

Switzerland - land of castles

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BLONAY CASTLE

By courtesy of Swiss National Tourist Office.

SWITZERLAND — LAND OF CASTLES

By Prof. LINUS BIRCHLER

Swiss history begins with the heroic story of the foundation of the first league, with the "breaking of the castles" in Central Switzerland where the tyrant bailiffs, the Austrian governors, resided. The rebelling people of the mountain valleys then "broke" or took the castles of Zwing Uri, Landenberg near Sachseln, Schwanau, and Gessler's Castle near Küssnacht. The flames of these burning strongholds form the glorious aureole in the concluding scene of Schiller's "William Tell". And again castles were set ablaze when the Revolution of 1798 swept away the old "Helvetic Confederation" and the uprising farmers drove out the new bailiffs imposed by the cities of Berne, Soleure and others and who had taken residence in the mediæval castles renovated in baroque style.

A generation or two after this second "breaking of the castles" as the Romantic Movement spread over Europe — the Swiss too were seized by a sentimental passion for castles and mansions, witnesses of historic times. In spite of the Swiss people's traditional enmity against the "seats of tyrants" Switzerland must be regarded as an almost classical example for a land of castles. The greatly varied topography of the country (mountainous regions alternating with rocky landscapes, lake districts and plains) found its counterpart in the

territorial diversity of the Middle Ages when mighty feudal lords and barons as well as poor, predatory knights dwelt in these strong-holds. There are many types of castles to be found within the boundaries of our small country. We have primitive castles, not much more than fortified towers perched on unclimable rocks in the Italian part of Switzerland (Ticino) and the Canton of Grisons. In the lowlands of Aargovia and Basle, on the other hand, we find island castles reminiscent of France or Denmark. Some, of no apparent style, seem to have grown out of the rocks. Others are symmetrical constructions with rectangular or square courts guarded by corner towers, proof of Savoyard influence.

Typically Swiss are the fortified towns with a strong castle in the centre or in the highest part of the place. Thus the residence of the local baron towered above the walled-in dwellings of the burghers, as we may still see at Burgdorf, Thun, Rapperswil and in Neuchâtel. Similarly "with castles crowned" were Romont, Lenzburg, Gruyères, all three seats of mighty feudal families. At Sion the Cathedral of Valeria (the choir of which is decorated with a tin cornice like that of "Les Saintes Maries" en Provence) stands within the fortified zone of a castle. "With castles crowned" were even such tiny towns

as Sargans, Werdenberg, Nyon or Rue, Aarberg and Regensberg. In Coire, the bishop's castle still stands at the highest point of what was once a Roman castrum, and in Lausanne the fortified plateau is flanked by the Château at one end and the Cathedral at the other.

Quiet and solitude now reign in some of the castles which once upon a time knew the splendour of powerful feudal lords and are particularly noted for their history or architecture. Most picturesquely situated on Lake Geneva is the Castle of Chillon, built by the Counts of Savoy. In the deep dungeon of this imposing stronghold was confined Prior Bonivard, Byron's "Prisoner of Chillon". In Aargovia still stand the ruins of the Castle of Habsburg, the cradle of a dynasty of emperors. Not far from Zurich, on a wooded hill, is Kyburg Castle where in the chapel at times were kept the jewels, and regalia of the Holy Roman Empire, the Crown, the holy Book of Gospels and the Sword of State used in the coronation and the coronation robes. The finest castles from an artist's point of view are to be found in the French-speaking part of the country: Chillon, Vufflens, Champvent, Grandson. The Canton of Vaud as a matter of fact has no fewer than 107 châteaux and ruins of former strongholds. While by far the greatest number of Swiss castles were built on hills, there are also a few typical "water castles": Marschlins, Hagenwil and Bottmingen.

Not real castles, but related to them, were the fortified towns and the numerous "Letzis" of Switzerland, fortifications stretching right across a gorge or valley. A kind of "Westwall" of the Middle Ages is still the most imposing sight of Bellinzona, in the Ticino. Its three castles were devised to protect the town either against the Swiss descending from the Alps or against the Milanese coming up Lake Maggiore or over the Monte Ceneri. Remarkably well preserved and impressive examples of mediæval fortified towns are Estavayer and Morat. The latter saw one of the most valiant feats in Swiss history, the defence of the place by Adrian von Bubenberg against Duke Charles the Bold of Burgundy.

