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# The Swiss Observer

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## THE ORIGINS OF ROMANSCH

The Retho-Romanic language is still spoken today in the Rhenish valleys of the Grisons in the Engadine and the Val Müstair. Before the invasion of the Alemannians and Bavarians, it was spoken throughout Raetia Prima (the actual area covered by the Grisons), in Val Venosta, in the upper Inn Valley, in the Vorarlberg and the Alemanic regions situated to the right of a line joining Disentis and Romanshorn. It was also spoken in parts of Raetia Secunda (Wurtenberg and north of Ratisbonne, Augsburg and the areas to the north-east, near to the sour merging of the Danube and the Inn). Idioms closely related with the surviving neo-Latin languages of the Grisons are still spoken in the upper Dolomite valleys.

### Birth of Retho-Romanisch

Before the conquest of Raetia by Drusus and Tiberius in 15 B.C., the language spoken in the mountains of actual Switzerland was ancient Raetian. Very little is known of this language, but it is thought to have had common traits with Lepontin and Veneto-Illyrian, which like Latin and Greek, have Indo-European roots.

When the warlike Raetian tribes had been subdued, the popular Latin spoken by the Roman occupant was mingled with the vernacular Celtic-tainted Raetian. The result, helped by the growing influence of Christianity, was a new kind of provincial Latin which gave birth to a new and picturesque language, Retho-Romanisch. Documents written over a thousand years ago show that the original Retho-Romanic idioms bore close resemblance to the ancient French spoken during the same period. Since Retho-Romanisch never was the official language of a central state, it became differentiated in the course of time into a series of separate dialects.

It was only in the 16th Century that the need for a written language, to be used in the service of the new

Reformed religion, became felt. Scholars then began to write books and to develop the grammar and spelling of Romanisch. They translated the New Testament and the psalms, and created hymns in the idiom of their valleys. The first texts were written in the Romanisch spoken in the Engadines (Ladin). A few decades later, the written word came to the Rhenish Valleys.

Retho-Romanisch thus came to be splintered into a variety of written languages. This process became inevitable after the loss of a Romanic cultural centre, namely the switching to German of Chur in the 15th Century, despite serious efforts to unify the traditional languages.

### Less than one per cent of the Swiss population

There are today four or five written languages in the Grisons alone: the Sursilvan (Upper Rhine), the Engadine Romansch (with the variants spoken respectively in Val Müstair, Lower Engadine and Upper Engadine); the Sutsilvan (Schams and Domleschg) and the Surmiran (Oberhalbstein and Val Albula). Each of these languages encompass a number of dialects and serve as a basis for primary and secondary school textbooks. According to the latest census, 50,000 Swiss today speak Retho-Romanisch, which corresponds to 0.8 per cent of the population of our country. Over 2,500 Romansch-speaking people live in Zurich, where they are more numerous than in any other commune with the exception of Chur (3,300).

It is often said that Romansch resembles a mixture of Swiss-German and Italian. This is a superficial and wrong impression. Retho-Romanisch is a language derived from Latin, but with a Celtic and Raetian substratum. It has been subjected over the centuries to strong Germanic and Italian influence. But its etymological roots are

generally archaic. It sounds both "harsh" and "soft" and has melodious qualities akin to those of Italian. Also, the language has an undeniable literary interest, as over six thousand works have been printed in Retho-Romanisch since 1552.

### Outside influences

Owing to the particular geographical situation of the Romanic regions on the dividing line between two fluvial basins, their dialects have been submitted to influence from both north and south, with characteristic effects on their morphology and syntax.

The northern influence on Raetian language was strengthened by the annexation, in 537, of the northern part of Raetia in the Franconian kingdom, which thus became Germanised. German words and expressions were introduced into the language, transforming its morphology and meaning of words, while the emergence of Italian as the language spoken by intellectuals in the 18th Century posed a growing threat to Retho-Romanisch.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that the Grisons and the Engadines have been a kind of linguistic ball thrown from one of the surrounding cultural areas to the other. Retho-Romanisch was too intimately amalgamated with the traditions and ancestral customs of the Confederates to be dissolved. In fact, the language had become the very expression of these customs, maintained with staunch independence. The people of these valleys borrowed words from both north and south, but adapted them to their own requirements and culture, so that these words can be considered as a genuine part of their linguistic heritage.

This was sufficiently established for the Romansch to be accepted as the fourth federal language after a federal vote in February 1938. It should be pointed out, however, that

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garten schools in those areas where Romansche is threatened with extinction.

