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The Walsers and their Wanderings

The ethnic group who later came to be known as the "Walsers" (abbreviation of "Wallisers", people from the Valais, had settled in the Upper Valais more than 1,000 years ago. They were the first peasants who in the Middle Ages succeeded in making permanent settlements in the Alpine highlands. The basic factor leading to their continuing to migrate was economic necessity. Because of the custom of "primogeniture" whereby only one member of a family could inherit the indivisible family property, the other members were in effect obliged to emigrate.

Fifty stages – on foot

The Swiss National Tourist Office has been endeavouring to encourage people to undertake walking tours along the Great Walser Route. The entire trail comprises 50 sections, making up a total of some 850 kilometres (about 528 miles). Apart from the mountain and glacier tours, passing over the Theodul Pass, the individual stages call for some stamina and energy, but experts state that they are "fairly easy to undertake". The route proposed is not absolutely identical with the path followed by the original Walsers in their emigration, but it has been planned to take one past leading sites of Walser culture. "It is a journey to tell us more about the life of these extraordinary



Heimischgartu, an old Walser settlement at 2110 metres above sea-level, on the road from the Saas valley over the Monte Moro pass to Macugnaga. (Photos: SNTTO)

people" says Arnold Niederer, professor of ethnology in Zurich, who goes on to say that it will put us "on the trail of a highly individualistic and self-willed minority", helping us to understand and picture their culture in our mind's eye.

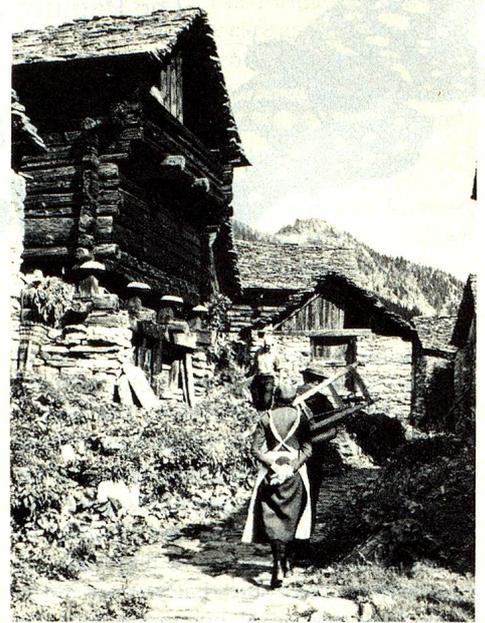
An intense wish for independence

To be free, to live and work in peace – that is what this race of herdsmen desired. They were the first settlers who could cultivate these inhospitable highland valleys. In the process, they felled many trees in these valleys – something previously unknown. Early in the 13th century, the Walsers reached the highest valleys of the Italian Alps. And through the Formazza valley they wandered eastwards – in separate "clan" groups – settling in all the side valleys of the Roman province of "Raetia". The last major wave of migration took them to the Vorarlberg. Peter Lorenz of the "Association of Walsers in the Grisons" says: "The Walsers settled only in locations where no settlements existed as yet, thus only in high-altitude regions."

Because of their experience as settlers at high altitudes, the Walsers were welcomed by feudal land-owners in the Middle Ages, who often possessed vast mountain properties which had previously been seen as barren and unfruitful. In recognition of their work in clearance of the land, and cultivation of crops high up in the Alps, the Walsers were granted various rights and privileges on the basis of an agreement reached in 1106 in Utrecht. The way of life of the Walser settlers in their mountain dwellings in isolated regions gave rise to special customs relating to their domestic habits and their housing. Obligated to be self-reliant, they had to grow or make everything they needed for daily life, and store up reserves to carry them over the long winters. This form of autarchy resulted in their erecting buildings at different levels in one and the same settlement, which thus was made up of small, often one-room, houses, separate from the stables, cowsheds, barns and store-houses.

Early practitioners of cooperation

The Walsers often became well-known traders in the markets of the Alpine region, thanks to their sales of milk products and cattle, and their purchases of bread cereals



Since the 13th century Walsers have been living in Bosco-Gurin, the only German-speaking village in the Ticino.

and various raw materials. This exchange of merchandise and the processing of milk, effected to some extent jointly by the buyers and sellers of other products, can be seen as a precursor of the cooperative concept (so important in the Switzerland of today).

Evidence of the migrations of the Walsers throughout the Alpine regions more than 700 years ago is offered by their language and the way it spread. Even today it provides a link between the more than 150 settlements of Walser origin, scattered in the central Alps over distances of 300 kilometres.

Apart from their language, the unique pioneering spirit of the bold but restless mountain race is something shared by all the Walsers. But Peter Loretz, himself a Walser, says a word of warning: "We do not want to be looked upon as some exotic ethnic group. Too much nostalgic reminiscing and too much harping on our special qualities could soon turn us into museum pieces!"

If you wish to know more about the Great Walser Route you can order from the Swiss National Tourist Office, P.O. Box, 8027 Zurich, the two beautifully printed and illustrated issues of the magazine "Schweiz – Suisse – Svizzera – Switzerland" at a price of Sfr. 6.– each, plus postage. A combination in book-form has also been published by Verlag Bugra Suisse, 3084 Wabern, at a price of Sfr. 29.80, plus postage.

Heidi Schaerer, from "Der Brückenbauer"