

The Walsers - an intrinsically Swiss people

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad**

Band (Jahr): **10 (1983)**

Heft 3

PDF erstellt am: **23.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906870>

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The Walsers – an Intrinsically Swiss People

Already as a schoolboy on summer holidays and again later – during the war years – as student on rambles and bicycle tours, it was again and again certain of our high-Alpine valley landscapes which held a special attraction for me. For one, there was the region around the upper course of the Rhone with its various side valleys like the Turtmantal, at that time still accessible on foot, the Loetschental wrapped in legends and the Binntal rich in crystals; then there was the Urserental in Uri, the Rheinwald in the Grisons, the Sa-fiental as much unknown as it was beautiful, Avers-Cresta high up in the mountains, the round hollow of Arosa, the surroundings of Davos and the idyllic villages of Furna and Valzeina in the Praetigau. I felt similar sensations south of the Alps, at Simplon village, hedged in by wide meadows, and at Bosco-Gurin and right up – twice round the corner – in the Maggia valley.

It was the same everywhere which fascinated me: the old farmhouses which, regardless of their simplicity, radiated an almost patrician pride, and in these houses the utensils and implements in daily use, which bore witness to long tradition and culture. The inhabitants themselves embodied in all their expressions a convincing attachment to the mostly poor soil and they struck one by their deeply anchored love of freedom.

In my own neighbourhood right up to the highest valleys in the Bernese Oberland, I found something similar only in the lonely village of Isenfluh high up above Lauterbrunnen, which fascinated me more than the «o so much more beautiful» and sunnier Wengen on the mountain terrace opposite.

What was the common connection in these districts? For a long time I did not know. It could not be in the seclusion alone. It is true that places like Heiligkreuz in the Binntal or Juf above Avers were still widely unknown. In the two Vispa valleys with Zermatt and Saas Fee, tourism had established itself for some time, and in the Urserental and in Rheinwald near Spluegen, long lines of motor vehicles from all countries of Europe were at times to be found in summer. It could not be the denominations either. The valleys mentioned were partly Catholic, partly Protestant, even though their church buildings, small though they were, bore witness to a deep testimony of faith by their impressive position in the magnificent mountain world – much more so than many large cathedrals in the low-lying country.

It was only at the beginning of the 'fifties when I found an explanation for my predilection, and that abroad of all places! It was in the Kleine Walsertal, the Small Waldensian Valley, the strange hybrid behind Oberstdorf in Southern Bavaria which, though belonging to Austrian sovereignty, is attached to Germany economically. There I found a small but very instructive museum which housed geographic tables on the distribution of the Walsers, that German-speaking breed from the upper Rhone Valley, which began to settle in the surrounding regions at the turn of the 13th and up to the 14th century, a kind of belated Mass Migration on a small scale and that in the heart of Europe. This advance led the Walsers to the Canton of Uri and from there to the Grisons, to the Oberland of St. Gall, to Liechten-



View of the village of Ausserferrera in the Avers Valley, Grisons.

stein and to Vorarlberg and Tyrol. At the same time, they also moved on breakneck paths over the Alps to the south, the Ticino, the Eschental, the Val d'Ossola, and into the northern side valleys of the Aostatal beyond the Monte Rosa. Isolated smaller groups eventually found themselves right inside Savoy, as is recognizable from the place name «Les Allamands» north of Chamonix, and into Bernese territory, the already mentioned Isenfluh. Walser settlement thus extended in the Alps over a length of more than 300 km from west to east.

The Walsers did excellent work as colonizers, managed to get returns from even the most meagre soil and transformed bleak and deserted valleys into flourishing communes. Due to the high altitude of their settlements, the agricultural side of their activities was confined to cattle breeding, dairy farming and forestry. Cereals and other field produce could be grown but in a limited way and then only in specially favoured positions. The Walsers, therefore, were self-supporting in the most exceptional cases only. This

meant that they had to sell the products of their work, like cattle, wood and hay, on the markets of the lowlands, often a long way off. And there they were able to purchase the goods they needed for their subsistence. This goods traffic had to be negotiated over most difficult paths. So, for instance, the Safiental could be reached only over the Glaspas and Thusis or across the Safienberg and Spluegen, on account of the Versamer ravine.

This imposed communication with the towns and markets in the lowlands was, however, of spiritual advantage and prevented complete isolation due to the seclusion of their homes. By the way, the Walsers were much-liked for their sincerity and their diligence. Their immigration was welcomed. In the Grisons, the landlords of Chur and other towns in the lower valleys could be sure of getting their rents and other dues from the immigrants. On the other hand, the Walsers knew how to secure special liberties.

The regular relations with the lower regions resulted also in the fact that the young Walsers, like

other Swiss, joined up as mercenaries in foreign armies. Brave, realistic and used to a hard life, they proved themselves extremely well. Quite a few of them made their way in French, Dutch, Italian and Spanish service, such as Hans-Peter Guler from Davos who, in 1635 was colonel of his own regiment in France, or Johannes Buchli from the Safier tribe of the Walser, who, like his predecessors before him, served the King of Sardinia, finally also as colonel. In the same way, the Walsers committed themselves to the federal troops. In the First World War, there were no fewer than two officers in the small Swiss high-command: Divisional Commander Friedrich Bruegger from Churwalden and the Chief of the General Staff, Colonel Theophil Sprecher von Bernegg, whose family came from Davos, and who was much revered by people and soldiers.

