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# The Canton of Uri

## The Author

Dr rer. pol. Hans Muheim was born on 24th August 1917 in Altdorf/Uri, his Commune of origin. He studied political science at the University of Berne, graduating with a doctorate. In 1949, he was appointed Second *Landschreiber* and in 1959 Clerk of Chancellery. His hobby is writing, and history, political science and history of art are the main subjects of his countless large and small publications in individual issues, in collected works and in the press.

Napoleon I once coined the phrase: «The political life of a State rests on its geographical position.» Did Napoleon know just how aptly this fits the small mountainous Canton of Uri? Well, an attempt will be made to present briefly the small land at the Northern foot of the Gotthard.

## History

The position of the Canton of Uri at the upper end of the Lake of Lucerne has always meant the advantage of natural communications. It is, therefore, not surprising that Uri, at least in its lower part, was already colonized in pre-historic times; a number of discovered objects clearly indicate this. In written history, Uri appears for the first time in 732 when Abbot Etto of Reichenau was exiled to Urania. The most significant event in Uri's earliest history is the gift of the territory to the Convent of Felix and Regula in Zurich by King Ludwig the German who had founded the Convent in 732. Henceforth Uri had to pay taxes to the Fraumuenster in Zurich. The tributes were collected by stewards resident at Buerglen, Erstfeld and Silenen. The first mention of Uri places of worship was in 857 when King Ludwig assigned the Chapels of Buerglen and Silenen to Priest Berold. Apart from the Fraumuenster, there were other property owners in Uri, as for instance the Counts of Rapperswil, the Counts of Lenzburg, the Counts of Habsburg, the Mona-

stries of Wettingen and Muri and the Abbey of Kappel, to mention but a few of the most important ones. The coat of arms of the Canton of Uri has always shown a black bull's head with protruding red tongue and an originally yellow (golden) and later red nose ring. This vivid coat of arms very likely represents the original aurochs, now extinct, which the first settlers found.

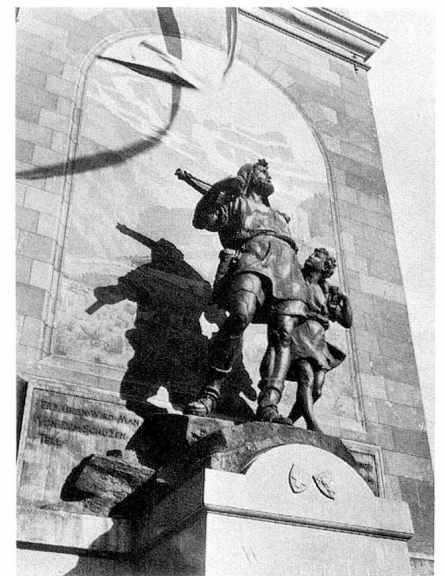
Of importance for the fate of the Canton of Uri was its situation on the Gotthard, and with this, Napoleon's above mentioned phrase becomes justified. With the opening up of the Gotthard, which began from the North with the construction of the Devil's Bridge in 1218 – according to the latest research, the opening up from the South began already in the 7th or 8th century – the political and economic development of the pass land of Uri began in earnest. There is no doubt that the origin of the Confederation is to be found in the Gotthard region: For the sake of the Gotthard, the men of Uri were the first to get a freedom charter in 1231; around the Gotthard it was that the first Confederates united in 1291, and it was from there that the Confederation grew and Uri finally acquired full political and economic status. Thus the history of the Valley of Uri in the 13th and 14th centuries may be called a process of emancipation, that of the 15th and 16th centuries as one of expansion, the 17th and 18th centuries as a period of discussion and altercation and the 19th century as at time of new beginnings. The resistance of Uri to the modern age must not be overlooked: it needed three *Landsgemeinden* to accept without reserve the first Federal Constitution of 12th September 1848. But these are the people of Uri – once they have recognised

something as right and good, they never waver, and that may be said also with regard to the new Confederation.

