

# Where Latin's still alive

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# WHERE LATIN'S STILL ALIVE

By W. J. GRANBERG

THIS MAY NOT be a fair selling point for teachers to use when pressuring students to pay more attention to Caesar's Gallic Wars, but the fact is that Latin is spoken and written today, deep in the Swiss Alps, by people who boast they are Romansh and want to stay so. Latin, or Romansh, is not as dead as some students wish it were, but certainly it is Europe's loneliest language. It is used by only 51,000 people, or a mere 1% of Switzerland's population.

The stronghold of these die-hard Latins is in the Rhaetian Mountains, among villages in the Vorder — or Rhine — and Engadine — or Inn — river valleys of the Grisons Canton. Samedan, as pleasant a Swiss village as a traveller could ask, may be said to be the twentieth-century headquarters for Latin, for it is the site of the research institute which was founded to study and preserve the language.

A Roman legionnaire of 15 B.C. would feel at home at Samedan, could he but drop in today to visit the region he conquered almost 2000 years ago. The legionnaires left behind them a little pocket of Vulgar Latin, a Ladin dialect that departs considerably from the literary Latin of Julius Caesar. Lest students

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scurry to Switzerland hoping to try their **amo, amas, amat** on villagers, it should be remembered that Romansh has been amalgamated with a regional Rhaetic base, although the dialect generally has been preserved quite faithfully. Samedan is only five miles down the road from St. Moritz, the ski resort, but slumbers virtually undisturbed by exuberant skiers who couldn't care less that within easy reach are folks reading the **Fögl Ladin**. More than 100 years old, this twice-weekly newspaper serves nine towns in the Engadine Valley, printed in a language so old it is a continuing tribute to Rome's legionnaires.

A pin-neat village of about 2000 inhabitants, Samedan sits at the foot of towering mountains overlooking a small valley skirted by the Inn River. There is an airfield below the town, frequented largely by glider enthusiasts who defy mountains to ride the thermal currents they promote. Those mountains offer unlimited hiking, while a string of lakes, the largest of which is St. Moritz, lure anglers. There is an eighteen-hole golf course for those who prefer less strenuous activity, or even **boccia**, an Italian version of outdoor bowling, which the priest at the church plays, welcoming competition as well as conversation.

The Romans had no easy time of it conquering what they called Rhaetia, the mountain-valley area in the Grisons Canton. The population there resisted the Romans so bravely that Horace wrote of them as a people "sworn to die for freedom". Pre-historically they were of Illyrian origin, a pastoral people fused with the Etruscans of Oriental source.

But no matter their bravery, they were defeated by the Romans, all males killed, and Chur occupied by the legionnaires. Rome made no attempt to colonise the area, but the troops left offspring and language behind them, as soldiers have a way of doing, and the result is Romansh which persists today, more akin to Latin than Italian.

Shortly after World War I, Italy launched a propaganda offensive in an effort to sell the idea that Romansh is an Italian dialect, but the Swiss of the Grisons would not stand for such nonsense. The Rhaeto-Romans set up such a howl that Italy gave up the idea of pirating a language. This defiant cry rang up from the Swiss Alps: "**Ni Talians, ni Tudais-chs! Rumanschs vulains restar!**" Translated from Europe's loneliest language, this determined resolve reads: "Neither Itaians, nor Germans! We want to remain Romansh!"

Jealously guarding their lonely tongue, Grisons villagers are joined in an aggressive programme to preserve it. Children are taught it during their first four years in school and oldsters speak it with pride at home and in shops. The Romansh language research centre is housed in the ancestral home of the Planta family at Samedan, built in 1593. Treasured here are about 4000 volumes in Romansh, some dating back to 1552.

