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Switzerland and its Past: An Uncomfortable Relationship

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

From a very early age onwards, children at school are taught to learn from the past, or, more specifically, to draw lessons from past mistakes. With advancing age, our sense of historical perspective grows, and this notion changes ever so slightly to include the entirety of history. Think of it: how many times have you been told that mankind would be better off if it had learnt from the past and drawn lessons from it? Many, I'm sure.

On a personal level, learning from past mistakes and experiences is relatively easy. For a large group, it is difficult but possible. For states and nations, it is, with a few exceptions, almost impossible. Why? Because a prerequisite to learning from past mistakes is the ability to admit that they ever happened. Every state has blood on its hands, but think of it: how many have admitted to deliberately causing pain, destruction and death? Not very many. And if they do, it is usually generations after the atrocities themselves happened. For example, Britain has yet to officially apologize for its role in the slave trade despite its role in that gruesome part of history being well documented.

Switzerland is no exception to this rule. Despite its neutrality in major conflicts, Switzerland has played a part in some of the 20th century's greatest tragedies. In the course of this lecture, I will discuss two such cases. First, Switzerland's asylum policies during the Second World War will be examined. The fundamental question here is whether it could have saved more Jews from certain death in Nazi Germany. Second, I will draw attention to Switzerland's relations with Apartheid South Africa in the 1970s and 1980s – a time by which most of the international community had decided to shun the racist regime. These relations were primarily fostered by certain business leaders in Switzerland – some of whom subsequently enjoyed significant successes as politicians.

I have chosen these two cases as they shed light on Switzerland's awkward relations with its own past. As mentioned before, this is not unusual. Most countries struggle to accept the

consequences of past events and will often go to great lengths to justify the course of action taken. Yet, the lengths to which many Swiss politicians and large parts of the population go to justify Switzerland's – at times – misguided actions is extreme. Why this is so, I will attempt to answer in the next half an hour.

To begin with, I would like to take a look back at Switzerland's policies towards refugees between 1933 and 1945. Understanding what happened is crucial if we attempt to analyze the course of actions. It will also facilitate the exploration of the recent debate these policies and the unearthing of other uncomfortable facts have caused in Switzerland.

When Hitler came to power in January 1933, Germany posed no immediate threat to Switzerland. This remained the case until the Second World War commenced in September 1939. For some reason, Hitler never espoused an *Anschlusspolitik* towards Switzerland, which was careful to give its increasingly powerful northern neighbor no pretext whatsoever to change this. Switzerland's decision to remain neutral in the build up to the war and during the war came as no genuine surprise to anyone. Neutrality was the main pillar of Switzerland's foreign policy, and had been for centuries.

Thus, during the Second World War, Switzerland found itself in a unique situation. In western continental Europe, it remained the only country which had not either elected a fascist government or had one imposed onto itself. Switzerland stood out as an island of democracy in a brown sea of Fascism and Nazism. Although an enviable situation, it was also a dangerous one. There has been much historical debate on whether Hitler ever planned to invade and occupy Switzerland, but it seems likely that the Confederation, as long as it remained neutral, was in no imminent danger of suffering the same fate as had Denmark or Belgium. Nevertheless, the

population at the time definitely felt as though an invasion was possible. This insecurity dictated Switzerland's relations with Germany.

However, what certainly could not have been – and was not – missed by the Swiss population was the increasing persecution of Jews soon after Hitler came to power. For all people fleeing the Nazi regime before or during the war, Switzerland was an obvious first choice due to its proximity, its liberal constitutionalism and its neutrality.

At first, the number of Jewish refugees seeking asylum in Switzerland was fairly low. This is not surprising, and can be put down to the fact that many German Jews decided to flee to Holland or France. However, by 1945, the total number of people granted refuge in Switzerland reached 300,000 – an impressive number. Unfortunately, though, this is not where the story ends.