As time went on, whole Walser families settled in our towns. In this way, many valuable new impulses were produced, for the newcomers proved themselves also in these new surroundings. In spite of their rural traditions, the Walsers were excellent tradesmen, dexterous in all manner of crafts and known for their spirit of invention and initiative. Tall and slender, they made an impression in spite of their modest manner. Their women drew attention to themselves by their domesticity and their intelligence. Already at the time of their heroic wanderings and opening up of new terrains, but also right into the present century, the women must have achieved extraordinary things. It was not by chance that the wife of the important Grisons leader in the Thirty-Year War, Anna Buol, was a Walser woman! Of the many Walser families who reached eminent standing in the lowlands, we should like to mention but two of them, the Steigers

from Raron and the Bodmers who came to Zurich from a Walser village in Piedmontese Val Sesia in the 16th century, though originating from Bodmen in the Upper Valais. The Steigers who settled in old Berne, have given the town many highly-placed administrators and high officers to Swiss and foreign armies. Federal Councillor Eduard von Steiger (1881–1962) came from that family. He was not the only Walser Federal Councillor. Joseph Escher, too (in office from 1950 to 1954) was a Walser from Simplon-Dorf. The Bodmers made a name for themselves in Zurich guild circles, in political life and in industry, specially as owners of a first-class silk manufacturing company whose domicile was moved to Milan at the beginning of the century. One descendant of the family, Johann Georg (1786–1864) worked in Germany and England as inventor of many ideas and industrial pioneer (his picture was shown on a Pro Patria stamp in his honour on the cen-

tenary of his death in 1964). His brother constructed the first steamer on the Lake of Constance, whilst another one was manager of the Mexican gold mines.

And with this, we finally come to the role the Walsers played as Swiss abroad. I have already mentioned their devotion in mercenary armies. Walsers settled abroad permanently very early, above all resulting from their visits to markets in Southern Germany and Upper Italy. Their field of activities then extended to Austria, Hungary, even to Russia. Later, we find them in North and South America. The lines can be followed exactly, for these families, in spite of their ability to adapt themselves to their new surroundings, remained attached to their homeland.

Much has been written about the Engadine confectioners abroad. The Walser pastry-cooks, too, deserve a mention, such as the families Gredig from Davos and Zinsli from the Safiental in

Hungary and Russia. Other Walser confectioners worked in Paris and England.

Johann Peter Hosang from Tschappina above Thusis made his fortune with his trading company in Bergamo. He left it for the benefit of the community in his homeland. Another philanthropist from the same region, Lorenz Allemann, worked as head of the cotton company of Planta & Co in Egypt.

In the 19th century, the Walsers made a name for themselves as hoteliers in the whole of Europe: the Borters from the Obergoms, the Enderlins from the little village of Stuervis am Falknis above Maienfeld, deserted today, but at one time the home of Heidi's Johanna Spyri who thus very nearly became a Walser.

Then there were the Seilers from Blitzingen and ahead of them all Cesar Ritz, hotelier of kings and king of hoteliers.

The family of Christian Ammeter from Isenfluh made unique history: In 1879, he emigrated to

The church of Bosco-Gurin



The settlement Platta in the Avers Valley

(Photos SNT0)



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Juf in the Grisons, the highest village of Switzerland (7038 ft. a. s. l.)

the Caucasus with his wife and four small children. He developed large dairies. But he and his sons lost everything during the Revolution. In 1929, the family decided to emigrate to Canada, Christian and his wife, eight sons and their families, all in all 79 people. In 1938, Christian died near Winnipeg at the age of 91. All the members of his large family had found a new and happy life there. We could fill pages with examples of Walsers abroad, but also with other aspects of their history and culture. It is regrettable how little is known of it. All too often, the Walsers are confused with the Waldensers, members of a Christian community in France and Lombardy, the Walisern, inhabitants of Wales, or simply with the Valaisans, the Walliser. I mentioned at the beginning how I got to know about the Walsers almost by accident. After having gone through the «Humanistische Gymnasium» of a large Swiss city, where we were told of the Botocudans on the Upper Orinoco, and the history and importance of the Ainus as original inhabitants of Japan was impressed on us, it is rather disgraceful that our Walsers were not found equally worthy of our attention at school. They would certainly have deserved it, for

their importance for our country extends much further than the regions inhabited by them. With their human qualities and progressive attitude, and above all with their volatile spirit, coupled with their appreciation of the value of tradition, they have contributed greatly to the strengthening of our democracy. Their economic realism and their intelligence, marked by experiencing nature in the mountains, has furthered in not a few cases the development of our industry, but also of our political institutions. With their tolerance and their great understanding of others, they have become models in our state which comprises several languages and several denominations. *Marcel Ney*

To vindicate my «Gymnasium», I have to say that Walser research had not got very far during my school years. It is to the merit of Paul Zinsli, Professor of language, literature and ethnology at Berne University, himself a Walser from the Safiental, who researched the world of the Walsers. He collected his findings in a 500-page book «Walser Volkstum», a work which will delight and interest every layman. Just recently, a very attractive illustrated book «Die Walser» was published, compiled by Georg Budmiger. It is full of excellent pictures and texts by several authors. And those who would like to read stories about the Walsers all over the world, would do well to read the book by Ludwig Imesch «Was die Walser erzählen». All these books are published by Huber, Frauenfeld.