

Interlude : an episode from Swiss army

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INTERLUDE

AN EPISODE FROM SWISS ARMY LIFE

By Andri Peer

(Translated by Myron B. Gubitz)

(Photo by courtesy of Swiss Armed Forces Film Department)

With a hundred swinging lanterns the company moved into the "Alter Schyn" like a giant millepede; horses' hooves clinked on the stony path of the narrowing gorge, which sent its cold breath out to greet us. The night was not very dark. Above us the starry sky sparkled like a great domed ceiling decorated with large-headed silver nails, and fir trees perched precariously on the rocky ridges. Our artillery unit brought up the rear of the column. The lieutenant checked each man carefully, shook one soldier who seemed to be getting sleepy, nodded encouragingly to his corporals. Everything seemed to be going well. The ravine yawned beneath us, and the sound of the water rushing along its bottom mingled with the dull hoofbeats, the calls of the noncoms, the cavalrymen's commands to their mounts. Then, just as we had passed the Val da Peurs, the entire column ground to a halt.

"Artillery squad, apply brakes! Chocks under all mobile weapons!" I was leading the last horse of the company. Behind me there was only a medical orderly who immediately sat down by the side of the road, as the lieutenant appeared and waved to me. "Robbi, follow me, bring your knapsack and carbine". The pass was so narrow that we scraped our knees on the hubs of the gun-carriers. The lieutenant stopped at the head of our squad. "Up ahead, in the third squad, a horse has gone over. Someone has to go down and see it we can get it up. Take care of it, Robbi".

"Do we have a rope?" I asked. He nodded and pulled me along. The troops looked disgruntled; they didn't like stopping in the middle of the ravine. We finally reached the spot. A gun-carrier lay across the path. The company commander was present and asked the helpless looking lieutenant: "How did it happen?" Lieutenant Füegg answered haltingly: "The horse got nervous, started to buck. Then it lays down and won't get up again. But



then it jumps up, starts to prance around, its hind legs go out over the edge and down it goes".

"Couldn't you hold it?"

"I held it as long as I could, then I had to let go or it would have dragged me down with it", said the cavalryman complainingly. Then he added, "First we heard it whinnying, then some stones rolling down, and then nothing".

"Quiet up the line!" shouted the first lieutenant. We listened hard. Nothing except the sound of water rushing down below.

"Someone should go have a look, lieutenant", said my squadron leader. "I've brought Robbi along, he's a mountain man. We'll let him down on a rope".

"Right", said the company commander, glad that someone was taking the initiative and glancing up the column from time to time to see if perhaps the major was coming. "Get the rope", ordered the lieutenant, taking me by the arm and pulling me over to the side. "Robbi", he said in a subdued voice, "We'll let you down as far as the rope goes. If you find the horse, call and I'll climb down after you. But only if you've got some solid footing; we've just got one rope. If the horse is dead when you find it, cut the main artery and mark the spot".

"All I've got is my army knife", I said.

"That's good enough. You know which artery to cut? The last

one down on the chest. If the horse isn't in too bad shape, see if you can secure it somehow. But it's not very likely". He buried his nose in a map of the area, while I held his flashlight. "Damned steep around here", he grumbled, "Couldn't have picked a worse spot. A little grass, a few bushes, but otherwise . . ." And his hand described a swift downwards motion.

I helped him fix the rope around the trunk of a pine tree. It was a good rope, thicker than the ones we use in the mountains. The others shone their flashlights on my stomach as I tied the rope into a sling beneath my thighs and then drew it over my shoulders.

"If you find the horse, yank the rope twice and I'll come down after you. If you want to come up again, pull it three times. And hold it", he called out, "you'd better take my pistol just in case I can't get down to you and you've got to kill the animal". He changed the magazine and belted the weapon around me. "You know how to handle it, don't you?"

I leaned back and began the descent. The first slope was steep, then came an overhanging rock, I hoped it wasn't too large, and I dropped over it and began to swing so that I kept contact with the wall. It's much pleasanter when you can see where you're going. Further below, the ground projected out beneath me again. I stood still for a

moment and listened. From above I heard a high voice yelling and cursing. Aha, the major has arrived, I said to myself, now they'll all get hell, especially the lieutenant who's lost a horse. "Come on down here, you loudmouth", I called up into the darkness, made bold by my own fear. Then I leaned back into the rope again and cautiously felt my way downwards with my feet. Suddenly I heard the horse very near me. When I shone my flashlight on it, its eyes sparkled. It was propped up on its forelegs, sitting with its hind quarters pressed against a tree. Its harness, which the soldier had cut in his panic, hung ridiculously over its neck. It snorted heavily, only its head moving. As I came close I saw its wounds and abrasions, one bleeding very badly on the neck and another on the croup. One leg was broken above the joint and hung down miserably. I hoped that it wouldn't become frightened of me, make a sudden move and fall further down the gully. As I came up to the animal I recognised it, a young mare. "Poor girl", I said and held her head. There was just room enough on the ledge for me to crouch down. "Poor girl, what have they done to you?" The horse looked at me and groaned in a tone far too small for so large an animal. They only sound like that when they are in a bad way. I patted it gently and ran my hand over its mouth. The fear of death was in its eyes. Then I felt over its body, carefully lifted the loosely hanging hoof and discovered the wound on its back. Its spine is broken, I thought, that's why it can't move and sits there like a dog. "I'm afraid I can't take you with me, old girl".

