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The Canton of Schwyz

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A Name

In Swiss dialect Switzerland is called «Schwiiz». This sound was taken over by foreign languages: Suisse, Svizzera, Suiça, Zwitzerland etc. But in addition, there is also a Canton of Schwyz with its capital of the same name. That is confusing for strange ears. As a matter of fact it is from that little Canton in its midst that Switzerland took over its name in the 14th century. Or to be more precise: the nearest neighbours and above all their enemies called the Confederate fighting bodies «Schwyzer», for often enough relevant policy and aggressive impact emanated from Schwyz. In a deed of gift from Emperor Otto II to the Monastery of Einsiedeln, dating back to the year 972, the estate «suittes» was mentioned for the first time. Scholars explain the name of the settlement as a «clearing» of former Celtic inhabitants. The oldest seals of the Canton still show the same name. According to German fashion in the 18th century, the «i» was modified to «ei», just as one wrote Weil at that time instead of Wil.

It was similar with the crest of Switzerland. Following the example of the men of Schwyz, other Confederate troops assumed the white cross on red ground in the 15th century and went into battle with that flag.

Position

Schwyz is a country in the lower Alps, between the Lake of Lucerne and the Lake of Zurich, between the Midlands and the Alps of Uri

and Glarus. It covers an area of 907.8 square kilometres, of which 18% are barren. The limestone peaks East of the Muotatal and the Waegital give way to softer limestone and moraine hills and to the conglomerate rock of the Rigi and the Rossberg. In between there are fertile meadows or poor marshy soil. The former are mainly used for dairy farming and cattle breeding, the latter for growing potatoes. The brown Schwyz cattle is hardy and resistant and was already exported very early on. For it proved an asset even on far continents. Since the High Middle Ages, the monks of Einsiedeln have bred a much sought-after stud.

The landscape is rich in variety. On an average, every Swiss can count on 1525 square metres of woodland – in the Canton of Schwyz the quota is 2377 square metres. The Southern Canton (the districts of Schwyz, Gersau and Küssnacht) borders on the Lakes of Lucerne and Zug; in between lies the little Lake of Lauerz which was hemmed in by a landslide from the Rossberg in 1806 – the catastrophe caused 450 deaths. Between the two world wars, a reservoir lake (11 square kilometres) was constructed in the Sihltal for the Swiss Federal Railways and the power works of North-Eastern Switzerland, and another one in the Waegital (4.2 square kilometres) for the electricity works of Zurich.

The wide side of the Canton lies on the shores of the Lake of Zurich