During the war, when the persecution of Jews and other minorities reached its tragic climax, Switzerland turned an unknown number of asylum seekers away or handed them directly to the German authorities. The estimates of how many people met this fate go into the thousands – the Independent Commission of Experts concluded that it would have been in the neighborhood of 20,000. The reasons for these rejections are numerous, but two stand out as particularly noteworthy.

First, a large part of the population subscribed to the belief that Switzerland was “full” and that it simply could not take in any more refugees. This point of view gained popularity in the latter half of the war – a result of the increasing hardships the war was bringing upon the general population. The underlying belief was that, to quote the phrase, “The Lifeboat is Full.” That those knocking on Switzerland's door would lose their lives, and not only certain luxuries, did not feature at all in this equation.

Second, the Jewish nature of the refugee surge was in itself considered problematic. As Alfred Häsler wrote in the foreword to his book *The Lifeboat is Full*: “On every level of the

population there were people – some of them very influential – who more or less openly subscribed to anti-Semitism.” Although Häsler notes that there were also “many others who combated racial hatred,” historical evidence forces us to draw the sad conclusion that these were often in a minority.

One of those who “openly subscribed to anti-Semitism” was Heinrich Rothmund, the man in charge of the Swiss police and the implication of their immigration policies. Rothmund held the position of immigration chief for a grand total of 35 years – between 1919 and 1954. In 1929, his position was greatly enhanced when he took over the newly created post as director of the police – a position he held jointly with that of immigration chief until 1954. Consequently, the powers Rothmund wielded were significant.

Rothmund’s anti-Semitic tendencies had been known to the public since at least 1919, when he warned of the consequences of Jewish immigration into Switzerland. During the crucial period between 1933 and 1945, Rothmund showed a shocking willingness to cooperate with Nazi officials in order to “manage” the influx of refugees arriving at the Swiss border. Two examples stand out as particularly horrific.

First, Rothmund played a central role in the introduction of the “J” which was stamped into passports of German Jews. He did so in the hope of making it easier for Swiss border officials to identify Jewish immigrants. Crucially, however, it was the Swiss government which voted in favor of supporting this measure, and, in doing so, it overrode some of the reservations Rothmund had previously held.

Second, it was Rothmund who on 13 August 1941 ordered the complete closure of the Swiss border to all refugees. His reasoning was that ethnic refugees could no longer be considered as political refugees and thus should no longer be able to gain access to Switzerland.

Although this complete ban was lifted after immense domestic pressure, the policy of having a closed border remained largely intact until the end of the war.

Rothmund was able to get away with his harsh actions largely because of the high degree of institutionalized anti-Semitism in Switzerland's official bodies. Rothmund's superior, the Federal Councilor and Minister of Justice and the Police, Eduard von Steiger, for example, showed similar anti-Semitic tendencies to Rothmund. It was von Steiger who coined the unfortunate and inaccurate term "the lifeboat is full."

Fortunately, however, there were many Swiss who heroically took it upon themselves to save Jewish refugees. There are countless examples of this behavior. In Geneva, for example, recent studies showed that 92% of all "illegal" and Jewish refugees were allowed to enter the country. There also exists a number of Swiss "Oscar Schindlers" – individuals who went to great lengths to save Jewish refugees. Let me briefly recount the stories of two of them.

Carl Lutz was Switzerland's vice-consul in Budapest after 1942. In this position, he issued visas for 60,000 Hungarian Jews – making him the savior of around half of all the Hungarian Jews who survived the Holocaust. Technically speaking, Lutz acted illegally, and he was ejected from Switzerland's diplomatic service once his actions became known. Lutz was well aware of the trouble he would get into if his actions were discovered and thus issued visas to Palestine and not Switzerland in order to cover up his actions. It is shameful that a man of such humanity should not have been able to do so openly with the full support of the Swiss government. Lutz was belatedly rehabilitated in 1958.

