

Opening address of Professor Dr. Leo Schelbert, Chicago, in occasion of the opening of the exhibition “Small Number – Big Impact” at the Swiss National Museum, March 1st 2007

Ladies and gentlemen

Having travelled all the way from Chicago I deem it an honor and a privilege to assist at the opening of the special exhibition «Small Number – Big Impact». An honor, because I am trusted to represent the more than 600'000 Swiss who live or work abroad. A privilege, because the opening gives me the opportunity to thank in public a number of personalities. First of all I offer my thanks to Mr. Markus Hodel, initiator of the project and founding president of the migration museum – an institution Mr. Hodel has been working towards for a number of years and for which he has created a supporting society. The concept of this museum is of major importance in three respects: to document Swiss migration within the country as well as emigration from and immigration to Switzerland. I would also like to thank FDP International – a group led by national council Markus Hutter that grants the annual award for the Swiss abroad. This award is meant to honor Swiss presence and activities abroad and officially underline their importance. I also extend my thanks to the Organisation of the Swiss abroad, especially to its staff and its director, Mr. Rudolf Wyder, for their important work at home which markedly complements the efforts of Swiss embassies and consulates abroad.

Dealing with the Swiss abroad helps extend and enlarge national conscience in a most important and necessary way. Switzerland as a nation consists not only of its home base of 26 cantons. There exists a 27th canton: the entireness of Swiss citizens living and working in every part of the world, sometimes - in allusion to the four linguistic regions of the homeland - also called «the fifth Switzerland». To develop and exploit the history of this imaginary nation, which I have made my life's work, is not some kind of scientific luxury. On the contrary, it focuses upon a major aspect of the Swiss past and present and should thus become part of our general knowledge – especially in today's world of global interdependency. Just as every canton forms an integrated part of Switzerland, so does the 27th canton of our Swiss abroad. At the same time this imaginary canton has close ties with what I should like to call our «sixth Switzerland», namely the world of our non-Swiss contemporaries working and living in our country. This «sixth Switzerland» will only develop a profile of its own when it is looked at in connection not only with the homeland but with the community of the Swiss abroad, and when both past and present of these societies are specifically valued and appreciated.

Now for the exhibition and its beautiful catalogue «Small Number – Big Impact». I have to admit that I don't feel quite at home with the title and that I suspect it has been chosen mainly for marketing reasons. «Big impact» may sound too self-congratulatory, at least in the light of American self-definition which is largely rooted in the history of its immigration. This image the country has of itself shows the American nation as fundamentally stamped and defined by England. Only around 1970, with the abolition of racially and ethnically defined immigration quota, did the concept of racial and ethnical plurality gain a foothold. At the same time, «small numbers» are hardly appreciated, much less admired. Mostly, they are neglected or tolerated in a condescending way. If they are ready to admit to a certain amount of non-anglosaxon impact at all, Americans think more of the millions of

Germans, Irish, Italians, Polish or today's Mexicans whose arrival has always met with embittered resistance – in the 19th, the 20th as well as in the 21st century.

Nevertheless the exhibition and the beautifully designed book, edited carefully by Barbara Lüthy and Bruno Abegg, are on the right path. They trace the multiple ways in which Swiss men and women were involved in the development of America as a nation – at present and in former times. Some of them gained international reputation. I name Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who brought the process of dying back from social oblivion and to the center of public consciousness, I name Othmar Ammann whose bridges have not only coined the profile of New York but put their stamp on the art of bridge-building all over the world. The exhibition and the book show the Swiss presence in the States in a multi-faced selection without denying the fact that the majority of Swiss immigrants – be they farmers, artisans, employees, teachers, nurses, priests or managers – make up a part of everyday America while forming a part of Swiss as well as of American history. Thus both exhibition and book serve a most important purpose by making us conscious of the globalization process of our small planet. And by bringing to our notice that people of foreign nationalities working and living in Switzerland are but the counterpart of our compatriots living and working in the USA, in Brazil, in Africa, China or India.