

Speech on the Occasion of the 218th Anniversary of Toussaint Louverture's Death

(due to Corona not live on 7th April 2021 at the Fort de Joux, but in video format online:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yILBzgLLXsU>)

by Hans Fässler, co-founder of the Pèlerinage Toussaint Louverture, St.Gallen (Switzerland)

Dear pilgrims, dear friends of Toussaint Louverture!

For the second year in a row, due to the corona pandemic, we cannot gather at the Fort de Joux to commemorate the great Haitian revolutionary Toussaint Louverture.

But still we want to commemorate, even if only in this somehow pathetic digital form.

Today, 7th April, the anniversary of Toussaint Louverture's death, I would like to draw attention to a rather unknown achievement of the great man.

I quote from this highly recommendable book by Sudhir Hazareesingh: «Black Spartacus. The Epic Life of Toussaint Louverture», published last year by Penguin:

«Toussaint sought to nurture a sense of public-spiritedness among the citizenry through the provision of primary schools, a major feature of his republican programme for the social regeneration of Saint-Domingue. He tried to ensure that each locality had a schoolmaster who could teach children to read and write. He consolidated a network of educational institutions, including a central training school for teachers at Le Cap, thanks to which thousands of young black children between the ages of eight and fifteen were given state-education.»

«A report to the French government about the extension of education to black plantation workers...» showed that «...since the revolution it had become common for these labourers to pay three-quarters of a *gourde* from their salaries so that their children could attend school, which they did readily, even though they sometimes had to walk several miles to attend the nearest one.»

This was in 1799. In other words, Toussaint, in what was to become Haiti, was already moving towards compulsory public education when most European countries were still debating whether it was a good thing to educate the common people or whether they had not rather be left ignorant and subservient and under the domination of the church.

In Switzerland, compulsory, free and non-denominational primary education was only introduced in 1874 with the total revision of the Federal Constitution. In France, the same did not happen until 1882, when an act of Parliament was introduced by Jules Ferry.

So, to conclude this little 7th April speech, let us add to the famous words with which American abolitionist Wendell Philipps praised Toussaint Louverture in 1861, the year that the American Civil War broke out, the little but important word «educator».

«But fifty years hence, when Truth gets a hearing, the Muse of History will put Phocion of the Greek, and Brutus for the Roman, Hampden for England, La Fayette for France, choose Washington as the bright, consummate flower of our earlier civilization, and John Brown the ripe fruit of our noonday, then, dipping her pen in the sunlight, will write in the clear blue, above them all, the name of the soldier, the statesman, the martyr, the educator Toussaint Louverture.»

I greet you all warmly in the hope that we shall all meet again at the Fort de Joux on 7th April 2022: face to face, hand in hand, shoulder to shoulder and cheek to cheek.