## *The Land of Passes at the Gotthard*

The geographic characteristics of the Canton of Uri show that it lies in the Southern half of Switzerland and on the Northern slope of the Alpine chain, between the 46th and 47th degree of Northern latitude and the 8th and 9th degree of Eastern (Greenwich) longitude. With an area of 1075 square kilometers, Uri comes in 15th and with a population of 34 191 in 22nd place amongst all the Cantons. Of the total area, 53% are productive and 47% barren. Lengthwise, the Canton measures 51 and across 45 kilometers. The highest elevation is at 3630 meters on the Dammastock (Goescheneralp) and the lowest point at 234 meters in the Urnersee below the Ruetli. Right across the Canton is the Valley of the Reuss, flanked by high mountains. Valleys lead in all directions, and five Alpine roads form openings to the neighbouring Cantons: The Gott-

Guillaume Tell's monument at Altdorf





The Tell's chapel

hard Road (1830) to the Ticino, the Oberalp Pass (1864) to the Grisons, the Furka Road (1865) to the Valais, the Klausen Pass (1900) to Glarus and the Susten Pass (1946) to Berne, and added to it the Axenstrasse (1865) to Schwyz. Cantonal roads measure 205 km and national roads 72 km when completed and including the Gotthard Road Tunnel from Goeschenen to Airolo; in addition, a number of Corporation and Commune roads help to ensure good communications throughout the Canton.

The ancient and the new «Devil's Bridge» over the Reuss.



Apart from roads, the tracks of the Swiss Federal Railways cover the whole Canton (since 1882), whilst the Furka-Oberalp-Railway connects Goeschenen with Ursern, the Valais and the Grisons. And in places where, for various reasons, road construction is not possible or expedient, over 40 aerial cableways, three of which are licensed federally, open up the mountain world, the world where relaxation and mountaineering are the big assets. On the Lake of Lucerne, which starts at Fluelen and where it is called Urnersee, the Navigation Company of the Vierwaldstaettersee keeps up the connection between all the places on the shore right down to Lucerne by means of its attractive, venerable steamers and modern motor-boats. A cable car goes from Treib to the heights of the Seelisberg resort, and the Auto AG Uri connects the cantonal capital Altdorf with the surrounding Communes of Fluelen (where the fast trains stop), Buerglen, Schattdorf and Attinghausen, and various private coach lines run inside the Canton, especially to the border regions of Urnerboden, Isenthal, Bristen and Meiental.

Seeing that there are so many different natural factors, the cli-

mate, too, varies greatly: In the main valley it is mild, in the higher parts cool and clear, and there is snow in the Urserntal. The flora is rich, and the fauna includes above all excellent game, and whoever is inclined that way and has enough leisure, can search for minerals. When the violent wind from the South, the *Foehn*, rages through the vallies – it is often called the «oldest Urner» – the alarm is given: open fires are extinguished, no smoking allowed out of doors, and fire watchers are on the alert by day and by night. Nearly all the places in the Canton have been hit badly by fires during Foehn conditions. In the night of 5th April 1799, Altdorf was completely destroyed by flames during Foehn weather and lost its previous face altogether.

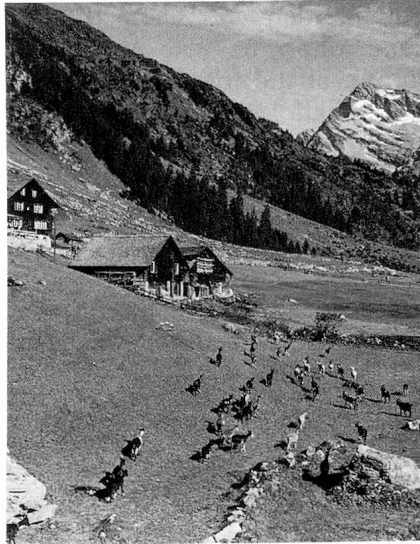
#### *Economy*

According to the census of 1970, the Canton of Uri has a population of 34,091; of this 31,393 are Swiss citizens and 2,698 foreign nationals. 23,219 people or 68% are Uri citizens. Altogether there are 50,402 citizens of Uri, and that means that 27,183 live outside the Canton. This situation naturally has important effects on social services. The large majority of the