Paul Grüninger met a similar fate. Grüninger was commander of the police of the canton St. Gallen. Between 1938 and 1939, he actively facilitated the immigration of around 3,000 "illegal" Jews into Switzerland. Like Lutz, Grüninger was punished for his actions once they became known. He was stripped of his rank and sentenced to serve a jail sentence for "gross

misconduct” in office. Grüninger died in poverty and was finally rehabilitated in 1995, 23 years after his death.

You can probably see a pattern emerging here. Although there were plenty of people willing to help Jewish refugees, there was little they could do on a large scale. The government was an omnipresent force which set hurdles so high that even the most humanitarian people struggled to overcome them. After 1942, the situation became even worse, and Geneva, which was the only region of Switzerland that was not surrounded by areas under direct Nazi control, remained the sole city that at times extended a helping hand to Jewish refugees.

So how then has Switzerland dealt with this historical burden? Unfortunately, there is no simple answer to this question. Unlike Germany, Switzerland was not forced to confront itself with its role during the Second World War for many decades. This is not really surprising as Switzerland’s crimes and policies during the war bear no comparison whatsoever to those committed by Germany. Yet, one would have expected that the traumatizing experience of the war and the gradual unraveling of the gruesome details of the Holocaust would have resulted in some kind of national soul searching. To an extent this happened: Switzerland’s role has indeed been officially researched on a number of occasions. However, acceptance of the findings has been slow to emerge.

The first wave of soul-searching began in 1954 when the journal *Der Beobachter* revealed the significant role of the Swiss government leading to the branding of German Jews’ passports with a “J.” Following a massive popular outcry, the government commissioned a report by Carl Ludwig, a prominent legal scholar. The commission’s findings were damning and attributed many of Switzerland’s policies to institutionalized anti-Semitism. The report’s findings were met with a certain degree of disbelief and outrage. Nevertheless, it failed to ingrain itself into the memory of the Swiss population.

Ludwig's report remained the sole official documentation of this aspect of Swiss history until the mid-1990s. In the meantime, private citizens and academics took it upon themselves to investigate Switzerland's role in the Holocaust. Alfred Häsler's book *The Lifeboat is Full*, from which I quoted earlier, was first published in 1967 and caused some stirs. The book is a timeless documentation of this period, and retains much of its relevance in today's debate about immigration to Europe from Africa.

Häsler's motivation to write this book came from his personal experiences during the war. Born in the Bernese Oberland, Häsler is the embodiment of Switzerland's humanitarian tradition, which began with the creation of the Red Cross, the symbol of which is simply the reverse of the Swiss flag. Upon witnessing the verbal and physical abuse some of his Jewish friends faced at the hands of the National Front, he realized that something had to be done against this. His experiences were further strengthened during the war when he kept in touch with friends in the occupied lands – some of whom ended up in German concentration camps.

From what he heard from friends and other sources, Häsler came to the conclusion that Switzerland had the moral duty to save as many refugees fleeing persecution at the hands of the Nazis as possible. To this end he published pamphlets urging people to accept refugees into their houses.

When asked why he was writing his book, Häsler replied that he hoped it would remind people of Switzerland's actions during the war. His aim was to make it impossible for Switzerland to forget this shameful episode of its history. Personally, I believe that his book serves this purpose like no other, and I would thoroughly recommend it to anyone, whether Swiss or not, because it brings to light the dangers of what can happen when a society abandons humanity.

The third and thus far final chapter in this exercise of national soul-searching ended in the publication of a report by the Independent Commission of Experts in 2002. The commission was set up in 1996 and was led by Jean-François Bergier. It consisted of four Swiss members and one from Israel, the United Kingdom and the United States, respectively. The committee was to unearth the nature of Switzerland's economic and financial dealings with the Third Reich. As part of this, it also touched upon the issue of refugees.

The creation of the Bergier Commission, as it came to be known in Switzerland, was forced upon Switzerland by external pressure that mainly came from the US. It was not a voluntary act, and should not be mistaken for one.

