

A cri de coeur from Altdorf

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A CRI DE COEUR FROM ALTDORF

(We mean to be a united people of brothers)
(Friedrich von Schiller, "William Tell")

In the year 1512 the "Uri Play of William Tell" was performed in the main square of Altdorf, capital of the Canton of Uri.

Since 1899 Friedrich von Schiller's "William Tell" has been produced at intervals at the same historical site of Altdorf. In time of peace and periods fraught with danger, the amateur actors of the Altdorf William Tell Players' Society aroused the enthusiasm of hundreds of thousands of spectators from at home and abroad. In 1925 the Society invested its personal resources to build their own William Tell Playhouse.

The William Tell players of Altdorf have continued to stand by their hero to this day. Now, however, the tradition of the Altdorf William Tell theatre is in serious jeopardy. If the future of the Festival is to be assured, the organisers will have to be able to rely on the solidarity and sponsorship of wide circles of the Swiss population and of the Society's numerous sympathisers abroad.

The William Tell Society shows

why this help is necessary and the manner in which it can be rendered.

The Society is certain that it will be able to count on the active support not only of the Swiss people but also of the countless William Tell admirers in foreign countries. Special mention is made of the fact that the Minister of the Interior of the Swiss Federal Government, Dr. Hans Hürlimann, has personally assumed the honorary patronage of the campaign.

THREE IMPORTANT REASONS WHY THE WILLIAM TELL FESTIVALS OF ALTDORF MUST GO ON

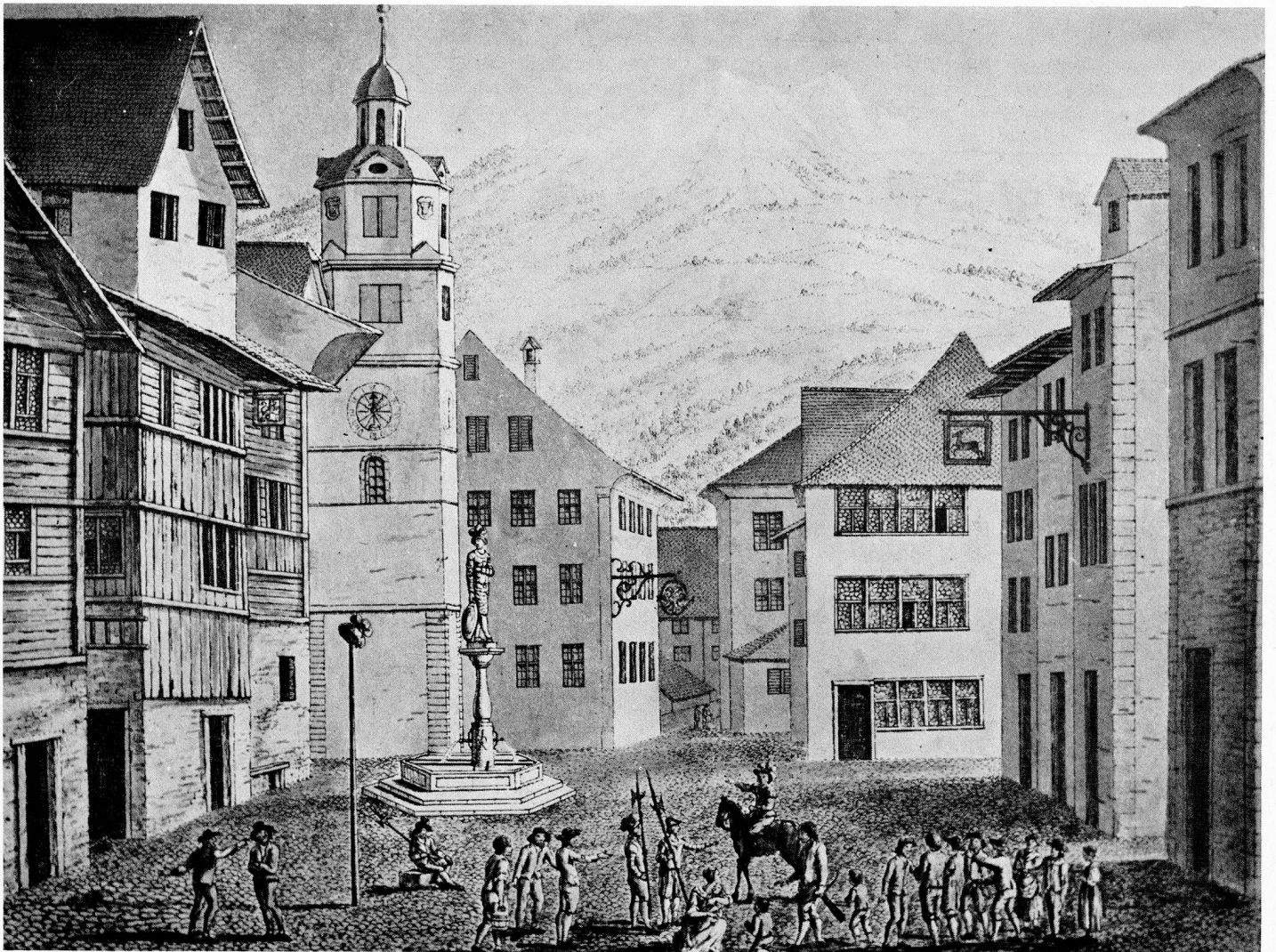
Considerations of an ideological nature clearly predominate. The Altdorf William Tell Players' Society is convinced that "their" William Tell plays will continue to meet a genuine need. This attitude has nothing to do whatever with drumbeating patriotism or the perpetuation of a historical illusion. Despite all the criticisms aimed at the play, William Tell is a symbol of the love of freedom and of freedom itself for hundreds of thousands of human beings and for many people personifies the hope that a William Tell of their own will one day bring them their

