” (under and above) sound rhythmic and lyrical. Children might remember them even before they have fully grasped their meaning.

¹⁹ Misleading is the most often used translation of “Anmut” with the word “grâce, grazia, grace” that may be easily misunderstood as “Gnade” (divine gift) instead of charm, gracefulness. To avoid that possible misunderstanding, Catherine and Leo Schelbert, who translated my proposed version spontaneously into English, replaced “grace” with “joy” (Freude) which I then did also in the German version.

²⁰ In the *Anthem of Europe*, the word remains unspoken since it is a purely instrumental arrangement without Schiller’s text. It is the official hymn of the European Union which Switzerland did not join, and of the European Council of which it is a member since 1963.

²¹ Although utopian, one might imagine that a condition for the new national anthem would not be keeping the melodic line of the present one, but rather that it would have an easily recognizable melody parallel to the European hymn and, further, that the best entry would not only remind one of the European hymn but also of Schiller’s “Ode to Joy.”

It might be hard to find a first stanza of a national anthem that athletes could sing with more conviction than the modified first stanza of Brecht's hymn. With "the country that was to last and blossom," they would also refer to themselves. At international competitions they *are* "Switzerland" or "Germany" or whatever other land. The celebrated traits are sportive as well as political virtues, not just intelligence, passion and toil, but also, and not in the least, joy. They are pairs of opposites that show their optimal effect in mutual tension.²² Although they are obvious and weighty values, one could hardly put them into the preamble of constitutions, certainly not in a group of four. In national anthems one may sing of traits that in constitutional preambles would be out of place.

In Brecht's original as well as in the proposed new version the third verse of the first stanza sounds trite and traditionally patriotic.²³ Combined with the fourth verse that follows, however, it immediately invites endorsement. Men and women athletes are fully aware that other countries are as good and often even better in a given sport. In contrast to nationalists, they do not hesitate to rate the country that they represent at international events in relation to other nations. There is hardly a country dedicated to a given sport that is not off and on motivated to take another as a model.

About the Second Stanza

In the middle stanza as given in the proposed text, Brecht distances himself from the *Song of Germany*, and that in two ways, in regard to the political relationship between nations and to the geographic boundaries of Germany. In explicit contrast to the

²² In national anthems, these traits represent a singular quartet, as Gerhard Müller rightfully observes (2010), p. 14. He asks further whether these four traits are a counterpoint to Hoffmann's now considered kitschy quartet "German women, German loyalty / German wine and German song". In his sarcastic *Bonner Bundeshymne*, written a year before the *Children's Hymn*, Brecht refers even more explicitly to Hoffmann's quartet with the fourfold adjective "German": "German coal and German iron / German wood and German steel / these we utmost cheaply sell / to Wall Street's capital." Quoted after Brecht, (1993), p. 207.

²³ According to Müller (2010), p. 13, Brecht's verb "blühen" (blossom) may be a conscious pointer to the final verse of the third stanza of the *Song of Germany*: "Blühe, deutsches Vaterland!" (Blossom! German Fatherland).

jubilating verses “Germany, Germany above all, / above all in the world,” Brecht declares: “and not over and not under / other people will we stand.” By “From the [North] Sea to the Alps, / from the Oder to the Rhine” instead of “From the Maas to the Memel, / from the Etsch to the Belt,” he suggests relinquishing all disputed territorial claims.

If one replaces “peoples” with “people”, it is proper in Switzerland to invert the sequence of “above” and “under”. What many Swiss are politically most concerned about is to remain independent. The line “not under other people will we stand” unavoidably brings to mind the historical matter of “foreign judges”²⁴ who were considered to be totally unacceptable. One might not object to this stance if the defensive posture is implemented not only with passion but also as mentioned in the first stanza with intelligence and, as far as possible, with gracefulness rather than with doggedness.²⁵

The addition “and not over other people” is in no way superfluous also for Switzerland. The small nation may be immune to wanting “to stand above other peoples.” But among Swiss the view is in no way foreign of being above other people: above those of other social classes, the rich above the poor, the learned above the unschooled, urbanites above rural people and, perhaps especially widespread, natives above those from abroad; and not to forget, men over women, over people from one part of the country versus those coming from others, or being above those from different political, religious or ideological persuasions.

