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The Walser Ways

Once vital, now simply to charm

The Walser Ways were first travelled in the thirteenth century. That was the time when life in European cities was just beginning to bloom, when the cathedrals of Reims and Chartres were being built, when Dante was born and when the Swiss peasants around Lake Lucerne were fighting for their freedom...

Around the year 1000, a group of the Alemanni tribe arrived on the high plateau of the Goms in today's Canton Valais. This was the highest Alpine settlement and the first real attempt by the men of medieval times to learn the secrets of the mountain world. We know little about the way these people lived or what it was that pushed some of them, about two hundred years later, to leave their homes and wander through the huge Alpine region. A natural catastrophe perhaps, or a change in climate – or simply over-population. A vital role was played in those days by the feudal lords and their broad network of relationships throughout the Alpine region. These were interested in consolidating their rule, in getting more money from the produce of the soil and in controlling the Alpine passes. In exchange for their efforts to cultivate the inhospitable mountain soil, the wanderers from the Valais – who became known as the Walser – gradually won for themselves a whole series of special rights and freedoms. One was the right to dispose freely of their property, which meant that they could leave their worldly goods to their children or transfer it to other Walser. They also had their own courts and chose their own magistrates.

Discovered in the 19th century

This independence was the condition of living amongst the wild mountain fastnesses and surviving from the meagre fruit of the soil. For about two hundred years the Walser wandered from one Alpine region to another, from Valais to Piedmont in northern Italy, from there to the Grisons, later to the St. Gall uplands, through Liechtenstein and finally to Austrian Tirol and Vorarlberg, where around 1500 the most distant of them

finally settled down in the Little Walser Valley.

The Walser were then lost sight of for several centuries – and this was very good for them, for it is because of it that their culture, their architecture, their customs and their language have survived into the present. It was not until the mid-nineteenth century, with the gathering interest in the Alpine regions, that the Walser were rediscovered – in over 150 settlements scattered across 300 km.

But these tracks were not originally used for pleasure, nor for cultural or sporting reasons. For the Walser who lived in the highest mountain regions they were absolutely essential for daily life. These were the tracks along which they brought home the goods which they needed for their daily existence: flour and rice, salt and wine, linen and cotton... They also used the tracks to bring to market their own products: cheese and butter, and above all the cattle which they bred. An example: the people of Vals regularly travelled over the Valsler Mountain to the upper Rhine valley and then over the San Bernardino Pass to Bellinzona and Lugano.

For marriage and death

These Walser Ways were also used to create family relationships. A young man from Davos might marry a girl from the Schanfigg, a girl from Alagne would be courted by a peasant's son from Macugnaga, a muleteer from Splügen would find his happiness with a woman from Safier. These old tracks and paths also had an administrative sense, for many of the Alpine slopes and meadows were held in common by the Walser. Sometimes too the Walser Ways were ways of mourning; the bodies of the deceased were taken from one Walser settlement to another for burial. From Capello Monti the bodies of the dead were carried for four hours over the pass to holy burial ground in Rimella; and the same was true for those from Valsesia who crossed the Colle Valdobbia to earn their bread in Savoy and then had to be brought back when they died.

Passes at over 13,000 feet

The Walser Ways can be divided up into three categories, each with its own highly specific character. There were the high mountain passes from the Valais along the flanks of Monte Rosa



An ancient Walser Way crosses Monte Moro from Saas-Almagell to Piedmont. (Photo: Kurt Wanner)

to Italy. These could easily reach heights well above 13,000 feet; but most of them (the second category) were around 8,000 feet – as, for example, Monte Moro, the Albrun, the Turlo, the Fallerfurga and the Safierberg...

Then there were the paths of those amongst the Walser whose eyes were on the lowlands and whose high mountain ambitions were limited. Most of these are in the easterly regions: the track from Zillis to Obermatten, for example, or the much lower Duranna and Auenfeld passes, or the track around the Widderstein. But all these tracks had one thing in common: they existed to maintain connection and contact within this remarkable mountain world between men and women of the same kind, who spoke the same ancient language, who were marked by stillness and dignity, and whose hospitality was legendary. And if others wish to get some feeling of this strange world as it still exists today, they must bring some small contribution to it as well – something spiritual not material, an open mind, plenty of time, and a pinch of that pioneering spirit which has marked the Walsers for generation after generation down the centuries.

Kurt Wanner, Splügen (GR) ■