own freedom. As long as William Tell continues to be discussed in Switzerland in some form or other, freedom itself will remain a subject of topical debate, and this is really what matters in the long run.

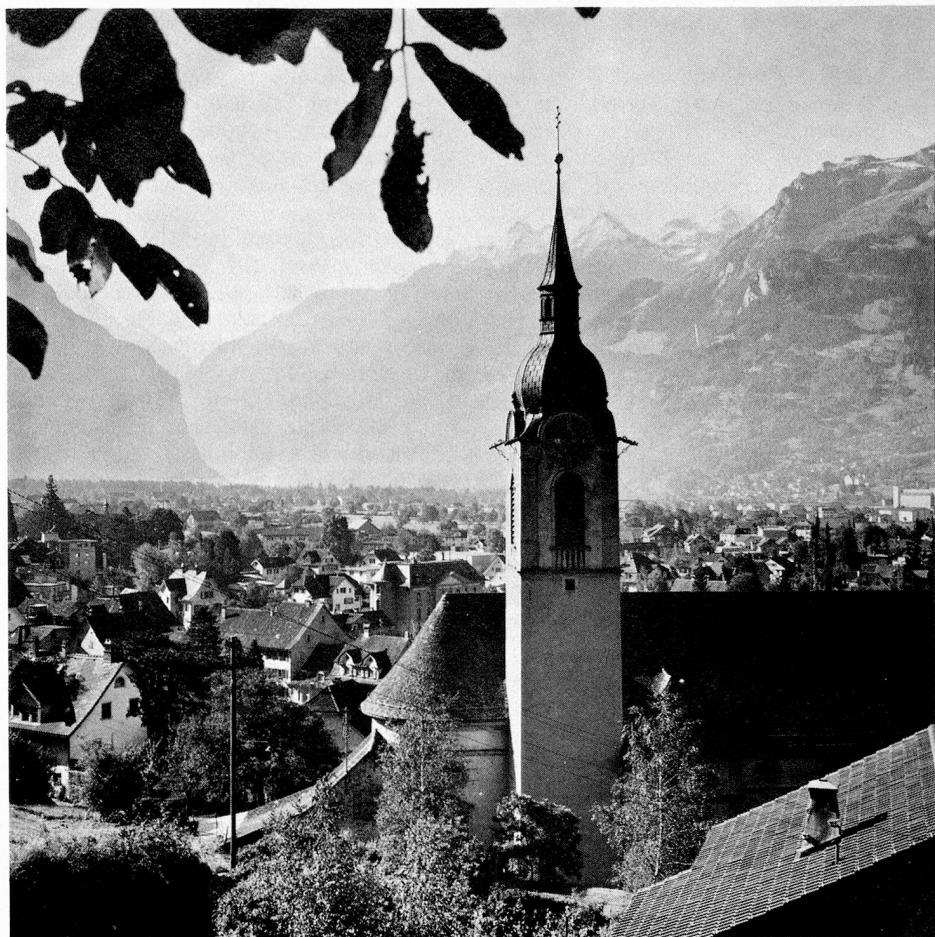
Furthermore, it would certainly be a grave mistake simply to abandon a theatrical tradition such as that which exists at Altdorf, since such traditions contribute to the cohesion of our society which today is in graver danger of disintegration than ever before. In this respect the Altdorf tradition may be an example also for other parts of our country and the world.

The second major reason speaking for the continuation of the William Tell Festivals is the fact that for the past 50 years the William Tell Playhouse has been a *genuine cultural centre*. The theatre has been available not only for the Tell plays but also for other theatrical as well as musical events, exhibitions, conventions and conferences of every kind. This fact has been a powerful stimulant to the creative cultural forces of the region and the Canton.

