

**Zeitschrift:** Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad  
**Herausgeber:** Organisation of the Swiss Abroad  
**Band:** 7 (1980)  
**Heft:** 2

**Artikel:** Obwalden : a small state worth visiting  
**Autor:** Theiler, Niklaus  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907810>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 29.12.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

---

# Contents

---

Obwalden – A small State worth visiting	2
Nidwalden	6
Official Communications:	
– The Federal Council decides to increase aid to the Third World	9
– Human rights and development cooperation	9
– Reflections on the new banknote series	10
– New chance for children of Swiss women	11
– Enrolment at Swiss universities of Swiss holders of foreign matriculation certificates	11
Communications from the NSH Secretariat of the Swiss Abroad	
– Assembly of the Swiss Abroad at Lugano – Application	17
Drawing Competition	18
The Symbol of the Swiss Abroad	19
Book reviews	20

---

## Cover page

Break-through of the Gothard-Tunnel a hundred years ago, i.e. on the 29th february 1880. The chief engineers Bossi and Stockalper congratulate each other (wood print from a drawing by Jauslin).

---

## Passports

Do not wait until the eve of your holiday before applying for Swiss passport to be renewed ... It may not be possible to return it to you in time.

# Obwalden

## A small State worth visiting

### The author

Niklaus Theiler is a citizen of neighbouring Entlebuch, but was born in Sarnen in 1946. He went to school there up to matriculation (Type A). He studied at the University of Fribourg and then returned to Obwalden. After a period of practical training in the administration and at the Courts, he qualified as lawyer. He is legal adviser to the Obwalden Government.

Obwalden is an independent Canton between the Pilatus and the Bruenig and completed by the valley community of Engelberg. It received its name because it is situated above the Forest of Kern which forms the boundary with Nidwalden. The six Communes of the old part of the Canton, Sarnen, Kerns, Sachseln, Alpnach, Giswil and Lungern, as well as the former Monastery State of Engelberg, which was attached to Obwalden in 1815, cover a total area of some 491 km<sup>2</sup>. Nearly half of its territory consists of agricultural land (31.9% alpine pastures, 15.5% meadows, 0.3% arable soil). Approximately one third of the ground is covered in woods, barely a fifth part is barren. 26 000 people live in this region of the Lower Alps.

Within the Confederation, Obwalden belongs to the Half-Cantons. The only difference from the full Cantons lies in the fact that it sends only one Councillor of States to Berne, rather than two, and thus it counts only as half a State in federal plebiscites on changes to the Federal Constitution. In anything else, Obwalden is no different from other Cantons: The administrative organization consists of power-sharing, Parliament, Government and indepen-

dent Courts of Law. The same tasks have to be tackled as in other Cantons; although taking in the conditions at a glance does often allow simplified procedures. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Obwaldner feels himself a proud and original Confederate.

## A turbulent past

Traces of habitation reach back to the later Stone Age (3000 B.C.). At that time, Celtic tribes lived in the region. The Romans came later and settled along the at that time vital arterial route from Vindonissa to Lombardy across the Bruenig, the Grimsel and the Gries passes. It was only towards the end of the 7th century that the Alemans settled there. The legal systems in the Middle Ages were complicated; secular rulers such as the Counts of Lenzburg, Zaehringen, Kyburg and Hapsburg, and numerous religious communities (Murbach–Lucerne, Beromuenster, Muri, Engelberg) owned extensive settlements. In addition, however, there were always free peoples who were accountable only to the district bailiff as representative of the Empire. In the 13th century, these free men resisted the expansionist efforts of the House of Hapsburg. This resistance finally culminated in the alliance with Uri, Schwyz and Nidwalden of 1291. The oldest account of these events are to be found in the famous «White Book» of Sarnen kept at the State Archives.

The poor Land of Unterwalden uniting Ob- and Nidwalden existed only at the beginning of the 14th century. Yet in the Old Confederate Alliance, Unterwalden was counted as one State. In the Diet, Obwalden had two-thirds of the voices, Nidwalden one.

Obwalden shared the history of the other States and took part in all the Swiss wars. Its young men searched for livelihood in mercenary service, for the soil could not provide for families with many children. During the Reformation, Obwalden remained loyal to the Old Faith. In 1798, the Obwaldner people bowed to the yoke of the Helvetic State, though they remained true to themselves and found their identity again immediately after the fall of Napoleon. A lovingly prepared exhibition at the local history museum at Sarnen depicts this part of Obwalden history.