The immediate cause for it was the scandal surrounding the Holocaust-era bank accounts held by Swiss banks. It all began when relatives and descendants of Holocaust victims attempted to claim money that had belonged to the victims; they were turned away by the banks. This was a cold-blooded and foolish thing of the banks to do. Jewish organizations in the US sued, and the US Senate opened an investigation led by the Senator from New York Alfonse D'Amato. The Swiss banks responded by panicking. Attempts to destroy records failed because a security guard employed by UBS uncovered them and went public. The damage that this inflicted upon Switzerland's reputation and its finance sector was immense. It was thus in the light of these developments that Switzerland's parliament and government decided to act by creating the Bergier Commission.

For large parts of the Swiss population, this was already a compromise too many. Swiss people, by and large, tend to be skeptical of the outside world, and when it comes knocking on Switzerland's door with demands, this skepticism turns to belligerence. On TV, in newspapers and on the radio, passionate debates about whether Switzerland should be bowing to this pressure

were held. In a sense, the issue resulted in something of a crisis of national identity. Switzerland's humanitarian tradition was being undermined, as was its all-important banking system.

Again, Swiss leaders in business and politics turned to deflection in order to save Switzerland's reputation. Jean-Pascal Delamuraz – at the time one of the seven Federal Councilors – lashed out at critics of Switzerland by reminding them that “Auschwitz was not in Switzerland” – a true but nevertheless ridiculous remark. Nobody was accusing Switzerland of actively or passively having played a part in the extermination of European Jews. Delamuraz's remark was insensitive and showed that Switzerland had failed to grasp the seriousness of the issue. Reminding people that Germany had done worse than Switzerland missed the point. It merely served as a reminder of the hypersensitivity that surrounded this topic – it was almost as if a taboo had been broken.

After the initial tension, the committee set out to get on with its work and delivered a first report in 1998, a second in 2001 and finally published its final and concluding report in 2002. Like the Ludwig Report half a century earlier, the Bergier Report was damning. Its basic findings were that Switzerland had profited from trade with Nazi Germany and that Swiss banks had profited from Holocaust victims and a refund would be necessary. It also criticized Switzerland's immigration policies.

The reactions to these findings were mixed and ranged from unconditional acceptance to outright rejection. Overall, many felt the commission had come to a biased conclusion. The findings are still contested regularly and general acceptance of them remains fairly low. Most depressingly of all, the Bergier Report seems to be meeting the same fate the Ludwig Report did, which is that it is slowly but surely, deliberately or not, being forgotten. This is dangerous and must not be allowed to happen. And yet it seems entirely feasible.

For years now, politicians on the right were amongst the report's harshest critics. A leading figure among these was Christoph Blocher. Blocher was elected to the Federal Council in 2003, but failed to win a second term in 2007. The significance of Blocher's political success is that it comes as a slap in the face to all those who hoped that Switzerland would have learnt from past mistakes. In a tragic case of historical irony, he was handed the brief as head of the Federal Department of Justice and Police – and, crucially, Immigration. Blocher's tenure in this position was marked by his repeated criticism of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as he believed it infringed on Switzerland's sovereignty over how to deal with asylum seekers – i.e. how to best get rid of them.

It is always dangerous to draw parallels between the present and the Nazi era, and by mentioning the election and success of Blocher, this is not – I repeat, not – what I am doing. I merely ask whether Switzerland and its politicians have learnt from the past. As the Ludwig and Bergier Commissions and Häsler's exceptional book brought to light, Switzerland's behavior towards Jewish refugees during and before the Second World War was shameful and morally indefensible. Yet, wind the clock forward sixty years and Switzerland once again boasts one of Europe's strictest immigration policies. But as if that is not enough, its largest political party, the far-right Swiss People's Party, recently put forward an initiative which called for the eviction of criminal foreigners and their families – a law which stands in clear violation of the European Convention of Human Rights and was reminiscent of the Nazi *Sippenhaftung* law. The initiative will be voted on next year.