A real loss would result from the impossibility to carry on these tasks in



This old drawing of the apple shooting scene in Altdorf will give some idea of the antiquity of the heritage which the Altdorf Players want to preserve. Picture by courtesy of SNTO.



And this modern view of Altdorf will help bring our thoughts up to date. Picture by courtesy of SNTO.

future. An enquiry conducted in the communities and various organisations has disclosed, incidentally, that following an appropriate reconstruction of the Playhouse the demand for the use of the premises would again rise substantially.

Experts have confirmed that the restoration would again make available to the Canton of Uri a playhouse, concert and convention hall, meeting the needs of a region of the size of Uri. Accordingly, to relinquish the building or to put it to use for other purposes would not be justified.

If the William Tell Players' Society were to abandon its objective, a suitable replacement would have to be found sooner or later, at a cost which undoubtedly would be vastly greater.

A third weighty argument for the preservation of the William Tell Festivals is the *economic and touristic value* of the event not only for the region of Altdorf and the Canton of Uri, but for Central Switzerland and the country as a whole. We are incessantly being reminded – and rightly so – that considerable efforts are required to expand the tourist economy of the country and that even greater efforts will be needed in future.

Uri and Central Switzerland continue to be regarded as the fount of our freedom. All the criticisms of the William Tell legend will not be able to discourage the hundreds of thousands of people from every part of the world who come to visit the region every year. It is the task of the public and the tourist organi-

sations to take advantage of this fact. Continuation of the William Tell Festivals would be a first and major point on any agenda for the expansion of the tourist industry.

There is no doubt that in the past fifty years the William Tell Festivals have played an important economic role for the region of Altdorf and its wider surrounds. One may add that the construction of the Swiss motorway system, especially the connection along the left-hand lake shore to the Lucerne area, has greatly improve the accessibility of the Festival site which accordingly may be expected to grow as a tourist centre also in future.

WHY THE WILLIAM TELL PLAYHOUSE URGENTLY NEEDS RECONSTRUCTION

Who will finance the restoration?

The William Tell Playhouse, which is owned by the William Tell Players' Society of Altdorf, was built in 1925, directly adjacent to the former town hall. It has since been used not only for the performance of Schiller's "William Tell" but quite generally as a theatre, concert hall and convention centre serving the Altdorf area.

In the course of the decades the building has grown obsolete. The roof, sanitary and electrical installations, the stage fittings and equipment are in extremely poor condition today and official warnings have been issued by the health authorities and the fire brigade that further use of the building for its present purpose may be prohibited.

The janitor's apartment is virtually uninhabitable. The theatre seats, too, are in precarious condition and no longer suitable for use by the public. Since the situation has worsened rapidly in the past few years, there is serious doubt about the ability of the William Tell Playhouse to continue in its rôle.

The William Tell Players' Society of Altdorf therefore found itself confronted with the question of whether it would be possible to carry on the 75-year-old William Tell Festival tradition of Altdorf or whether alternative solutions could be found to perform the play. A study group was formed to analyse the problem and in December 1972 submitted a recommen-



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dation to the Society's General Meeting calling for the complete restoration of the Playhouse. The cost of the reconstruction, based on autumn 1973 prices, was estimated at Sw.Fr. 4,000,000. The basis of this recommendation is outlined in the attached summary of the Study Group's report.

The William Tell Player's Society unanimously approved the recommendation. *It thereby affirmed its willingness to carry on the William Tell Festival tradition and to do everything in its power to raise the funds necessary for the restoration of the building.*

It is obvious that the William Tell Players' Society will not be able to finance the project from its own resources and that it will have to count on the assistance of a wider public, both inside and outside the Canton of Uri.

The William Tell Players' Society is convinced that the necessary help will be forthcoming from circles in the Canton of Uri, in the rest of Switzerland and from abroad, since there is no doubt that the William Tell Festivals, performed at the William Tell Playhouse, will continue to be regarded as major cultural events.



