

# Letter from Switzerland

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## LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

Wherever one travels, it's a good thing to get close to the people, for this cements international relations, creates good will and plants the seeds of understanding in fertile ground for future harvest. And there is often no better way to get to know the people of a foreign nation than to learn their songs and dances, the heart and soul of any country. Switzerland is no exception to this rule, and it is always thrilling when a visitor is able to sing a local folk song. Imagine the pride of an American were he to hear a Swiss singing *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* or *Who Put the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder*? By the same token, chills of something resembling emotion shoot up and down the Helvetic spine when a guest of the country joins in an old-fashioned Swiss community sing.

One of the most beautiful folk songs in Switzerland, conjuring up memories of an alpine paradise, is *Le vieux chalet*. It begins:

*Là-haut, sur la montagne,  
L'était un vieux chalet.  
Murs blancs, toit de bardeaux,  
Devant la porte, un vieux bouleau,  
Là-haut, sur la montagne,  
L'était un vieux chalet.*

These touching lines, fraught with meaning, tell of a Swiss merchant's yearning to return to the mountains, where he has just remodeled an old chalet. The plaintive words describe his feelings when he first learns what the lovely old chalet will cost. Tears welling up inside him, he signs the contract and secures a building permit to enlarge the maid's quarters. No sooner does he start remodeling than the construction contractor raises the price of paint and nails, and the merchant must take a loan to continue his project. *Le vieux chalet* is sung to the same melody as the well-known British folk song, *Yon Pie in the Skye*, so that there should be no difficulty for those who want to learn it.

Another typical Swiss song, from the Lake of Lucerne region, is the popular *Wind in My Chimney*, similar in melody to *Blow the Man Down*. *Wind in My Chimney* describes a föhn storm in the mountains, and is one of the oldest songs in Switzerland. It had already fallen into obscurity when it was found on an illuminated manuscript in the dark and dusty recesses of the Cloister of St. Johann in Golino (Canton of Ticino). The words themselves are based on the innermost feelings of a lonesome Alphorn player, and they read as follows:

*Holi - do - lee - do,  
Holi - do - lee - day.  
  
Holi - da - lee - da,  
Holi - all - the - day.*

One of the most attractive songs in the entire ethnic literature of Switzerland is *Vreneli, Vreneli, ich lieb dich*. Like so many songs of the early eighteenth century, it tells of a young Swiss lad and his love for Vreneli, daughter of a neighbor. Whatever he does, wherever he goes—down into the valley or into military service as a mercenary—our young Swiss thinks of his Vreneli. He imagines her sitting on her three-legged stool, milking the goats, Schwänli and Bärli. He hears her singing and begins to sing himself. He sings of his travels and his loves, and he always returns to the thought of Vreneli, his Vreneli! If only he had a picture of Vreneli, but the camera had not yet been invented. Alas! He must remember Vreneli as she was when he left her. Now, as he reaches into his pocket for his tobacco pouch, out falls a golden twenty-franc piece. Our mercenary studies the glittering coin—turning it over and over in his hand—and sees the face of Vreneli staring at him. He sees her beautiful golden hair and realizes again that he will always love his Vreneli. And this is why, even today, twenty-franc gold pieces are referred to as “Vrenelis”. This is also why the Swiss have been known to fall in love with the coins in their pockets.

Then there are the drinking songs! What gaiety, what laughter and good humor as the Swiss gather in their local inns to raise their voices and glasses on high. One song, *Let's Have Another* (Fräulein, no 's Bierli bitte), is extremely popular throughout German-speaking Switzerland. It is a traditional yodel in three parts, with an unusual syncopated rhythm reminiscent of the peasants of Appenzell, who learned this technique from the gypsies in the latter part of the seventeenth century. Although the texts of such songs are difficult to translate, we have secured an authentic version, found among the papers of Edward I. Lash, the famous British alpinist:

*Let's have another, the evening's still young.  
Why go home? We're here to have fun.  
The inn's where we live, the home's where we sleep,  
We only need to pay our keep.*

*Let's drink right now to every hausfrau  
And to all the wives we know.  
We're happiest here with good old Swiss beer,  
Where women can't spoil the show.*

EUGENE V. EPSTEIN

### SWISS CULTURAL EVENTS IN DECEMBER

#### ANNIVERSARY EXHIBITION BY SWISS ARTISTS IN ZURICH

A hundred years ago an association of professional artists was formed in Zurich, to-day bearing the name of “Gesellschaft schweizerischer Maler, Bildhauer und Architekten” (Society of Swiss painters, sculptors and architects) and comprising fourteen regional sections with about 750 active and 1700 art lovers as honorary members. Of the 28 combined exhibitions which have so far been held, and around which exhibitions by individual sections have been grouped, twelve have taken place in Zurich, six in Berne, three in Basle, and one each in Soleure, Fribourg, Geneva, St. Gall, Lausanne, Aarau and Neuchâtel. The celebration of the hundredth anniversary will also take place in Zurich and will take the form of a repre-

sentative show for which the Kunsthauus will be making its considerable reserves of space available. It will begin on December 16 and will last until mid-January.

#### WORKS OF ART AS CHRISTMAS GIFTS

As the time of present-giving approaches, artists often hope that their works may be considered worthy to make beautiful gifts. They turn mainly to the art lovers among the men and women living in their region, presenting for their selection their latest productions in a display designed to attract purchases. A promotion of this kind has been given a novel accent in the Grisons Kunsthauus in Coire, for here the slogan “Swiss artists draw and paint in the Grisons” has been taken as the theme, so that lovers of this beautiful mountain Canton have the opportunity to acquire examples of local creative talent, obtaining additional pleasure from the regional