

A centre of raeto-romanian culture in the Engadine

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A CENTRE OF RAETO-ROMANIC CULTURE IN THE ENGADINE.

Raeto-Romance, the least known of Switzerland's four national languages, still exists in a few mountain valleys of the Grisons from the St. Gotthard to the frontiers of Tyrol. It is the only exclusively Alpine language, and leads a solitary existence between the German-speaking culture in the north and the Italian-speaking in the south.

In summer 1946, a research institute was founded in the Engadine for the study and promotion of the Raeto-Romance language and culture. The ancient Planta family of Samedan (the chief place of the Upper Engadine, near St. Moritz) has given its splendid ancestral home there for this purpose, as the Planta Foundation. This "Planta House" possesses a valuable library and a collection of MSS, which is open for research. Raeto-Romantic literature which comprises some 4,000 works dating from 1552 to the present, is being collected here as far as possible. Works of reference such as dictionaries, grammars, textbooks, etc., together with the latest publications, are kept in a cheerful reading room. They are intended to stimulate the inhabitants to make use of them, and to give visitors an impression of the Romance peoples of the Grisons. Cultural information about Romance is likewise imparted, and in the beautiful rooms of the house are held meetings, congresses and courses on Raeto-Romantic culture.

In the Raeto-Romance library are several documents connected with English cultural circles. The first complete edition of the Bible in Raeto-Romantic, printed in Coire in 1718, contains a four-page dedication to King George 1 of England, who contributed 50 guineas to the cost of this expensive Bible. By a curious chance the first article on the Raeto-Romance language was written in English and published in London: this is a paper read by Joseph Planta of the Engadine (who later became Director and Principal Librarian of the British Museum) to the Royal Society on 10 November, 1775, entitled "An Account of the Romansch Language". The portrait of Joseph Planta which hangs in the Board Room of the British Museum inspired the Raeto-Romantic writer Selina Chönz to write an interesting novelette, dealing with the life in English surroundings of a native of the Engadine. In spite of the distance from English cultural circles, several works by English and American writers including Shakespeare, Burns, Thomas Moore, Byron, Longfellow, Tennyson, Dickens,

Walt Whitman, Francis Thompson and Sara Teasdale have been translated into Raeto-Romance, besides English and Irish folk songs.

Conversely, poems by Raeto-Romance writers have been translated into English. It is the great merit of Mildred Elizabeth Maxfield, an American, to have opened the garden of Raeto-Romance poets to Americans and English in her excellent thesis, "Studies in Modern Romansh Poetry in the Engadine".

For a long time there were people who saw the Raeto-Romance language as already marching in the procession of the dead. It is true that this Alpine language has been more or less relegated to the background by the development of tourism and penetration by German — and Italian-speaking settlers. Yet the desire has always persisted to maintain this interesting language, and in 1938 the whole of the Swiss people accepted Raeto-Romance as the fourth national language, thus giving voice to this wish that it should not die out, even if spoken only by 45,000 Swiss. In recent years the "Lia Rumantsche" has by great efforts issued modern dictionaries, grammars and schoolbooks and has promoted literary production in recent times it has established Raeto-Romantic infants' schools in the districts between the Surselva and the Engadine where the tongue is in most danger with the object of thoroughly assimilating children speaking other languages. This practical measure has turned out to be highly efficacious. The child will decide the future of the language.

The institution in the "Planta House" is not intended to be a mere dry museum of Raeto-Romantic cultural treasures, but a "smithy and forge" on which to work for the maintenance and development of Raeto-Romance.



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