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A Franco-Provençal dialect in French-speaking Switzerland

Evolène – An Island of Dialect

The 1,500 inhabitants of Evolène in the canton of Valais are the last group in the French-speaking part of Switzerland to use their dialect in all everyday life. This notable cultural phenomenon is unique in that “francophone” region, and the reasons for its survival – in spite of pressure from many quarters – are interesting to analyse.

In “French” Switzerland, local dialects have not been able to resist the centralism and cultural influence imposed originally by the kings of France. We should remember that Philippe-Auguste established the royal governmental system as long ago as around 1214 and that François I appointed a Secretary of State for France in 1547, the use of Latin having been abandoned for official documents, and replaced by French, in 1539. A comparison with the German language shows that it was not until 1750 that the power of Prussia began to grow on the European continent and to encourage the spread of German. This “time-lag” is held to be one of the reasons for the maintenance of local dialects throughout the Germanic linguistic regions. Nowadays, local dialects have not survived for daily use in “French” Switzerland – the sole exception being the region around Evolène, a high valley in the mountains, where the dialect is still the mother tongue of the inhabitants.

The dictates of geography

The Evolène region is separated from the Zermatt valley and the Italian (though partly French-speaking!) Val d’Aosta by the massifs of “Dent-Blanche” (4357 m.) and “Mont-Collon”. It is located at the bottom of one of the lateral valleys of the Valaisan Alps. It cannot be described as a “media-

tory” or “transit” location – it is rather a “closed” region, at the ideal altitude for rich grassland, and its meadows make it a privileged zone for mountain farming. It is well known that the maintenance of agricultural activities is closely linked with survival of dialects. In Evolène, unlike what happens in most other Valaisan mountain communities, farming remains a mainstay of the economy and of the way of life, and complements the earnings from tourism and handicrafts.

A stately people

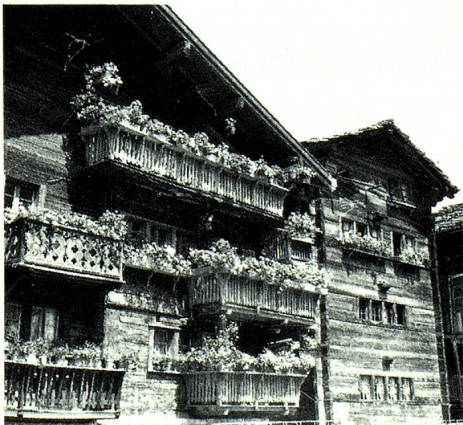
A landowner is a “lord and master” of his real estate. And practically all the farmers of Evolène own the land that they cultivate. Their love and respect for their native soil, for the family heritage and tradition, are legendary. Farming land seldom changes hands in the region, and even today a man from Evolène who works in some other location will spend his spare time and leisure taking care of his property – and he does so

as a matter of pride and personal enjoyment rather than as a way of making a profit. After doing a day’s work in Sion for instance, an employee will often return to his valley and devote himself to his cattle, his meadows and his woods.

This stability resulting from the continuance of traditional activities and the deeply-rooted links with the soil has proved a decisive factor for sustaining the dialect. There is nowadays a good road leading from Evolène to Sion so a goodly number of youngsters are able to work down in the plain, but they live in Evolène, and uphold the local traditions.

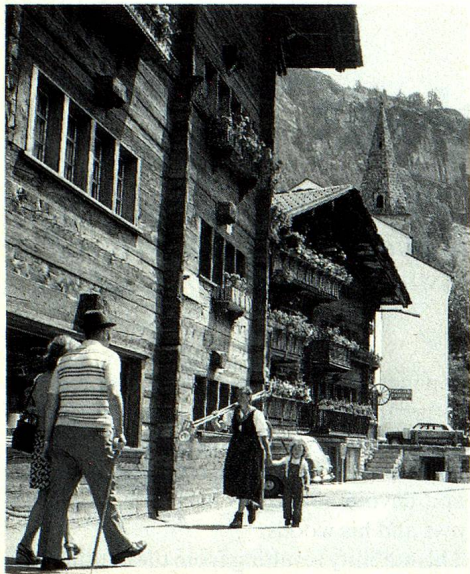
Well integrated tourism

The beauty of the landscapes, and friendliness of the welcome from the inhabitants have attracted many tourists throughout the 19th century, and until nowadays too. Evolène became well-known as a Mecca for everyone interested in the artistic civilisation of the Alps. The incursions of holiday-ma-



Evolène in the Val d’Hérens (Valais).
(Photos: SNT0)





kers have done little to disturb the traditions. The visitors have, as real connoisseurs, shown great admiration for the taste and skill of the craftsmen of Evolène, courageous and robust mountain dwellers that they are. Their talents are evident in the original exterior decorations of the houses, in their wood carvings, in the charm and beauty of their woven textiles and costumes, their delicate wrought-iron products. Writers, painters, musicians are attracted by the region, and many like to work there. A play by René Morax "La Servante d'Evolène" is famous, and greatly enjoyed in all parts of "French" Switzerland.

Children of the Future

In Evolène, children have to begin their "apprenticeship" to the French language as soon as they start going to school. The aim is to give them a thorough knowledge of both the written and the spoken language. And they have to learn it according to all the rules. The result is that quite often, the inhabi-

tants of this mountain valley speak a purer French than do other "francophone" neighbours in the Valais, whose language is often peppered with regional expressions and the sort of errors that one meets with in a language that has not yet been properly assimilated!

As long as the children continue to talk to one another in "patois", the Evolène dialect will have a future. The members of the Ru-

ral District Council use the dialect in their debates – but the minutes of their meetings have to be written in French.

European unity is highly topical nowadays, and a community such as Evolène will by its unique character make its contribution towards enriching the "Europe of the Regions" just as it already enriches Switzerland by its authentic Alpine culture.

Alain-R. Zuffery

Colloquium at Schloss Lenzburg

Swiss Living in EEC Countries

The fact that Switzerland is not a member of the European Economic Community is causing problems for Swiss who live abroad in EEC countries as non-EEC citizens. These problems were listed and attempts to find solutions to them were discussed at a colloquium arranged by the New Helvetic Society (NHS), the Organisation of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) and the Service for the Swiss Abroad of the Department of Foreign Affairs at Schloss Lenzburg between 9th and 10th June 1989.

At the forefront of these talks, held over two days among representatives from the fields of administration and politics, as well as Swiss people living in EEC countries, were the issues of education and recognition of professional qualifications and study courses, freedom of movement of people, social insurance payments and integration into the political system (political rights and citizenship).

As a result of the creation of the single European market in 1992 and the improved status of EEC foreigners in other EEC states which will result from this, non-EEC foreigners – and among them the Swiss abroad – are now experiencing a form of "passive discrimination" and a deterioration in their situation. One definite problem, which is partially discernible even today, is for example, in the sphere of education (with the recognition of professional qualifications and study courses).

In all the attempts made to find solutions to such problems, it was quite plain to be seen that one of the main problems was that of reciprocity. Nevertheless, it was felt that the Swiss were in no position to address their demands to the EEC but that they should instead examine some of the fundamental stances of their own country. Among the key factors to be considered here are the policy towards foreigners and federalism in education.

Those present also expressed concrete demands in favour of making dual nationality easier to obtain and requested more detailed information about social insurance payments.

A limited edition of the final report of this conference has been published, and copies may be obtained from the Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad. JM



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