

The Swiss Alphorn in legend and in fact

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Verteilt auf anmutige Hügel, liegen die verschiedenen Stadtteile in saftiggrüne Wälder eingebettet. Dazu ist auch zu sagen, dass die Einwohner von Wellington sehr hilfsbereit und gastfreundlich sind. Auch und gera de einem Ortsfremden helfen sie und geben ihm die nötigen Tips, die das Leben einfacher gestalten. In dieser Beziehung kann ich allen Schweizern, die ich hier angetroffen habe, ein besonders gutes Zeugnis ausstellen. Meine Aufgabe wäre es ja, unsern Landsleuten zu helfen, bis jetzt ist das Umgekehrte der Fall gewesen. Ich hoffe aber, dass es mir möglich sein wird, allen Schweizern in Neuseeland ein guter Freund zu sein und dem Postenchef zu Helfen, seine nicht immer leichte Aufgabe zu erfüllen.

Wahrscheinlich hättet ihr gerne etwas von der Schweiz selbst gehört und was die Schweizer von ihren Landsleuten in Neuseeland Denken. Zum ersten ist Raum und Zeit zu kurz und der Stoff zu ausgedehnt, als dass er auf einer Seite behandelt werden könnte. Ihr habt ja hie und da Gelegenheit, etwas zu vernehmen und dies wird ja nicht die letzte Nummer der "Helvetia" sein, sodass sich noch weitere Chancen bieten werden über dieses Thema zu berichten. Vorläufig nimmt mich allerdings, - um einen geschwollenen Ausdruck zu gebrauchen - die "Amtstätigkeit" noch voll in Anspruch.

Zum zweiten ist zu berichten, dass die Schweizer zu Hause alle denken, in Neuseeland mus es schön sein (nicht zu unrecht). Sie wünschen, dass alle Eidgenossen die hier leben, ihre alte Heimat lieb behalten. Wenn unsere Bürger beim Auswandern gewöhnlich nicht viele materielle Güter mitnehmen können, so haben sie doch einen starken Charakter, einen gesunden Verstand und geschickte und fleissige Hände. Das ist eine Mitgift die für mehr als bare Münz bewertet werden kann und die Ausnahmen sind auch sehr selten, dass Eidgenossen nicht "ihren Mann stellen". So wünschen die Daheimgebliebenen, dass es auch den Neuseeland-schweizern recht gut geht, dass sie aber trotzdem und gerade deshalb ihrem Heimatlande die Treue bewahren.

Diesem Wunsch schliesse ich mich gerne an und grüsse Euch herzlichst

Ernst Fretz

Kanzler des
Schweizerischen Konsulats
Wellington

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THE SWISS ALPHORN IN LEGEND AND IN FACT.

Trying to explain the origin of the Swiss alphorn a pretty legend relates how a lonely young herdsman in the Alps wished constantly for something that might help him brighten the long hours of his solitude. One evening, after he was already in bed, he heard voices in the room below his sleeping abode. Peering down he perceived three strangers around the fireplace. In the huge kettle that always hung there one of the men was boiling a mixture.

Presently one of the nocturnal visitors went outside and strange sweet music began to float through the air. The herdsman listened spellbound, but all too soon the music stopped and the player rejoined his companions. "Come down" the three men now urged the youth in the loft, and trying to show himself fearless he promptly obeyed.

Amazing things then began to happen. The stranger tending the boiling mixture took one of the three glasses which stood on the table and filled it. The liquid was of a brilliant green color. He gave a rap with his dipper, then filled the second glass, the same appearing bright red. With another rap he filled the third glass and that fluid showed the transparency of pure crystal.

"Drink" urged the men. "The green liquid will make you victorious in many battles" promised the first. "The red beverage will bring you countless riches" enticed the second. "Neither glory nor riches can I give you" declared the third, "but I offer you the happiness of real music and my alphorn."

Without hesitation the youth drank the clear liquid. The visitors and the glasses vanished and the bewildered herdsman climbed back to his sleeping quarters. Recalling the strange happenings in the night he ran outdoors next morning and beheld, leaning against a tree, a wooden horn some six feet long. He placed it to his lips and soon found himself playing some familiar herdsman's tunes.

More matter of fact data on the alphorn indicates that it had its origin in Northern Asia. From there it migrated southward with nomadic tribes, then finally reached the Swiss alpine regions. According to Tacitus the Romans used horns of this type for signaling.

Historic records dealing with this now characteristic instrument of the alps are more definite from the 9th century on. In those early days, in the Bernese and Valaisan mountains, the alphorn reached a length of over 13 feet. In other sections, especially in Central Switzerland, where the Rigi and Mythen districts near Lucerne were its favorite haunts, the instrument was sometimes shortened by bending the upper part of the conical pipe to run parallel with the lower part. The average length of Swiss alphorns is now only six feet. Nevertheless, even these shorter instruments can be heard at $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours' distance.

