

Further light on the Beresina song

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1956)**

Heft 1267

PDF erstellt am: **08.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-687665>

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FURTHER LIGHT ON THE BERESINA SONG.

In January 1952 we published a short article on the Beresina song and the circumstances that made it famous. It was sung, as we know from Lieut. Thomas Legler's memoirs (*Denkwürdigkeiten aus dem russischen Feldzug*) on the morning of the battle in which the Swiss regiments in Napoleon's army fought a rearguard action against vastly superior Russian forces, thereby allowing the stricken *Grande armée* to cross the river in its retreat from Moscow.

At the time the 1952 article appeared it was not known when and by whom the song was written and the melody composed. Today this obscurity is cleared up thanks to the patient and painstaking researches undertaken by Max Wetterwald, a Swiss Doctor from Bâle. The result of his labours is embodied in a monograph published in the *Schweiz. Archiv für Volkskunde, Band 51 (1955)* and recently issued as a separate brochure of 30 pages under the title *Der Text des Beresinaliedes und seine Uebersetzungen*.

Dr. Wetterwald has discovered that neither the song nor the melody is of Swiss origin. The author of the song was a hitherto unknown German poet named Ludwig Giseke (1756-1832). His poem, called *Die Nachtreise* appeared in 1792 in the *Göttinger Musenalmanach*. It consisted of ten stanzas but only the last four became the Beresina song. It was set to music in 1798 by one Friedrich Wilkes, also a German. Another tune was composed later by the Erfurt musician Johann Immanuel Müller; the German words of the song remained unchanged. Numerous translations exist in English, French, Italian, Spanish, in Raeto-Romansch and even one in Hebrew.

Lieut. Legler, one of the very few Swiss officers to survive the Russian Campaign returned to his native Glarus and there married in 1813. He had been promoted to captain but when, after the final defeat of Napoleon, peace was established in Europe, Legler's military career came to an end. He could not, however, settle down to civilian life. Soldiering was in his blood and he took service in Holland. There, in command of a battalion of the Dutch army, he died from heart failure in 1835. Thirty years later his son Gottfried Heinrich submitted his father's memoirs, the *Denkwürdigkeiten*, to the Historical Society of the Canton Glarus and, in 1868, arranged for their publication.

All these facts and much other data relating to the Beresina song and to the hardships endured by the Swiss troops serving in Napoleon's armies form the substance of Dr. Wetterwald's carefully documented study. They have been collected, not without difficulty, from every likely source. It is an interesting, dramatic story and one that had not been fully told until Dr. Wetterwald's researches were completed.

We can but offer Dr. Wetterwald our admiration and praise for the unremitting industry and the enthusiasm with which he has performed his self-imposed task.

J.J.F.S.