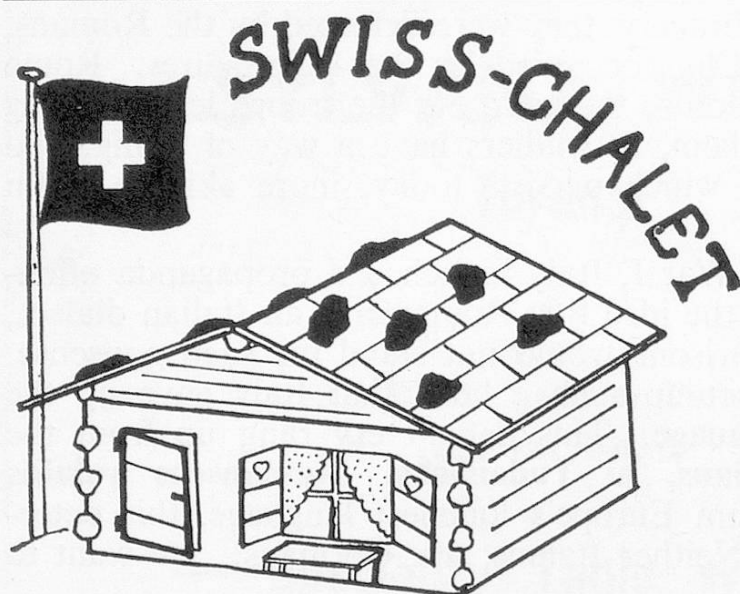


Some of the Plantas were diplomats and one of these was Joseph Planta who in 1775 carried word to London of the strange Romance language that persisted in his hometown.

It was Planta who argued that Romansh is identical with the archaic language of Gaul. There are those who admit he may have been near the truth, for they do see similarities between it and the most ancient French and provencal tongues. Be that as it may, people in the Grisons today are eager to preserve their historical language. Their slogan is: "**Tanter Rumanschs, be Rumansch**". Make what Latin of it as you may, freely translated it reads: "Among Rommansh people, nothing but Romansh".

Romansh survived for centuries before it became a written language and it wasn't until 1522 that the first book appeared, with an alphabet appended. Church leaders stimulated printing in this purely regional language and certainly gave its survival effort an impetus. There is no denying the fact, however, that the Ladin dialect did become sullied, influenced heavily by both Italian and German as people of those nationalities pushed into the Grisons.

Actually, early Romansh writers themselves helped alloy the language by adding Italian words and grammatical constructions in what they termed an effort to "civilise" it, something current adherents to the tongue deplore. And if the truth were known, those in the Engadine once were a little reluctant, if not down-



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right ashamed, to admit their language to public ears and use. When the postal system was organised in the Nineteenth Century they meekly permitted Germanised and Italianised versions of village names to be used. Today, however, legitimate Romansh place names are being restored officially.

If history of the doughty Grisons people means anything, Romansh will persist. The Swiss take kindly to language differences, believing that nationality depends upon a common bond as a nation, rather than on a common language. Of Switzerland's 5,429,000 people, 72% speak German, 21% French, 6% Italian, and 1% Romansh. When in 1938 the mountain people asked their language be given national status, more than 90% of the electorate voted "yes" in the largest affirmative vote cast on any question in Swiss history.

Explaining this attitude of his people, Georg Thurer wrote: ". . . the Confederation attaches more value to freedom than to unity of language. Indeed, the people of Switzerland are deeply attached to this multiplicity of language, for it lends variety to life. . . . This small, neutral country has proven that, given good will, understanding, welfare and loyalty are not only possible among people speaking different languages, but that these languages themselves mean an enrichment of life".

Within the domain of Romansh itself there are minor regional differences in the upper and lower Engadine valleys, and between the Ladin of the Engadine and Surselvan of the upper Vorder-Rhein valley. These are not great, however.

\* \* \*

Another note on the Romansh language also goes back to the Romans and says:

In spite of the Romans being in the majority at first, the Romansh language was not able to take a hold as the official language, and the reason for this was on the one hand its late standardisation as a written language (16th/17th century) and then the already evident signs of separation in many languages. Even the use of usual Romansh in local institutions was not able to help any more.

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"JUST IMAGINE, a gipsy has told my daughter that she would marry and have twins".

"Did it really come true, Mrs Meier?" asks the neighbour.

"Everything, but the wedding", says Mrs Meier.

AN ELEPHANT and a mouse go to the pictures together. Up to half-time the mouse sits behind the elephant, and during the interval they change seats. After a while the mouse turns round and says to the elephant: "Do you notice it too, that one sees precious little from your seat?" —Nebelspalter.