Switzerland’s geographic extent is easy to define. The phrase “from the Ticino to the Rhine”²⁶ might surprise because Swiss are

²⁴ In their Federal Charter of 1291, the “Eidgenossen” (oath-associates) vowed not to accept any judge “who was not our inhabitant or landsman”—*noster incola sive conprovincialis*. It is another question how far this exclusion benefited the locally powerful who ignored the possible benefits of a further division of power.

²⁵ It is above all the own judges and jurists who need to determine what aspects of international law are compatible with the autonomously passed constitution. In case parliament or a majority of the people should reach different conclusions than international bodies, the view of the framers of the American constitution holds: “A decent respect of opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to separation.” Just as no state owes its prosperity to its own prowess, its responsibility may not remain limited just to itself.

²⁶ Egon Ammann thankfully suggested the replacement of the ordinarily used phrase “from the Rhone to Rhine” with “from the Ticino to the Rhine.”

used to consider their country from north to south, “from the Rhine to the Rhone,” and most common from northeast to southwest, “from Lake Constance to Lake of Geneva.”²⁷ In the anthem, however, Italian Switzerland should not be missing.

A reviewer of the proposed patriotic song observed that besides geographic names the second stanza was devoid of anything special that Swiss could intuitively identify with. One may counter, however, that precisely the line “not under and not over / other people will we stand” awakens historical memory. The geographic names, furthermore, point to unity in diversity, and patriotic Swiss do not view them without feelings. They do not only refer to borders. For Switzerland the Alps are geographically, historically, and economically more central as well as more important than for Germany for which they have only marginal significance. According to tradition, the old confederacy had emerged in the Alps. In the 18th and 19th centuries the most significant cultural, political, and social impulses for “modern” Switzerland reached the country from France, yet not just via Geneva but also from the Neuchâtel and the Bernese Jura. Like the Alps, the Jura is geographically, historically, and economically more important to Switzerland than to neighboring France with which it shares the range. The “Ticino” symbolizes “italianità,” an aspect nobody would want to miss.²⁸ As compared to the Alps, the Rhine is of greater importance to Germany than to Switzerland. But the river too is significant for it, not only because it originates there, but also because that significance is of an ambivalent nature. On the one hand the Rhine is a river that marks the border between the two countries, on the other it is also a shared bond with Germany.²⁹

²⁷ Switzerland shares the Rhine as a border river also with Austria and Liechtenstein although with a smaller stretch and of little importance. A Viennese colleague thought that, should the hymn be sung in all four German speaking countries, that is, in Austria, Germany, Liechtenstein, and Switzerland, the Rhine should be mentioned as a border river in all of them, in Austria perhaps with the verse: “From the Morva (Austria’s oldest border river March) to the Rhine.”

²⁸ In a first reading of the second verse I replaced Brecht’s defensive term “beschirmen” (to shelter) with “verbessern” (to improve). Later I decided using the brisker, more creativity demanding word “erneuern” (to renew). Brecht’s word “beschirmen” could inspire a horde of homeland-defenders to open a “Schirm” (umbrella) over their land in order to repel immigrants and foreign cultural influence.

²⁹ The pronoun “we” in the first verse of the third stanza is thus to be stressed not only for rhythmical reasons but also to accentuate that it is us who have the mentioned luck.

Thus, all four geographic terms used in the stanza have primary meaning for Switzerland. The hymn uniquely brings to the fore, that what at first seems to be merely national is at the same time also transnational; in concrete terms, it is geographically expressed in the middle stanza, as to felt values in the first and third. Thus, what may be experienced as uniquely Swiss, may simultaneously be of universal validity, an insight that Swiss owe to special historical and geographical privilege.

About the Third Stanza

The replacing of the intense word “lieben” (to love) with the weaker “mögen” (to like), needs explaining. Without being arrogant one might contend that today’s attitude toward the commonweal is more differentiated for most than for earlier generations. The same holds for love relationships. Germany’s president Gustav Heinemann supposedly answered the question whether he loved the German state: “I don’t love states, I love my wife.” The bond that today unites people with their country may be more fittingly expressed with the word “to like” than with the stronger “to love.” The country in which one happens to live is not the one we have built ourselves. Many view it as a privilege or luck that they may call a specific land, a piece of earth with a unique geography and history, to be theirs.³⁰ Like many a heritage piece, looking backward, one values it, while looking forward one knows that it needs care and at times even rejuvenating.