#### **A few figures**

Surface area:	1,076.4 km <sup>2</sup>
Population:	34,091 inhabitants in 20 communes (8,900 in the town of Altdorf)
Denominations:	31,732 Roman Catholics 2,236 Protestants 123 other religions
Language:	German
Agricultural estates:	703
Tourism:	135 hotels (3,618 beds)
Industrial undertakings:	22 (3,020 employees)
Limited companies:	178
Net of roads:	324 km
Total of engine-vehicles:	9,186

people of Uri, i.e. 31 732, are Roman Catholics, whilst 2236 belong to the Protestant Church or to smaller denominational groups or adhere to no denomination at all. Uri can boast the phenomenon that it changed from an agrarian to an industrial state in less than 100 years and that the service sector has also had strong reinforcements. This astonishing development began with the opening up of the Gotthard railway on 1st June 1882 and has been strengthened steadily as technology and motorisation have grown. It is also surprising how well the people of Uri have adjusted to this change. Originating in agriculture to which the Urner in his innermost still has a strong leaning, he has been open-minded and far-seeing as is natural in a people living on the Gotthard route, gateway to the world. Yet he has been able to adapt himself remarkably well to the demands of development. Something else which should be mentioned about Uri economy, it suffers from a lack of diversification: 80% of the industrial employees work in two large concerns, one private undertaking and one federal establishment, and numerous small and medium-sized factories and workshops, and this does not exactly offer a large variety of occupational choice. Yet Uri economy has managed to cope with the recession, even though with some sacrifice, and this is due to a certain foresight and prudence. Nevertheless, the figures for earnings per head of the population show that compared to the whole of Switzerland, Uri does not do too badly, but considerably less well than other Cantons. Great efforts are needed, therefore, both in the private and in the public sector to keep a place in the sun, or even to improve the situation. It will certainly cause no surprise to learn that Uri is a small State with big worries. Again and again natural



View of the Maderan valley, pleasant area for walks



Open air representation of «Guillaume Tell»

calamities occur. The construction of the national road, economic demands based on a development concept and the upkeep of employment are the present most urgent problems occupying the administration. Yet it is gratifying and comforting that Uri may always count not only on active

support from the Confederation, but also on friendly solidarity and assistance from the other Cantons.

#### *Art and Culture*

The small land of Uri, embedded in high mountain chains and bounded by the Gotthard and the Urnersee, does not appear at first sight

Splendid view from «Axenstrasse» by the side of the lake of the «Four Cantons»



to be a particularly favourable place for art and culture. Yet it would be completely wrong to characterize it as barren ground for culture. Here is a small and partly quite modest people who knows how to value quality of life, and that includes art and culture. Not least, this is due to the transverse Gotthard line which connects parts of the outside world. Naturally one can't expect great cultural deeds of world importance of such a small people in a confined area. But it may be said that it has a cultural level perfectly compatible with its living standards. In castles, towers and strongholds one finds the first feudal buildings. Mercenary service abroad not only brought much money into the country, but it also broadened the horizon of

leading men and enabled them quite often to take up public service at the top. The imposing and often splendidly furnished palaces of the Late Gothic period, of Renaissance and Baroque, are vivid proof of those wonderful times. The beautiful religious buildings of the 16th and 17th centuries not only reflect the impressive architecture, but also contain most valuable works in painting, sculpture and stucco-work.

In the painters Heinrich Gessner in Altdorf (1597-1622), Karl Leonz Puentener from Altdorf (1667-1720), Felix Maria Diogg from Andermatt (1764-1834), Franz Xaver Triner from Buerglen (1767-1824) and Jost Muheim from Altdorf (1808-1880), Uri presented impressive artists.