Slender cembra pines or young firs furnish the wood preferred for alphorns. They are cut in two, length-wise, carefully hollowed out, then bound. The hooked end for the sound-hole is made of the root. At first the horn was covered with tree-bark, mostly of birches, or with hemp yarn soaked in tar or pitch. Later on roots of young fir trees, about as thick as a pencil, were used, also rattan cane, which, while excellent and attractive, proved, however, rather expensive. Today birch-rind or thin oakwood chips are generally used as protective materials.

Seeing that the octave scale of the alphorn is not complete, players have been advised not to attempt the rendition of entire songs on this instrument. Nevertheless, in spite of its limitations, the music of the alphorn in alpine regions is an unforgettable delight, especially when it is mingled with the sound of tinkling cowbells and joyous waterfalls.

Since the aesthetic effect of alphorn blowing depends not so much on the sound as it does on the echo, the instrument is most effective out-of-doors where it enjoys the advantage of open spaces. Interesting observations have been made regarding the quality of the echo. It has been found that the first echo usually retains the key of the original melody, while the second echo may be a quarter note lower and rhythmically less precise.

Alphorn melodies, although limited, have frequently found a place in the work of great composers. Outstanding examples are the beginning of the fourth movement in Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony; the prelude to Mozart's pastoral play "Bastien and Bastienne", composed in 1768; the beginning of the overture to Rossini's "William Tell"; also the respective passages in Meyerbeer's "Dinorah" and Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde". According to a research on the alphorn made by S. Elkan, Wagner, when composing this opera, had suggested that a special instrument should be made for the herdsman's horn, taking the Swiss alphorn as a model.

Good alphorn playing is undoubtedly an art, for it takes skill to acquire the lip technique necessary for producing the desired notes and for giving musical variety. While there is no complete record of alphorn artists in days gone by, a few outstanding players are mentioned in small chronicles. Thus the "Bermer Taschenbuch" of 1892-1894 remembers one Jakob Henzi of Chateau d'Oex who lived in the 16th century. He was the son of very poor people, but admirers of his alphorn music found a position for him as one of the guards of the Duke of Anjou in France.

In the 19th century there was a general revival of interest in Swiss folklore. As a result renewed attention was also focused on the alphorn. Thus Major Fr. von Mulinen arranged for a course of study in alphorn playing for young people, to be given in the Bernese Oberland by the composer Ferdinand F. Huber, a teacher at the Fellenberg School at Hofwyl. Huber accordingly spent yearly two weeks at Grindelwald and gave lessons on six alphorns. He was the first musician to attempt the tuning of several alphorns in the same pitch and to have alphorn melodies played in three parts.

Composer Huber's efforts evidently bore fruit. Since the middle of last century alpine festivals, with competitions in excellent alphorn playing, have become annual events in Switzerland.

The alphorn is without doubt the characteristic instrument of the Swiss Alps. Limited as its range is, its music, when floating and echoing through the wide spaces of the alps, has a magic of its own which fills the hearts of natives of the Swiss mountain regions with a strange tenderness and love for their homeland.

Marie Widmer.

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SWISS MODEL FOR U.S. ARMY.

Don Markel from the N.Y. Journal-American Washington Bureau writes March 25: Veterans of Foreign Wars experts on national defense have drafted a new peace-time training program patterned on the Swiss system.

The V.F.W. plan, in which the Swiss program has been modified to facilitate an expanded National Guard, will be presented to the national legislative committee of the organization.

Quick general approval is expected by V.F.W. officials who, for the past two years, have worked on development of a national preparedness program for submission to Congress.

Here are high lights of the V.F.W.'s plan:

American youth at the age of 18 would receive 60 to 80 days basic training in each of two consecutive summers. They would retain their civilian status and training would be under over-all civilian authority.

American trainees would become members of a newly created National Guard Reserve, as distinguished from the traditional National Guard, which would be retained.

V.F.W. would specify that National Guard reservists be absolved from any State service or duty to which regular National Guard units might be called, and they would have a continuous peace-time civilian status, similar to that of the peaceful but trained and prepared Swiss.

V.F.W. leaders who have been working on this plan feel that it is the most democratic that can be devised, declared James W. Cannon, V.F.W.'s general counsel.

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HOOVER PRAISES SWISS.

Geneva, March 26. Herbert Hoover praised Switzerland's food distribution system and care of war victimized children at a press conference here today.

"Never has so little a nation done so much for humanity in all history", said the former United States President, now chairman of the American commission investigating the European food situation.

"Switzerland has performed a gigantic task in most able fashion, not only in caring for children but also in caring for the great mass of refugees and soldiers who were prisoners of war.

"If all the world had a democracy so dedicated to peace", Hoover added, "world civilization would be two centuries ahead of where it is today."

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