Such developments project a depressing image of Switzerland in the 21st century. Nevertheless, I remain hopeful that the lessons from this period will be learnt and that the Swiss population will find it in itself to recognize this shameful chapter of its country's past.

As indicated at the beginning of this lecture, I will now turn to another questionable chapter of my country's history.

The subject of Switzerland's relations with South Africa at the height of Apartheid is a murky one. On the one hand, it is a fairly recent chapter of history, which makes extensive research impossible. On the other, it was an immensely complicated relationship nurtured only semi-officially but also by certain businessmen, politicians and parts of the banking sector. If the word "dodgy" applies to any kind of inter-state relationship, this certainly would be a viable candidate for the dubious honor.

Due to time constraints, I will, in turn, discuss only two aspects of these relations.

I will begin with the well-documented and elaborate ties between certain Swiss businesses and the Apartheid regime. Again, I will only be able to single out a few cases, due to the complexity of the issue. I do, however, believe that this will suffice to illustrate the nature of these relations.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the international community – with a few exceptions – began to impose sanctions on South Africa's racist regime. Switzerland did not. In the following years, certain prominent Swiss industrialists skillfully began to fill the void that resulted from the sanctions. Key players in this game were Dieter Bührle, who owned the Bührle-Oerlikon Group, a weapons manufacturer and industrial giant, and Christoph Blocher, who in the 1980s and 1990s owned the chemical and engineering company *Ems Chemie*. Blocher, you will recall, later became Switzerland's most successful politician and Minister of Justice.

Let me begin with Dieter Bührle. Bührle has over the past century had his fingers in so many pies that it was inevitable that, one day, he would burn one. This happened with regard to South Africa. Bührle inherited the company Bührle-Oerlikon from his father. Apparently, he also inherited the latter's sense for seeking out morally dubious deals. Where Bührle Senior had sold

weapons to the Nazis, his son Dieter did so with the Apartheid Regime in the early 1960s. Even at this time – before the international community had decided to impose tough sanctions on South Africa – Bührle's decision to sell weapons was controversial. Bührle's actions became outright illegal when he continued to ship weapons to South Africa after the Federal Council had banned this practice after the 1963 massacre of Sharpeville.

Recent studies have shown that the Swiss government, and in particular the Ministry of Defense, were aware of this fact. Nevertheless, Bührle's illegal action led to him being sentenced to a 3-month prison sentence in 1970. But Bührle did not let this stop him, and Oerlikon-Bührle remained one of South Africa's main arms suppliers until well into the 1980s.

Bührle's role was controversial in Switzerland. He became a figure of hate for the political left. Many people found it hard to understand why Switzerland's richest man would sell weapons to such a despicable regime. Crucially, however, this aspect of public sentiment never spilled over into the government, which constrained itself to criticizing Apartheid on a moral basis, but refused to impose tough sanctions in line with those of the international community. Even the massacre in Soweto in 1976 did not change this, and Bührle was able to continue selling weapons.

The level of contact between the Swiss weapons manufacturing industry and that of South Africa reached new heights in the 1980s. By this time South Africa was diplomatically as well as economically isolated as a result of sanctions imposed by the UN. Again, Switzerland chose to go it alone and refused to impose sanctions. Instead, the Ministry of Defense openly fostered close contacts with its South African counterpart. This was formalized in 1980, when Switzerland decided to accredit a South African defense attaché to Berne – a move many other European countries had refused to make. South Africa ruthlessly used this official channel to foster contacts with extreme-right movements in Europe that contributed moral and physical support to the racist

regime. Only in 1988 was the practice of encouraging close military ties restricted as a result of international pressure.