Engelberg's origins go back to the foundation of the Monastery in 1120. In 1798, the French dissolved the rule of the Monastery, and in 1803, Engelberg was united with Nidwalden. But its inhabitants were dissatisfied with their representation with the authorities and with Nidwalden's politics, and so Engelberg turned to Obwalden in 1815 and was readily accepted as a Commune with equal rights.



Sarnen, capital of the canton of Obwalden (Photo ONST)

### A land of contrasts

Obwalden is both austere and delightful. The Sarner Aa Valley

Summer skiing on the Titlis above Engelberg (Photo ONST)



risers gently from the lake of Lucerne to the Sarnersee, up to the Lake of Lungern and to the easily surmounted Bruenig Pass. It is bordered by hills, in their turn opening to the rocky valleys of the Melch Aa. Engelberg is surrounded by craggy mountains and fissured glaciers rising to the towering Titlis at an altitude of 3238 meters.

The character of its people is just like that. Their peace-loving attitude found its expression in Brother Klaus (1417–1487); the hermit at the Ranft succeeded 500 years ago in calming the excited tempers of the deputies at the Diet of Stans in 1481 and in enabling

Fribourg and Solothurn to join the Alliance, a success which will be celebrated appropriately next year. On the other hand, when tempers are roused in the people of Obwalden, agitation is tremendous. This aspect of the people's character is reflected in the Constitution accepted in 1968: the citizens have been given political rights which would be unthinkable elsewhere; thus an individual elector may hand in a constitutional initiative. On more than one occasion, the *Landsgemeinde* which takes place on the last Sunday in April on the Landenberg, has been attacked without success.



Lungern and its lake (Photo Rheinhard)



A square in the old Sarnen; on the left the town hall; the old shooting stand on the Landenberg hill (Photo Rheinhard).

### What does the Obwaldner do ?

Agriculture constitutes Obwalden's greatest riches. Strong mountain farming is the main part of it, though this is threatened by economic difficulties. Various small industrial undertakings gain ground more and more. Industry and trade, to a large extent indeed, are in line with extensive forestry and take up the biggest share of the Canton's economy. Tourism whose beginnings go back to the second half of the last century, is becoming more and more important. Quiet and restful holidays are offered recreation in various sports all the year round. The holiday resorts of Engelberg, as well as those near the Sarnersee, Melchtal and Melchsee-Frutt, Lungern and Schoenbuel, and recently, too, Moerlialp above Giswil are well known. Many pilgrims visit the Church of Brother Klaus, patron saint of the Canton, at Sachseln and his cell at Flueli-Ranft. Crowds of tourists ascend the Pilatus (2067 m) in comfortable trains from Alpnachstad and the Titlis (altitude of the top station at 2696 m) from Engelberg.

The valley of the Sarner Aa presents excellent conditions for high-quality living. Communications are very good, and they will be

improved even more in the coming year by the national road Lopper Tunnel towards Lucerne, and the motorway towards the Bernese Oberland with the Bruenig Tunnel will be opened within the next few years. With regard to culture, a great deal is offered, too.

In early days, Obwaldner artists created their works from religious

tradition. The Library of the Engelberg Monastery houses a considerable treasury from the golden age of illuminated manuscripts (12th century) and a rich collection of medieval art treasures. One of the artists and authors of our times should be mentioned, Heinrich Federer who lived from 1866 to 1928. His works reflect the impres-

They go to school by air ...

(Photo Odermatt)







The Benedictine Abbey of Engelberg, founded in 1120 (Photo ONST).

View of Sachseln and the lake of Sarnen (Photo ONST)



sions of his youth spent at Sachseln, the impressive landscape around the Sarnersee and the people he knew – a beautiful and warm-hearted picture. Yodeling and *Betruf* have always been part of musical life, and folk music is widely cultivated. Many Obwalden writers, composers of popular and modern music, painters and sculptors are known well beyond the boundaries of the Canton. Such culture needs great care, just like the countryside, for the two are intertwined. There exists earnest endeavour to protect and enrich the landscape: protection by segregating building land from open meadows and woods, and by re-introducing the lynx.

Obwalden can be seen almost at one glance. Yet it harbours many secrets. The sensitive soul of this land is contained in a hard shell. Only those who rest on its soil will be able to define its essence; those who rush through regardless, will soon forget this little State.

*Niklaus Theiler*

---

## Some useful addresses

Would you please make the following alterations on the list of addresses published in the last issue of 1979:

### Trade

Swiss Office for the Promotion of Trade (SZH)  
Rue de l'Avant-Poste 4,  
1001 Lausanne  
Phone 021 203231

### Transports

Touring Club Switzerland (TCS)  
Head Office  
9 rue Pierre-Fatio  
1211 Geneva  
Phone 022 366000

---