One hesitates again when reading “das liebste” (the dearest), in the third verse because of grammar as well as meaning. For a moment one must recall the context and realize that the adjective refers to the “liebste Land” (the dearest land), the most treasured land, and not to an imagined abstract “most beloved.” Critics may also ask why now the root “lieb” (dear), and even its superlative form, is suddenly supposed to be right. It is proper, because no statement of fact is being made. One openly acknowledges a subjective given. In the next verse, furthermore, it is being qualified by the statement that members of other states do the same; being human like us, they have the same psychological bent and the same psychological right. As mentioned earlier, patriotism is rooted in human nature just as is

³⁰ Such a doubling seems as suited for the analogous final verse of the first stanza.
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the bond between members of the same family. That trait, the love for the own country being shared by people of most diverse cultures, thus points to a “Völkerverbindendes,” to “a bonding of peoples,” to use an expression that was common in earlier times.

Just as the last line of the first stanza implies that we endeavor also for our country what we find realized in others in exemplary form, the last line of the final stanza reiterates that the special appreciation we feel for our country is what others feel for theirs. It is the very recognition that the disposition of people towards their countries is comparable, that Brecht’s hymn might be suitable even for nations initially not taken into account. It might be difficult to find a more universally acceptable national anthem once geographic names are properly adjusted. It would, furthermore, be befitting to repeat the last verse as the hymn’s conclusion as Hanns Eisler had done.³¹

The Verse Structure and Melody of the Hymn

The hymn is written in the simple form of a folk song, in four-tact verses (trochees), alternating with more melodious (“female”) and duller (“male”) cadences and with cross rhymes in the first stanza. This makes memorizing and singing easy. It is no accident that there exist quite a number of melodies already that may be used for the singing of the hymn, not just the one Eisler wrote.³² With small adjustments the hymn could also be sung at national events according to the festive and solemn melody of the *Song of Germany* or the more muted of the *Beresinalied*. The melodies of both have

³¹ Eisler has sung it himself: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a7GkiBcPzls>. – Like in Brecht’s Text, Eisler’s melody reminds one several times of the *The Song of Germany* as well of his *DDR Hymn*: Schutte (1975), p. 212 ss; Jan Knopf in Brecht (1988), p. 442; Müller (2010). In his answer to the *Zeit* questionnaire, Wolf Biermann stated that as the German national anthem Brecht’s hymn was to be sung “in the nice music of Hanns Eisler, “that is so light of touch and not suitable for marching.” Compare the differentiated consideration of Sabine Schutte (1975), pp. 213 and 215: Brecht’s “third stanza wird zum Teil gesungen, zum Teil tritt sie aber auch in einer instrumentalen Fassung auf.” This instrumental version has the character of an arrangement for a military band. After tact 21 “follow march-like pizzicato accords ... that specially underline the words ‘unter’ und ‘über.’”

³² The same holds for the American national anthem. Although composed in 1814 following the battle of Fort Henry in Baltimore in the War of 1812, the melody derives from a drinking song of London’s Anacreontic Society, a club of amateur musicians.

been borrowed. The one for the *Song of Germany* was taken over from Austria's *Emperor's Hymn* "Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser" (God save Emperor Francis), a melody created by Joseph Haydn possibly on the basis of a Croatian folksong.³³ The first half of the melody used today in Switzerland for the *Beresinalied* derives from a medieval liturgical chorale, the *Pange lingua*. In form, even Beethoven's melody for Schiller's *Ode to Joy* would be usable for Brecht's text. Finally there have been three new melodies presented as alternatives for Eisler's.³⁴ Given the very easily sung stanzas in the folk song pattern and given the present popularity of folk culture, it will be easy to find composers for a new tune to be adopted especially for a new patriotic song.

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The imperfections of the poem and commentary, however, of course, are exclusively my own responsibility.

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³³ See http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Österreichische_Kaiserhymne#Die_Melodie_von_Joseph_Haydn. How could one object if Switzerland were to use Haydn's folk tune as a third, partly German-speaking, country for a patriotic song?

³⁴ By Leo Spies, Fidelio F. Finke, and Kurt Schwaen; see <http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinderhymne>, and: <http://www.kurtschwaen.de/schwaen/noten/Kinderhymne.pdf>.
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~ Translated by Leo Schelbert