"Robbi!" I heard a voice calling far above, "Robbiii . . ." I didn't want to shout just then, in order not to frighten the animal, and instead I tugged twice on the rope. I wondered whether to wait until the lieutenant arrived. But I decided to act alone, spurred on by the fact that up above, the sound almost obliterated by the rushing of the waters, the chattering had begun again, a shrill yelling like that of a moon-sick dog, with occasional pauses.

"I'll have to kill you", I said to the mare, and knelt down beside its head. "You can't come along with me, but you're going somewhere far away, far from all these guns and wagons, from all the stupid asphalt roads and soldiers who don't know anything about a horse". I had taken the pistol out and examined it in the light of the flash. Again I stroked my hand over the animal's head, from its mane down over the white star on its forehead to the broad nostrils. "It's time now", I said, feeling my eyes begin to sting, "you've suffered enough". The horse moved its head

slightly, as if it wanted to nod. It was difficult for me to look it in the eye. There is something human about an animal's glance at the point of death. I held the weapon near its forehead, but not too near, put my finger on the trigger and fired. The bullet made a clean hole in the flat forehead, a hole in the white star which immediately filled with blood. The horse's head fell. I shot a second time at the same place, just to make sure, then took out my pocket knife, lifted the head, felt for the carotid artery and cut it. The blood shot out and sprayed over my arm.

They must have heard the shots up above, but the lieutenant didn't come. Perhaps the major hadn't let him go down. I cut off a spare piece of rope and used it to tie the horse's feet to the tree as best I could. Then I pulled three times on the rope and immediately I felt a strong, jerky pull upward.

When I reached the top eight hands stretched out to me and pulled me back on to the road. My

sleeve dripped blood. The lieutenant clapped me on the shoulder and the major spoke to me, this time in a normal tone of voice: "Dead?"

"Yes, sir, major. I had to kill it. Its spine was broken".

His sparse eyebrows drew together. "Are you sure the horse couldn't have been saved?" I only nodded. "Well, we'll see tomorrow when they pull it up with a winch . . . And now", he turned to the first lieutenant, "let's get moving, we've lost enough time already". And with that he stormed up ahead, his poncho fluttering around him.

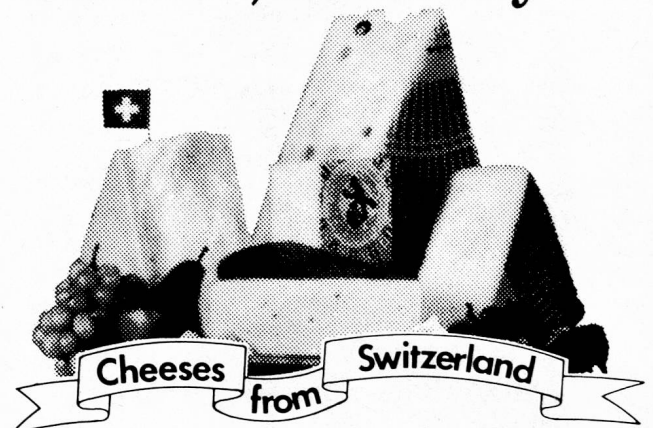
The horseless wagon was hitched on to another. The lieutenant and I returned to our squad. The others all knew what had happened. As we passed the Parnell farm, the morning broke. In Scharans the sun was shining. We had a warm breakfast at a canteen. I lay down under a tree and looked up at the sky. A cloud went sailing overhead. For a moment it took on the shape of a horse.

INTERNATIONAL INVENTIONS EXHIBITION IN GENEVA

The 8th International Inventions Exhibition will be held in the Exhibitions Palace in Geneva from 30th November to 9th December, 1979, in an area of some 66,000 sq ft of exhibition space. It will display over 1,000 new inventions, from about 30 different coun-

tries. Last year, 35 per cent of the inventions presented found buyers, and the turnover amounted to about 25 million Swiss francs. In order to advise exhibitors and visitors, the World Intellectual Property Organisation, the European Patents Office and the Federal Bureau of Intellectual Property will be present this year at the exhibition.

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