## Literature

From the second half of the 19th Century onwards, poets joined in the protection of the newly recognised Romansch language. They wrote poems, songs and tales demonstrating the literary virtues of a language which thereby won a reputation which it did not have before. Men of letters like Giachen Hasper Nuoth, Gion Antoi Huonder, Gian Fontana writing in Surselva, Peider Lansel and Men Rauch in Engadine and Alexander Lozza in the Surmeir, to name only the "classics", have devoted their talents to the defence of their mother tongue. Young intellectuals today, philologists, politicians and the Romansch-speaking population are intent on keeping their language alive despite the difficulties presented with an alllevelling modern civilisation. The romansche-speaking areas represent a unified cultural entity which deserves recognition with Switzerland's other linguistic groups.

The wealth of literature deeply rooted in a Raetian and pagan past can be appreciated in the 13 volume Rheto-Romanic anthology compiled by Caspar Decurtins. Its legends, popular songs and tales all have an Alpine savour. One of the first Romansch writers was Gian Travers de Zuoz, a humanist who lived in the upper Engadine, and who wrote in 1527 an epic but politically inspired poem called "Chanzun de la guerra dal chastè de Musso" (War songs of Musso Castle).

The Reformation paved the way for the publication of the first printed works. In 1560, Giachem Bifrun, a farmer and notary living in Samedan, wrote a beautiful translation of the New Testament. Two years later, Duri Champel, a reformed pastor and historian, translated the Psalms in the lower Engadine dialect. Other Protestant and Catholic publications in the various Rheto-Romanic dialects followed, in particular religious textbooks, hymn and prayer books in Sursilvan, and then a complete Bible in Ladin and Sursilvan. Rheto-Romanisch became used in legal life and in schools in the 19th Century.

The first non-religious or non-political works in Rheto-Romanisch were published during the Romantic era. Engadine poets, for the most part emigrants, sang their valleys with nostalgia and lyricism whereas the writers of Surselva, rooted on their native soil, wrote with mainly epic inspiration. The four outstanding names among a multiplicity of poets are Giachen Hasper Muoth, Peider Lansel, Gian Fontana and Alexander Lozza. The Engadine prides itself of many distinguished living writers today, express-

ing themselves in their native language. Among them one should mention Artur Cafilisch and Reto Caratsch, who write in a predominantly satirical vein for radio and television. Jon Semadeni and Tista Mur, famous authors of children's books, should also be mentioned.

Even the Russians have the opportunity of knowing their works and their language. In 1969, a Leningrad Romanic specialist, Professor M. A. Borodina, published a highly detailed book entitled, "The modern literary Rheto-Romanisch language of Switzerland", which contains an analysis of the language and a selection of modern authors.

It is certainly remarkable that a small population of a few Alpine valleys should have produced such an abundant literature despite the decline of the economy of the upper Grisons and the cultural invasion of tourism. But the struggle for existence has spurred the inhabitants of these valleys into defending the language of their forefathers.

*(Translated by the Editor from a study published by the "Pro Helvetia" information service.)*

"national language" does not mean "official language". That is why federal documents are not published in Romansch. The only canton that has officialised the language is the Grisons.

## The struggle today

It was only in the second half of the 19th Century that scholars were concerned with the survival of the language for the first time. Defenders of Romansch realised that the intrusion of alien idioms and terminology would jeopardise the future of the language. This foreign invasion was fought with considerable reflexion, but also with firmness. Linguists such as the specialist of Germanic languages, Robert de Planta, scholars such as Florian Melcher, Giusep Huonder, Chasper Pult and Andrea Schorta, scientists such as Jakob Jud and Karl Jaberg, literary historians such as Caspar Decurtins, Gian Bundi, R. R. Bezzola and Jon Pult contributed by their common research and teaching to revive the Romansch language. Thanks to their efforts, the language is currently taught in Swiss universities, and even abroad, which will prove vital for its preservation.

These specialists compelled monumental reference books such as the "Rätisches Namenbuch" (Dictionary of Nouns) and the "Dicziuari rumantsch grischun", which can be likened to a complete Alpine encyclopaedia.

At the same time, linguistic societies were founded with the purpose of saving the Rheto-Romanic culture. Their central body, "Lia Rumantscha", founded in Chur in 1919, is responsible today for the publication of dictionaries, song books, school textbooks and calendars intended for the young. The society also runs Romanic kinder-

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