But the real paradise for lovers of old castles is the Canton of Grisons. In his masterly written book "Graubündner Burgen" Erwin Poeschel describes more than 250 castles and ruins in this largest and most diversified of Swiss Cantons. There are mighty fortifications like the Castles of Mesocco and Tarasp. Others are placed boldly on high, almost inaccessible rocks, like Ortenstein in the Domleschg valley. Italian and German influences merged in the planning of some of these strongholds. We know, for instance, that one of the military architects of the Republic of Florence was called upon to build one of the three castles in Bellinzona.

The Swiss Society for the Preservation of Castles, founded in 1927, groups all the friends of mediæval strongholds. It publishes an illustrated Bulletin and is preparing a voluminous publication "Die Burgen und Schlösser der Schweiz" (The Castles and Strongholds of Switzerland), to appear within a few years. The castles of every Canton will be described and illustrated in alphabetical order. Founder of the society is the architect Eugen Probst, today an old gentleman of over eighty. The new President is Dr. H. U. Schneider, director of the Swiss National Museum. Apart from the above-mentioned Swiss society there exists an "International Institute for Castles" (IBI) with a permanent office at Rapperswil.

(Press Service, Pro Helvetia Foundation, Zurich.)

RECENT DEATHS IN SWITZERLAND

- Prof. Felix Georgi (71), Basle, eminent neuro-psychiatrist, creator of the Basle centre of neurology.
- Dr. Max Husmann (77), Zurich, co-founder and chairman of the institute "Minerva" at which he was active for forty-seven years; founder of the institute "Montana" on the Zugerberg; mediator in the armistice negotiations in Upper Italy at the end of the war.
- Dr. iur. Max Wolff (72), Zurich, lawyer and judge; president of the Evangelical Church Synod of the Canton of Zurich from 1939 to 1947; member of the Cantonal Council for several years.
- Dr. Leone Airoidi (72), Lugano, lung specialist; founder of the "Dispensario Profilattico Antitubercolare" in Lugano and the "Ala Materna" at Rovio; active in several medical organisations.
- Dr. Max Meier (78), Basle, headmaster of the "Untere" and "Obere Realschule" and later of the "Realgymnasium"; member of the Basle Grand Council for six years and member of the Council for Education.
- Dr. Werner Bucher (67), Lucerne, well-known general practitioner, politician and sportsman.
- Dr. Hans Portmann (89), Escholzmatt, medical practitioner and public figure in the Entlebuch.
- Frau Nelly Schnyder-Zuercher (32), Muensingen, wife of the manager of the Cantonal Agricultural College Schwand-Muensingen and "Hausmutter" of the school.
- Eugène Charlet (81), Geneva, teacher and later deputy-headmaster of the Geneva "Gymnasium"; for twenty years Commune President of Plans-les-Ouates.
- Max Brem (62), Kempttal, head of the consumer service of Maggi A.G., for forty years in the firm's employment; vice-president of the "Club Kochender Männer" of Switzerland.
- Carl Gisler (80), Altdorf, hotel keeper, politician and member of the Council of the Uri Cantonal Bank since 1944. From 1940/41 in charge of Altdorf's civil defence.
- Madame Burgat-Maccabez (101), St. Aubin; celebrated the 77th wedding anniversary with her husband at the end of 1964.
- Aloys Auber (79), Geneva, manager of the Hôtel de la Paix; Knight of the French Order of Merit for Tourism and holder of other distinctions.
- Colonel Robert Carrupt (76), Sierre, former president of the Valais Cantonal Council; for twenty years with the Federal Topography in Berne as surveyor.
- Manfred Daepf (66), Wichtrach, farmer and politician; member of the Berne Grand Council.
- Frau Henriette Bollag-Piccard (103), Stein (Aargau), for many years active in charitable work as a doctor's wife; honorary citizen of Stein.
- Prof. Kurt Wiesinger (85), Lugano, former professor of machine construction at the ETH in Zurich from 1912 to 1949; expert on railways and locomotives, also of aeroplanes.
- Willy Luescher (73), Basle, former chief of a Basle private bank; treasurer of the Basle theatre administration.
- Dr. Armin Billeter (81), Schaffhausen, for many years chief surgeon of the Cantonal Hospital; interested in nature protection.

[A.T.S.]