Among the close ties created by South African government branches in the 1980s was that between elements of South Africa's secret service and Christoph Blocher. Blocher, who was at the time a rising political star in Switzerland, was also an industrialist billionaire and, crucially, president of the so-called "Working Group on Southern Africa," which he founded in 1982. The working group's stated aim was to counter, and I quote, "misinformed coverage" about South Africa in the Swiss media, as well as to encourage business relations between Switzerland and South Africa. The group also considered the Apartheid regime as a reliable partner in the global struggle against communism – a position which the US and most western European countries shared, but put second to the far more burning issue of human right abuses.

Blocher's position at the time was that economic and political isolation of South Africa would lead to a state of chaos. He believed that Apartheid could only be defeated as a result of a gradual domestic process in which the black population would have to liberate itself. He did not believe that it was the international community's role to encourage this process by means of sanctions. The obvious flaw, which barely needs pointing out, is that by selling weapons to the regime and by offering it a market at which to sell its gold, Switzerland was helping to perpetuate Apartheid rule. Blocher was aware of this but it hardly bothered him – over and over again, he repeated his dogma which was that revolution or change would have to come from the inside, and could not be imposed by external powers.

As stated, Blocher was not alone in pursuing this course. Excluding himself, five parliamentarians and a further 19 personalities representing Swiss business acted as patrons of the Working Group. Ironically, most of these were affiliated with the Free Democratic Party of Switzerland. The group was careful not to openly express support for Apartheid, and it is fair to

say that most of its members stringently opposed the regime. Yet, by urging Switzerland to resist calls for sanctions, and by encouraging business contacts, the working group helped prolong the struggle for democracy.

Crucially, the Working Group was also supported by Switzerland's powerful finance industry. After the weapon manufacturers, it was perhaps Switzerland's banks that profited most from the trade with South Africa. There were numerous reasons why the banks may have been interested in doing business with South Africa. The most important, however, for both sides was the gold trade. As part of the United Nations' trade embargo against South Africa, most global markets were unable to purchase gold from South Africa. This, of course, presented Switzerland's banks with a huge opportunity upon which they duly capitalized. As a result, the value of gold reaching global markets via Switzerland almost quadrupled between 1968 and 1984.

The implications of this were summarized by Sébastien Geux and Bouda Etemad in the conclusion of their report on Switzerland's economic ties with South Africa. I quote:

“The personal relationships forged between Swiss financial leaders and South African leaders also played a decisive role in the entry of major banks in the South African gold market. The Pretoria authorities knew that by giving Swiss banks a favored position in the gold market, they were wooing reliable and discreet partners who could, when the moment was opportune, furnish the capital South Africa needed. [...]. Subsequent events demonstrated that this trust was well founded.

Switzerland had thus become South Africa's banker. This level of involvement caused outrage among Switzerland's left-wing groups, who organized protests against Apartheid and against companies dealing with this racist regime. However, those who protested remained in a minority

and never possessed the political clout of those in favor of close ties. Again, it was Blocher's Working Group that helped shift the balance in favor of those advocating close ties between the two countries.

In making its case for maintaining close economic and political ties with South Africa, the Working Group also pulled the ultimate Swiss trump card from its sleeve: Switzerland's neutrality. Throughout the 20th century, Swiss politicians have used Switzerland's status as a neutral country to justify pretty much every questionable decision the country made. As I mentioned earlier, this excuse was unsuccessfully presented to account for Switzerland's business ties with Nazi Germany.

Blocher and Co. relentlessly put forward their notion of neutrality, which was that a) Switzerland could not support international sanctions as this would violate its neutral status and b) Switzerland's neutrality hindered it from commenting and passing judgment on South Africa's domestic issues. That this argument is morally reprehensible and dangerous was of little concern to its proponents. To them, neutrality had to serve and justify certain shifty business interests pursued by reckless industrialists.

In its fundamental goals, Blocher's Working Group was successful. Business and military relations with South Africa prospered throughout the 1980s and remained intact until Apartheid was finally overthrown in 1994. However, the South Africa Lobby's greatest success was that the Swiss government never went beyond criticizing Apartheid on moral grounds – a dubious success indeed.

