Mr. Matthias Meier, Dr. Walter Roder, Excellencies, Dashos, ladies and gentlemen,

On the auspicious occasion of celebration of the National Day of Switzerland today, it is my great honor and privilege to extend, on behalf of the members and directors on the Board of Bhutan-Switzerland Society, our heartiest felicitations to Mr. Matthias Meier, Counselor and Director of SDC office in Bhutan, Dr. Walter Roder, Country Director of Helvetas Swiss Inter-cooperation, and all our Swiss friends gathered here today. I would like to take this opportunity to wish the people of Switzerland peace, prosperity and happiness for all time to come.

I understand that it was 722 years ago today that the historic birth of the Swiss Confederation took place at the Meadow of Rutli above Lake Lucerne when representatives of three valleys in the central part of today’s Switzerland formed a pact to jointly resist the lords from the Austrian Empire. 722 years is really a very long period of time in the life of a nation state particularly for small countries like Bhutan and Switzerland which are naturally faced with numerous challenges to its survival, its sovereignty and nationhood. It is quite remarkable that small Switzerland not only survived as a nation state but also prospered to become one of the most industrialized and richest countries in the world. Bhutan, though not prosperous by economic wealth standards, has a very similar history of how it survived as a sovereign independent country in spite of serious threats posed to its security from both the north and the south. Further, Bhutan and Switzerland share many other similarities of being fully mountainous, being completely landlocked and surrounded by big neighbours, being endowed with limited natural resources, being blessed with similar climate, our people’s natural instinct for survival, and many more. So, it was only a matter of time that Bhutan and Switzerland would be drawn naturally towards each other because of the close affinities. As we believe in Bhutan, it was an auspicious beginning and perhaps destiny that the seeds of friendship and cooperation between our two countries should be sown by none other than
a future queen of Bhutan and the daughter of a Swiss industrialist when they met in London in 1949 and became very close friends. The rest of the fascinating story which is now a part of well-recorded history of bilateral relations between Bhutan and Switzerland is well known to all of us.

So, Switzerland was one of the first few countries to come forward to assist Bhutan in its development process. In fact, the cooperation which started at a personal level between our third King, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, and Mr. Fritz von Schulthess, goes back to 1958 even before the planned development process was launched in 1961. I consider myself to be very fortunate to have got the opportunity to be involved with Swiss-assisted projects right from the beginning of my 33 years of service to the King, country and the people of Bhutan until my retirement in 2008. My first involvement started with the Dairy and Forestry Programme which was renamed the Rural Development Project when I was the Assistant Director of Animal Husbandry. I was one of the key officials involved in the planning and implementation of the High Altitude Area Development Project, as a senior official in the ministry of agriculture, I was actively involved in the conception, planning and implementation of the Natural Resources Training Institute, the integrated natural resource management policy, the RNR Research Systems, and the development of the four RNR Research Centres. I was instrumental in initiating the East-Central Agriculture Development Programme, the Rural Development Training Centre in Zhemgang and the Participatory Forest Management Project. I was also directly involved in the implementation of Brown Swiss breeding programme, Haflinger Horse breeding, fodder development and fodder seed multiplication programme, bee keeping project and formation of bee keepers association of Bhutan, milk processing plant, Bhutan National Potato Programme and Integrated Forestry Development Project. Most of these programmes and projects executed during my 26 years in the ministry of agriculture were generously funded by SDC although implemented through Helvetas. I was very closely involved with the suspension bridge programme when I worked as the minister of works and human settlement. In fact, the first wooden cantilever bridge in the modern day Thimphu across Centenary Farmers’ Market, a landmark and a symbol of Bhutan-Swiss collaboration, was built with generous Swiss assistance on my request. Of course, the generous assistance extended to other sectors such as education, health, industries, culture, good governance, democratization, media development, etc. have not only been substantial but very meaningful as well.
In the above context, the Bhutan-Swiss partnership in the key areas of knowledge transfer, rural development, social services, environment conservation, preservation of culture, infrastructure building and good governance were crucial not only in laying a sound and strong foundation but also in terms of what Bhutan has achieved so far in its efforts towards the pursuit of its overarching goal of Gross National Happiness. The Swiss inputs were not only useful and relevant but made a big difference because of very similar conditions existing in Bhutan and Switzerland. The ultimate result and impact of the very fruitful cooperation and close collaboration over the last 50 years is there for all of us to see in front of our eyes.

