

# The legend of William (Wilhelm) Tell

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# Swiss National Day

## 1st of August Celebrations

*As many of us are getting ready for Swiss National Day celebrations in various places and ways around the country, it is again time to reflect on what it is all about.*

The origin of the Swiss Confederation (Alliance) is historically understood to be the outcome of an oath of mutual support sworn between the three "original cantons" of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden in 1291.

This event followed the death of the German Emperor, Rudolf of Habsburg. There was concern that his successor might try to take away the customary rights and freedoms previously granted by the Emperor.

**We wish you all enjoyable celebrations!**

## The legend of William (Wilhelm) Tell

At a time soon after the opening of the Gotthard Pass, when the Habsburg emperors of Vienna sought to control Uri and thus control trans-Alpine trade, a new bailiff (Vogt), Hermann Gessler, was despatched to Altdorf. The proud mountain folk of Uri had already joined with their neighbours from Schwyz and Unterwalden at Rütli in pledging to resist the Austrians' cruel oppression.

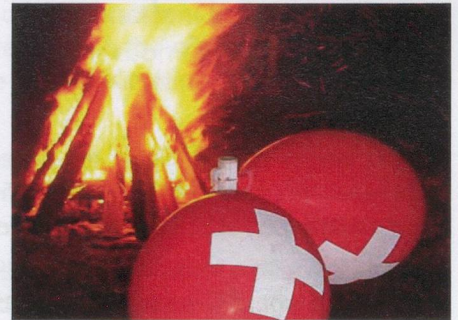
When Gessler raised a pole in the central square of Altdorf and perched his hat on the top, commanding all who passed before it to bow in respect, it was the last straw. William (Wilhelm) Tell, a countryman from nearby Buerglen, either hadn't heard about Gessler's command or chose to ignore it; whichever, he walked past the hat without bowing.

Gessler seized Tell, who was well known as a marksman and set him a challenge. He ordered him to shoot an apple off his son's head with his crossbow; if Tell was successful, he would be released, but if he failed or refused, both he and his son (Walter) would die.

The oath took place on the Rütli meadow by Seelisberg high above Lake Lucerne, which has since become a symbol of Swiss freedom.

Whether in remembrance of this event, or just because it is fun, every Swiss commune now lights its own bonfire and sets off fireworks, and children parade through the streets with paper lanterns - often decorated with the Swiss cross or the symbols of the cantons - and people light candles in their windows.

The children love to light their Bengal matches (bengalische Zündhölzli) and draw some fancy figures into the air.



Sources: [www.swissworld.org](http://www.swissworld.org),  
[www.swiss.org.au](http://www.swiss.org.au)

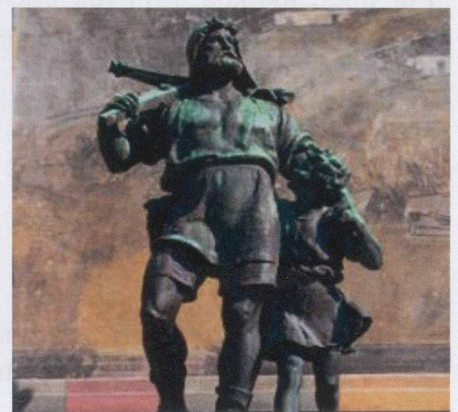
The boy's hands were tied. Tell put one arrow in his quiver and another in his crossbow, took aim, and shot the apple clean off his son's head. Gessler was impressed and infuriated - and then asked what the second arrow was for.

Tell looked the tyrant in the eye and replied that if the first arrow had struck the child, the second would have been for Gessler. For such impertinence, Tell was arrested and sentenced to lifelong imprisonment in the dungeons of Gessler's castle at Kuessnacht, northeast of Luzern.

During the long boat journey, a violent storm arose on the lake, and the oarsmen - unfamiliar with the lake - begged with Gessler to release Tell so that he could steer them to safety. Gessler acceded.

Tell cannily manoeuvred the boat close to the shore, then leapt to freedom, landing on a flat rock (the Tellsplatte) and simultaneously pushing the boat back into the stormy waters.

Determined to see his task through and use the second arrow, Tell hurried to Kuessnacht. As Gessler and his party walked along on a dark lane called Hohlegasse on their way to the castle, Tell leapt out, shot a bolt into the tyrant's heart and melted back into the woods to return to Uri. His comrades were inspired by Tell's act of bravery to throw off the yoke of Habsburg oppression in their homeland, and to remain forever free.



William Tell and his son Walter  
Source: [www.swissworld.org](http://www.swissworld.org)

Contributed by Adrian Blaser