

# On the origin of the "Schwyzer" and "Oberhasler"

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## SCHWEIZERBUND (Swiss Club)

A very successful social evening was held once again at the "Edge-warebury Country Club" at Elstree on Friday, 30th July. Whilst one was encouraged to gather on the garden-terrace for drinks by the warm summer temperature, an excellent meal was served afterwards in the restaurant of this old-world manor house.

Among the 37 members and friends, the President, Mr. A. Berti, paid a special tribute to Monsieur and Madame Charles Abegglen, who are shortly to leave London. Monsieur Abegglen, Vice-Consul at the Swiss Embassy, needs no introduction. He and his charming wife have been regular participants in all the Club's functions, and their departure will mean a great loss to the "Schweizerbund".

As has become traditional in the "Schweizerbund", sing-song reigned following the Dinner, and only too soon it was time to bid farewell to the magnificent house and grounds.

J.S.

### ON THE ORIGIN OF THE "SCHWYZER" AND "OBERHASLER"

One used to be taught at school that the forefathers of the *Schwyz* and *Hasli Valley* people came from the north, from Sweden, to escape famine during the Dark Ages and settled in Central Switzerland. Just how true is this story?

The name "*Schwyz*" is usually said to be originating from the Court of Suito, an Alamanni tribal chief. Due to his prestige, he became ruler of *Schwyz* and neighbouring valleys. There is practically no confirmation of such an Alamanni settlement. Lack of data in a people's history favour the spread of legends, which in turn become the folk tales of today. Sources of such tales—in this case the "northern origin"—are not taken out of the blue. On the contrary, they arise from similar well-known tales about the origin of other peoples. Identical tales concerning the origin of the Goth and Langobard peoples can be quoted. The belief that the *Schwyz* and neighbouring *Oberhasli Valley* dwellers came from the north would never have spread, had some original tales not been set down in writing. The historian Heinrich von Gundelfingen (1445-1490) supported his arguments with papers of the Zurcher Canon Felix Hemmerli ("*De nobilitate et rusticate*"—written about 1448-1450). Thus, a written report came into being on the

origin of the *Schwyz*. A piece of history handed down in many forms from generation to generation took its place among the famous deeds of the people.

On the basis of various Latin and German manuscripts of the 15th and 16th centuries, the chronicles attributed to Gundelfingen were critically edited by Albert Bruckner in 1961. Some 6,000 Swedes and 1,200 East Fresians reportedly headed up the Rhine Valley. After fighting the French, they settled around the "Fractus mons" (Pilatus), with the permission of Rudolf von Habsburg. The Swedish leader was *Swytherus*, who gave the people his name, while the Oberhasli people are supposed to have derived their name from the Fresian town of Hasnis.

Italian origins are also mentioned. The Swedes supported Pope Zosimus, the West Gothic King Alarich and Emperor Theodosius around 400 A.D. against the heathen Eugenius. It is said that the *Swytherus* warriors were awarded for their historic deeds the "freedom of the empire" and a red flag with cross. In turn, the Hasli people were granted "freedom of the empire" and a black eagle (their shield motive) on the empire's flag. The importance attached to this chronicle for a long time is illustrated by two examples. In 1531, the *Schwyz* region decided that all inhabitants must unite in prayer in memory of the famine and emigration from Sweden. One hundred years later, the delegate of the King of Sweden offered the *Schwyz* at the Diet of Baden an alliance in view of their identical origin. In 1828 the Swede Graf Axel Emil Wirsén tried to prove the Swedish origin of the *Schwyz* in his study "*De colonia Suecorum in Helvetiam deducta*". The Swiss historian Aegidius Tschudi (1505-1572) had already strongly refuted this theory as a "fairy tale". Intensive research carried out in the 19th century banned the origin theory to the realm of the historical pilgrims' tale, along with the Wilhelm Tell story.

*Schwyz* and *Hasli Valley* people are of Alamanni descent. Following the treks of the German invasion during the period of the migration of nations, they settled in Switzerland. However, it is not at all certain from which part of the north or north-east they came. The first settlers most likely brought a colourful collection of tales with them, resembling those they left behind. For example, the Tell apple and arrow motive is also found in many northern tales. Such saga built the basis for the origin theory, which is time again corroborated in similar tales of other tribes.

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