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The Walsers – an Intrinsically Swiss People

Already as a schoolboy on summer holidays and again later – during the war years – as student on rambles and bicycle tours, it was again and again certain of our high-Alpine valley landscapes which held a special attraction for me. For one, there was the region around the upper course of the Rhone with its various side valleys like the Turtmantal, at that time still accessible on foot, the Loetschental wrapped in legends and the Binntal rich in crystals; then there was the Urserntal in Uri, the Rheinwald in the Grisons, the Sa-fiental as much unknown as it was beautiful, Avers-Cresta high up in the mountains, the round hollow of Arosa, the surroundings of Davos and the idyllic villages of Furna and Valzeina in the Praetigau. I felt similar sensations south of the Alps, at Simplon village, hedged in by wide meadows, and at Bosco-Gurin and right up – twice round the corner – in the Maggia valley.

It was the same everywhere which fascinated me: the old farmhouses which, regardless of their simplicity, radiated an almost patrician pride, and in these houses the utensils and implements in daily use, which bore witness to long tradition and culture. The inhabitants themselves embodied in all their expressions a convincing attachment to the mostly poor soil and they struck one by their deeply anchored love of freedom.

In my own neighbourhood right up to the highest valleys in the Bernese Oberland, I found something similar only in the lonely village of Isenfluh high up above Lauterbrunnen, which fascinated me more than the «o so much more beautiful» and sunnier Wengen on the mountain terrace opposite.

What was the common connection in these districts? For a long time I did not know. It could not be in the seclusion alone. It is true that places like Heiligkreuz in the Binntal or Juf above Avers were still widely unknown. In the two Vispa valleys with Zermatt and Saas Fee, tourism had established itself for some time, and in the Urserntal and in Rheinwald near Splügen, long lines of motor vehicles from all countries of Europe were at times to be found in summer. It could not be the denominations either. The valleys mentioned were partly Catholic, partly Protestant, even though their church buildings, small though they were, bore witness to a deep testimony of faith by their impressive position in the magnificent mountain world – much more so than many large cathedrals in the low-lying country.

It was only at the beginning of the 'fifties when I found an explanation for my predilection, and that abroad of all places! It was in the Kleine Walsertal, the Small Waldensian Valley, the strange hybrid behind Oberstdorf in Southern Bavaria which, though belonging to Austrian sovereignty, is attached to Germany economically. There I found a small but very instructive museum which housed geographic tables on the distribution of the Walsers, that German-speaking breed from the upper Rhone Valley, which began to settle in the surrounding regions at the turn of the 13th and up to the 14th century, a kind of belated Mass Migration on a small scale and that in the heart of Europe. This advance led the Walsers to the Canton of Uri and from there to the Grisons, to the Oberland of St. Gall, to Liechten-