

The Beresina Song

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THE BERESINA SONG.

Unser Leben gleicht der Reise
Eines Wandrers in der Nacht.
Jeder hat auf seinem Gleise
Vieles, was ihm Kummer macht.

Aber unerwartet schwindet
Vor uns Nacht und Dunkelkeit,
Und der Schwergedruecke findet
Linderung in seinem Leid.

Darum lasst uns weiter gehen,
Weichet nicht versagt zurueck.
Hinter jenen fernen Hoehen
Wartet unser noch ein Glueck.

Mutig, mutig, liebe Brueder,
Gebt die bangen Sorgen auf.
Morgen geht die Sonn' schon wieder
Freundlich an dem Himmel auf.

This is, so far as can be ascertained, the authentic text of the *Beresina Lied*, so-called because it was on the banks of the Beresina that it was sung by the officers commanding the Swiss regiments in the rear-guard of Napoleon's ill-starred army when in 1812 it was in full retreat from Moscow.

These men formed part of the Swiss levies which, under the military articles imposed on Switzerland by Napoleon's Act of Mediation, had been incorporated in the French army. Out of ten or twelve thousand men serving in the Russian campaign barely a thousand were to see the homeland again, the rest perished on the battlefields and the frozen steppes of Russia.

On the Swiss division, already decimated, its men exhausted, hungry and cold, fell the duty and the brunt of covering the passage of the Beresina river. Under the eyes of the Emperor Napoleon himself, the sappers, amongst whom there were a number of Ticinese, working up to their necks in the icy water, constructed a pontoon bridge. Many were swept away and drowned, but by nightfall on the 26th November the bridge was completed and the demoralised, frost-bitten and starving rabble that had once been the much-vaunted, invincible *grande armée*, began the crossing. Meantime a Russian army, 40,000 strong, was approaching with no more than 1,600 Swiss troops to hold it off. Of these, only 300 survived the battle, most of them wounded.

A first-hand account of the battle and the association the *Beresina Lied* has with it, is found in the

memoirs of Lieut. Thomas Legler, a native of Dornhaus (Glarus) and one of the few Swiss officers that survived the battle in his *Denkwürdigkeiten aus dem russischen Feldzug*, he writes: "On the morning of the 28th November it began to snow. It was about half past seven as I walked up and down the road with Commandant Blattmann (from Zug). He spoke to me of the song "*Unser Leben gleicht der Reise*" which I had often sung in the past and was my favourite. Blattmann also liked it and asked me would I sing it to him once more. I did so at once and when I had finished he said with a heavy sigh "Yes, Legler, these are indeed beautiful words". Presently other officers joined us and we passed this morning hour in song and conversation. It was nine o'clock when suddenly a cannon-ball flew close over our heads with an infernal noise.

This was the beginning of the battle of the Beresina, in which Blattmann was killed. Little more is known of the episode except that the text and the melody of the song have come down to us. When and by whom they were written and composed is not known.

It is not great poetry, but it has the charm of moving simplicity and the poignancy of the circumstances in which it became famous. Several French translations exist in some of which liberties have been taken with the original text.

As an adequate English rendering we would suggest the following:—

Life is like a wanderer's progress,
Travelling when the sun has set;
And our journey through the darkness
Is with many cares beset.

But when darkness has departed
And the dawn has brought relief,
He who's sad and heavy-hearted
Will find solace to his grief.

Onward then, let none be falling
Back in timid fearfulness,
See, the distant hills are calling
And beyond lies happiness.

Courage, brothers, gather courage!
Lay aside your woes, your pain,
For to-morrow on your voyage
Will the sun shine once again.

J.J.F.S.

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