Swiss historians are only beginning to grasp the depth of Switzerland's relations with South Africa. In 2001, a report was commissioned to investigate the economic relations between the two countries. Unfortunately, both the Swiss government and many Swiss companies who had fostered these ties proved uncooperative and kept their respective archives sealed.

As Dr. Peter Hug, a contributor to the commission, wrote in the conclusion of his report:

“[...] the Swiss Federal Council had every reason to block review of the South African files in Switzerland on 16 April 2003. For there are many in Switzerland who supported the apartheid government in South Africa out of deep conviction and profited greatly by business that violated international law. Uncovering this seems necessary if ongoing efforts by the UN and Switzerland to involve business more intensively in a preventive human-rights policy is to achieve a breakthrough.”

The covering up of this episode of Switzerland's history has thus already begun. It seems unlikely this will change as long as the politicians and business leaders who directly profited from these relations remain in positions of influence and power. Yet, there remains hope: Blocher's failure to secure a second term as Minister of Justice has removed an almost insurmountable hurdle to unearthing the depressing truths of this period.

Yet, the fact that a figure with such a controversial history as Blocher was able to become Minister of Justice illustrates that Switzerland has a long way yet to go in properly assessing its past.

At the beginning of this lecture I compared states to children. I illustrated that we teach children to learn from the past and especially from past mistakes, and that the precondition to this is the ability to learn from past mistakes. I then continued that states should behave the same. Surely, if we are taught to accept individual errors, we can do the same as a community. Sadly, mass psychology hinders us from doing so.

I would like to conclude this lecture by returning to this analogy. Switzerland's behavior in the two cases I have spoken about resembles that of a child who fails to accept fault. Like any

child who is caught doing something wrong, Switzerland tried to deflect the blame. It committed the cardinal sin of comparing itself to those who are worse. Any decent parent would advise its son or daughter to compare him or herself to the best – to reach for the stars. Switzerland failure in this regard is typical of the behavior of states. In the case of its actions towards refugees during the Nazi era, the typical response was along the lines of “well, it wasn’t us who committed the Holocaust.” This completely misses the point – just as much as it does if your child turns around and says “well, so-and-so did even worse on the exam.” Sadly, as the reactions to the Independent Commission of Experts showed, there is little evidence that attitudes are changing in Switzerland.

The example of South Africa underlines this. A public debate on Switzerland’s role during this period has yet to take place. More astounding, however, is the fact that many of the profiteers from Switzerland’s close relations with the Apartheid regime have been able to escape scrutiny. I very much doubt whether any Western democratic country in the world would tolerate a man who actively helped perpetuate a regime as morally and ethically repulsive as that of South Africa before 1994 as its Minister of Justice. To me this proves that Switzerland has failed to deal with its past in a way one should be able to expect of a country with a liberal-democratic tradition.

In this sense, Switzerland resembles the awkward teenager who refuses to apologize for mistakes he knows he has made, because, in doing so, he believes he could lose face. As grown-up and sensible people we know that this behavior is silly. Apologizing doesn’t equate to losing face – in fact, issuing an apology where one is due is a sign of mental maturity and humility, both of which are great strengths. So, I guess, in this case, Switzerland just has to grow up and behave more responsibly and with more humility in regard to its past.

Concluding, it thus becomes obvious that Switzerland has a difficult relationship with its past – just as most other countries do. But unlike most other liberal democratic countries, neither the general population, nor academics or the media, have worked hard to nurture a debate about the country's past. On the rare occasion when such a debate threatens to take place as a result of external pressure, it is quickly stifled by nationalistic and populist sentiment encouraged by right-wing parties. As a result, general awareness of Switzerland's history, and especially of its darker chapters, remains low. Personally, I hope this will change – in fact, I believe it must. History lessons at school ought to include some of what I have told you about today. Only through proper education can the right lessons be learnt and future mistakes avoided, and only then can Switzerland hope to become the humanitarian nation it likes to see itself as.

Thank you very much.