On the occasion of celebration of the Swiss National Day today, for the first time on the premises of the SDC office in Thimphu, I felt it was an opportune moment for us to reflect on the path of friendship and cooperation that we have traversed so far, so that we can not only look back with tremendous sense of satisfaction but also take this opportunity to express our sincere appreciation and gratitude to the people and government of Switzerland for their understanding, steadfast friendship and long standing cooperation. Although the initial years of friendship and cooperation were more at the personal level, it soon turned into a bilateral engagement involving the respective governments. Since then we have never looked back. So, it was a historic step when our former Prime Minister and then our Ambassador to Switzerland, Lyonpo Jigmi Y Thinley, asked Mr. Ernst Reinhardt, the former and first Resident Coordinator of Helvetas to Bhutan, to establish a Bhutan-Swiss Friendship Association to promote people-to-people cooperation and understanding. The By-laws establishing Society Switzerland-Bhutan was signed on 4th August 2000 in Zurich, and the first meeting to establish Bhutan-Swiss Friendship Association in Bhutan was held on 8th December 2000 in Thimphu with election of office bearers. An agreement on Co-operation between the two sister-organizations was signed on 2nd December 2009 in Thimphu. Since then much water has flown down the bridge. We now have Bhutan-Switzerland Society in Bhutan and our counterpart organization called Society Switzerland-Bhutan in Switzerland, with whom we share the common objective of promoting primarily friendship and understanding between the peoples of Bhutan and Switzerland.

During the last few years, we have received substantial financial contributions from SSBB starting with a large contribution of SFr 50,000 for reconstruction of Chamkhar town after the unfortunate fire accident of 26 October 2010 and another SFr 8,000 after the 2nd fire accident of 18 February 2011. We also
received a generous contribution of Nu 139,340.30 meant for His Majesty’s Fund for Reconstruction of Druk Khamsum Choki Phodrang Dzong in Wangduephodrang. In the education sector, in addition to the continuing support extended to 2 CPS in the most remote parts of Zhemgang, this year 2 more CPSs in Zhemgang and one CPS and one PS in the remote part of Mongar, are being supported. This year alone 325 girls and 364 boys are benefitting from their support in the 6 schools mentioned above. In monetary terms, the support extended to the education programme was Nu 395,013.00 in 2011, Nu 443,946.50 in 2012 and Nu 1.803 million in 2013. As always, the President and members of SSB have also been very generous with their time and hospitality to any Bhutanese visitor to Switzerland including a large number of students studying there.

Among the many programmes and activities generously supported by the SSB in the recent past, the support extended to 6 schools in the most remote and underdeveloped parts of Bhutan stand out as the Lodestar of people-to-people cooperation and friendship that we have jointly set out to promote, nurture and sustain. The immediate impact of the support extended to these schools have been dramatic, extraordinary and most beneficial, to say the least, as reported by the school authorities. And the benefits have accrued not only to the students as direct beneficiaries but also spilt over to the teachers, the parents and the local community on the whole. In my 33 years of service and experience in development work in Bhutan, I have rarely come across such impressive results which were immediate and visible.

It was, therefore, most befitting that we were able to make this humble contribution when the country was celebrating “The Sherig Century” in an effort to chronicle Bhutan’s journey in modern education over the last 100 years, and to prepare for the challenges that lie ahead of us. Because, as we all know education means more than just acquiring knowledge. Education means empowerment, education enhances opportunity in life, education helps to fulfill one’s aspirations, education is wealth, education can help one to attain happiness and education can lead one to enlightenment, education can make one a good human being and many more. One of the reasons for Bhutan’s remarkable achievement in the socio-economic field in the last 50 years or so is because of its wise investment in education in spite of numerous constraints and challenges, thanks to our development partners, such as Switzerland, without whose goodwill, friendship, understanding, cooperation and support Bhutan could not be what it is today. As His Majesty the King has said time and again that “a nation’s future will mirror the quality of her youth – a nation
cannot fool herself into thinking of a bright future when she has not invested wisely in her children”, we are mindful of the fact that what we invest in education today will determine our future tomorrow.

May I, therefore, take this opportunity to express our appreciation to the President, Ms. Marianne Frei, and her colleagues at the SSB, for their kind cooperation and generous support extended to BSS and through it to the people of Bhutan. We look forward to continue working closely in the same spirit of people-to-people cooperation and friendship. I would also like to convey my deep gratitude to Dr. Walter Roder, Country Director of Helvetas Swiss Inter-cooperation, for his unstinted and generous support extended to BSS through our use of his office facilities, staff time, financial support and also hosting the Annual General Assembly on 1st of August every year since 2010 in his office premises. We will look forward to receiving the same level of support from Helvetas Swiss Inter-cooperation in the years ahead.

Finally, I would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to SDC for opening their country office in Thimphu recently, and congratulate Mr. Matthias Meier on his appointment as the first Director with concurrent consular responsibilities. We are also grateful to him for hosting our Annual General Assembly this year in his office premises and for organizing the celebration of National Day of Switzerland here today. We are particularly indebted to him for his personal contribution of Nu 15,000.00 made to BSS. We will look forward to his cooperation and support to BSS in the near future so that we can continue to give true meaning to the people-to-people cooperation and understanding between Bhutan and Switzerland.

I would once again like wish you a happy Swiss National Day.

Thank you, and Tashi Delek!