Glass-painting was prominent in Uri right into the 18th century, also goldsmith's art, above all in some outstanding sacred pieces. The sculptor Max August Imhof from Buerglen (1795-1869), pupil of the famous Thorwaldsen and living and working mainly in Rome, was an artist of international repute. This century brought forth the painter Heinrich Danioth from Fluelen (1896-1953) who died far too young and who was Uri's most assertive artist in word and illustration. To his circle belonged the sculptor Eugen Puentener from Schattdorf (1904-1952). Amongst contemporary artists are the painter Erna Schillig from Altdorf (born in 1900), Franz Fedier from Erstfeld (born in 1922 and working in Berne and Basle), as well as the sculptor Gedeon

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Renner from Altdorf (1923–1977).

The world of music, too, is well represented by Uri artists: Pater Alberik Zwysig from Bauen (1808–1854), composer of the National Anthem «*Trittst im Morgenrot daher*»; Gustav Arnold from Altdorf (1831–1900), musical director in Lucerne and composer of the song «*Der Tell sei uns gepriesen*»; Berti Juetz from Altdorf (1900–1925) with his folk-songs, specially the well-known «*Zogä am Bogä, dr Landammä tanzet*»; Hanns In der Gand from Altdorf (1882–1947), who accompanied his songs on the lute; Clemens Dahinden from Altdorf (born in 1912), orchestra leader and conductor with the Winterthur Municipal Orchestra and member of the Winterthur String Quartet; as well as Anton Gisler from Altdorf (born 1944), pianist, harp-sichord player and conductor, musical director at the Burgtheater in Vienna since 1975. A profession rather unusual for Uri is the ballet chosen by Susi Della Pietra from Altdorf. Having been trained by the Russian Leonid Massine of the world-famous «Ballet Russe» of Serge Diaghilev, the talented dan-

cer was appointed *Prima Ballerina* and director of the ballet school at the «Teatro Massimo» in Palermo. In addition, there are a number of young artists in Uri who are concerned with modern art. Nor must one forget the *Tellspiele* in Altdorf, which have produced Schiller's «*Wilhelm Tell*» periodically for nearly 80 years; the latest theatrical undertaking, the Cellar Theatre in Altdorf, which may be considered a successful contribution to contemporary art.

Literature, too, has its place in Uri's culture, poetry, prose, historic research, science, folklore. And there are old customs which come to light at religious and secular festivals (St. Nicolas, carnival, folklore events, pilgrimages and processions). The Historic Museum in Altdorf, the Tell Museum at Buerglen and the summer exhibitions at Castle A Pro at Seedorf make it possible that the rich indigenous artistic and cultural heritage insofar as it is kept in collections, may be seen.

With this we end our small excursion into the Canton of Uri. For reasons of space not all aspects could be shown, but the author hopes that he has been able to



The small castle of A Pro, at Seedorf

give a picture of this little stony mountain land at the Northern foot of the Gotthard. The presentation shall be rounded off with a word by Heinrich Daniöth who knew his beloved homeland and its people like no other and who was able to characterize it so aptly: «All praise, I reckon, always covers one half only. And my homeland is indeed God's show-piece and Satan's maze in equal parts.»

*Hans Muheim*

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## Book Review

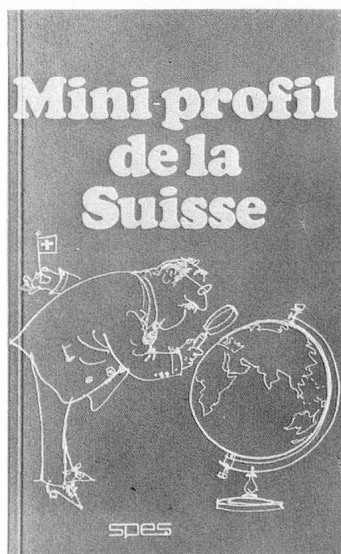
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## Skiing Camp

Once more winter is approaching, and with it our skiing camps become topical again. The first will take place at Sedrun (Grisons) from 25th December 1978 to 3rd January 1979. We are looking forward to welcoming in that lovely small village all young Swiss from abroad who enjoy skiing and who appreciate fun and games. If you fell attracted to this idea and are between 15 and 25 years old, please write and ask for an application form and further information. Our address is: Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad, Youth Service, Alpenstrasse 26, 3000 Berne, Switzerland.