A CHRONICLE OF THE WILLIAM TELL FESTIVALS

- 1512 First performance of the original "Uri Play of William Tell" at Altdorf, the oldest Government-sponsored festival of the Swiss Confederation. Based on the Swiss Chronicle composed by Petermann Etterlin of Lucerne it contained the first known pictorial presentation of William Tell's shooting the apple from the head of his son and is attributed to the schoolmaster Compars of Altdorf.
- 1648 A play describing the origins of the Confederation, distinguished by the actors' "exquisite garments" and dealing with the "extermination of the tyrants" and the deeds of William Tell, was performed at Altdorf.
- 1748 Altdorf revived its William Tell Festival tradition in the form of a festival described as "Flourishing Uri".
- 1802 Friedrich von Schiller, whose wife Charlotte had travelled through Switzerland as Fräulein von Lengefeld in 1783-84 and had brought home enduring impressions of the country, began his preliminary work on a William Tell drama. His source material included the chronicles by Etterlin, Stumpf, Tschudi and Johannes von Müller. In addition, he made use of reminiscences and travelogues, the "Natural History of Switzerland" by Scheuchzer, as well as the original William Tell play (printed in 1698). In 1803 he wrote the play in dramatic detail.
- 1804 Schiller completed his play. The first performance of "William Tell" took place at the Court Theatre of Weimar on 17th March. On 4th November of the same year the play was first produced in Lucerne under the direction of Vinzenz Weiss of Dresden. The performance was held at the Comedy Playhouse above the vestry of the Jesuit church. Immediately thereafter the same German touring company performed the Zürich première of the play. Critics objected to the severe pruning to which the piece had been subjected.
- 1859 The Cantons of Central Switzerland dedicated "Schiller's Rock" between Rütli and Treib to the "Bard of William Tell" as part of their celebration of Schiller's 100th birthday. On this occasion the Rütli scene was performed for the first time at the historical site.
- 1883 In June of that year the new "William Tell's Chapel" was consecrated near the "Tellsplatte". Ernst Stüchelberg created the frescoes for the Chapel.
- 1895 The William Tell Monument, created by the Solothurn sculptor Richard Kissling in Zürich, was unveiled in the main square of Altdorf.
- 1898 In response to a proposal submitted by Lieutenant-Colonel Alois Huber, merchant, future Governor and first actor of the rôle of William Tell, the Men's Choir of Altdorf unanimously decided to take the organisation of the William Tell Festivals at Altdorf in hand. On 18th October a people's meeting was called at the town hall, and the inhabitants of Altdorf were unanimous in agreeing that the venture should proceed.
- 1889 On 25th June "Association for William Tell Performances" opened with Schiller's "William Tell" in a 1200-seat "William Tell Playhouse", a wooden structure especially built for the purpose on the "Schützenmatte" (Archers' Field), today a sports stadium. The director was Gustav Thiess, of Vienna.
- In the years 1899, 1900, 1901, in 1904 and 1905, in 1908 and 1909 and for the last time in 1912 and 1913 a total of 91 performances were given, all of them very well attended. In the war year of 1915 the old William Tell Playhouse was torn down.
- 1924 On 21st April, 1924, the foundation stone was laid for the second Playhouse, designed by architects Kaiser and Bracher, of Zug, in Central Switzerland. On 21st July, 1925, the imposing new Playhouse was inaugurated, with the première directed by Otto Bosshard of Winterthur.
- 1939 In this year the William Tell company made a guest appearance in Budapest at the invitation of the Budapest city authorities. From 27th June to 2nd July the 160 William Tell actors aroused the enthusiasm of thousands of spectators with their performance on the vast open-air stage on Saint-Margaret's Island.
- 1941 On the occasion of the 650th Anniversary of the foundation of the Confederation of Switzerland the Altdorf company enacted the Rütli scene at the historical site of the nation's birth.
- 1956 Dr. Oskar Eberle of Thalwil and Einsiedeln was commissioned to modernize Schiller's play on the basis of the traditional material. The work included the construction of a revolving stage and the substitution of projected stage settings created by Max Bignens, of Basle and München, for the old sets. Dr. Eberle died shortly before the play opened in its new form.
- 1959 The Altdorf players devoted an extra playing season to Friedrich von Schiller, the classic, on the occasion of the bicentenary of the poet's death. The season was directed by Erwin Kohlund.
- 1962 In this year the William Tell Players' Society for the first time appointed a citizen of Uri to the post of Artistic Director in the person of Dr. Tino Arnold, a radio play specialist. On 7th July the festive opening performance took place in the presence of the Lord Mayor of Berlin, Dr. Franz Amrehn, to whom the President of the Altdorf municipality presented an antique cross-bow as a gift to the Free City of Berlin.
- 1965 The festive opening of the season was held on 3rd July. It was combined with the formal inauguration on the lake shore near Flüelen of the "Rütli Serment" sculpture by Werner Witschi, of Bollingen, Berne, which was at the National Exhibition at Lausanne the year before and had been presented to the Canton of Uri by the City of Lausanne as a gift.
- 1968 Erwin Kohlund was once again called to Altdorf to direct the William Tell Festivals. The tragedy of Czechoslovakia conveyed a note of cruel reality to the play.
- 1971 Official vernissage of the exhibition "William Tell drawings by the students of Uri".

Today the future of the William Tell Festivals at Altdorf is in grave jeopardy. The William Tell Playhouse built in 1925 is in urgent need of restoration.

The cost of this task will by far surpass the means of the William Tell Players' Society. The Society will therefore have to depend on the active succour of its friends.

"Should you need me for any resolute deed, call for Tell. He shall not fail you". How about you?