

# Switzerland's fourth language : rhaeto-romanian

Autor(en): **McKechnie, Alexander**

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## SWITZERLAND'S FOURTH LANGUAGE.

### Rhaeto-Romanic.

By ALEXANDER McKECHNIE.

*The following article is reprinted from the June issue of the "CHAMBERS JOURNAL" by the courtesy of the Editor.*

A recent convalescence in the Engadine has introduced to me the fourth national language of the polyglot Swiss nation, namely, Rhaeto-Romanic. This is spoken, in two dialects called Ladin and Romansch, by about 45,000 people in Switzerland, by 12,000 in Austria, and by others in Friuli (Italy).

The Rhaetians — I presume a Celtic tribe — were conquered by the Romans in A.D. 15, and they adopted the language of their conquerors, which they still speak in a comparatively pure form. As a matter of interest, I was told that the only remaining Celtic word in the vocabulary was the word for a wood, i.e. 'god' (Brythonic 'coed').

From the national point of view it is indeed a sign of the racial and linguistic impartiality of the Swiss that for the last twenty years the language of a virtually purely agricultural community has been placed on the same level as that of the Swiss-German, French, and Italian speaking members of the rest of the Swiss Confederation, and that, irrespective of the parental language, all Swiss children (civil servants' children in particular) living in the Grisons are taught Romansch from the kindergarten stage, as well as German (and later, of course, French).

For these 45,000 Swiss there is a flourishing Press, and many books are printed in Ladin (the dialect around St. Moritz) and Romansch. The most attractive children's book I have ever seen — and bought — has recently been published in both dialects. This deals with the trials and troubles of young 'Oursins,' who wants to get a really big cow-bell for the 'Chalanda-marz' (first of March), when the little boys dress up and ring in the spring. For those who pride themselves upon their Latin, the first four lines of this delightful poem in its Ladin text may be of interest:

Sue ot in las muntagnas blovas,  
Dinuonder vegnan gio las ovas,  
Lo ais uen pitschen miser vih  
Al pe dad uen superbi spih.

(Up high in the blue mountains,  
Whence come down the sheep,  
Is placed a wretched little hamlet  
At the foot of a superb mountain-crest.)

Encouraged by the Swiss Government, and controlled by the Lia Rumantscha/Ligia Romantscha, at the Ladin helm of which stands young, enthusiastic Doctor Pult of the Chesa Planta (a magnificent house and museum once belonging to the de Salis family), the ancient language of Rome still proudly resounds around the majestic peaks of the Engadine, and even in the streets of St. Moritz!

One of the earliest books in Romansch was a translation of the Bible, which was dedicated to George I. — Defender of the (Protestant) Faith. A very fine publication it is, too, by one of the Planta family. When Dr. Pult showed it to me with its (English) dedication, he was a little surprised at the uproarious mirth of a descendant of the supporters of the 1715 rebellion. 'Why do you laugh?' he asked. 'Because George I. from Hanover could never speak English,' said the Jacobite descendant, 'let alone read it!'

The most celebrated son of the Engadine in English letters was Joseph Planta (1744-1827), born at Castasegna (Grisons). His father, the Reverend Andrew Planta, resided in England from 1752 as minister of the German Reformed Church in London. Joseph Planta succeeded his father in 1773 as assistant-librarian in the British Museum, and in 1776 obtained the keepership of MSS. in the Museum. From 1799 to 1827 he was a principal librarian. In 1776 he wrote 'An Account of the Romansch Language.' He was a personal friend of Dr. Johnson.

And so, reader, when you next think of a holiday in St. Moritz, think also of the heroic mountain race who live in the valleys around that most cosmopolitan of towns, and who maintain pure and undefiled the vernacular of the legions of the 'Pax Romana.'

## SWISS YODLERS TO COMPETE AT THE EISTEDDFOD IN WALES.

The Bernese Yodler Club, numbering about twenty members, has arrived in England, and will take part in the famous Eisteddfod which is held in Wales between the 15th and 20th of this month. Amongst the foreign competitors are choirs from Ireland, Spain, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Sweden and Turkey.

It is the first time that a Swiss choir is competing at this historical festival. The choir was accorded 4th place, and Fritz Aergerter (solo) 2nd place in the competition.

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