

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 22 (1995)
Heft: 4

Artikel: How Berne came upon the bear : the mighty Bruin of Berne
Autor: Baumann, Alice
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906954>

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: 19.04.2026

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

of these cards throughout the whole territory of the state of Berne. Indeed this edict is the first historical piece of evidence for the existence of the tarot. It is not known exactly why the authorities saw such danger in it and condemned it with such rigor. But it was probably due to the fear of everything un-Christian felt by the strict and mighty universal church.

Amongst the greatest and the most famous attractions of Berne are the fountains which are dotted all over the city. These are usually crowned with figures of artistic significance, and those knowledgeable in the tarot immediately notice that without exception they are tarot subjects dating from the Middle Ages. A city prohibits the tarot and draws its water, which is the element of life par excellence, from fountains linked to the tarot! This is evidence enough that the drive towards spiritual freedom could not be halted amongst at least part of the population of Berne.

Fertile ground

It was two Bernese authors of modern times who first acquainted a wider readership with the tarot. In 1975 Sergius Golowin wrote a book called "The World of the Tarot", and this was followed in the 1980s by the three-volume "School of the Tarot" by the author of this article.

The Weyermann bookshop near Berne's railway station is another consequence of Berne's mystical and esoteric field of energy. In incredibly cramped premises Hans-Jörg Weyermann founded in 1966 the first specialist bookshop for esoteric literature in the German-speaking world. It remains today a treasure trove of valuable books and a magnet for those interested in and moved by the esoteric. In addition, Weyermann has repeatedly succeeded in persuading spiritual leaders such as the Dalai Lama to visit the federal city. ■

How Berne came upon the bear

The mighty Bruin of Berne

The bear is supposed to be huge, strong and intelligent. Its wild elemental force laughs back from gingerbread, handkerchiefs, T-shirts, scarves and ties. There are many reasons why the city of Berne so much honours its heraldic animal symbol, the bear.

Drama in the bear pits: female bear poisoned". How was it possible for a serious Berne daily newspaper to splash such a tabloid headline above one of its stories? It is quite simple really. When anything happens to a bear

Alice Baumann

in Berne the place erupts. The murder of a prominent person would not have been described in such emotional terms as the accidental poisoning of 18-year old Pyrenean brown bear Carmen in the winter of 1994/95. She ate some highly poisonous yew twigs which someone threw into the bear pit. Another bear sicked them up in time and survived. It is true that tourists fling all sorts of things into the bear pit along with the recommended carrots, but this must

**Summer in Berne – the Mediterranean sun reaches north.
(Photo: Marcus Gyger)**

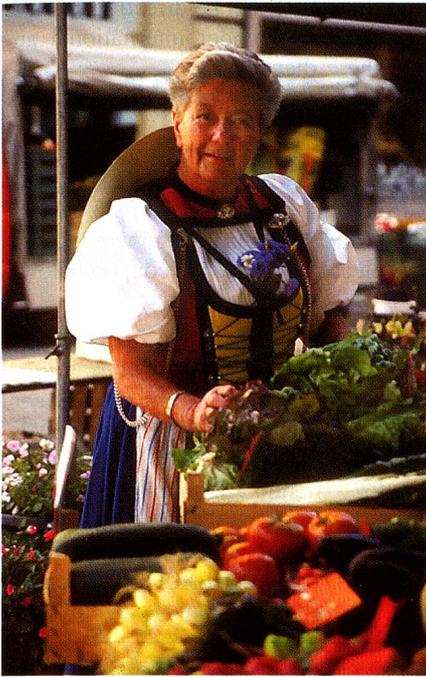
have been the first time that a bear actually died from it.

A storm of indignation whips threw Berne when mongrel cubs have to be put to sleep. This has to be done when there are too many bears romping about the bear pit. The reason for the culling was explained by zoo director Max Müller: "A bear-pit bear is something which does not exist in nature. It has been specially bred. And it has to be as huge as possible. That is how people saw bears in the 19th century. The shape of the bear pit is adapted to this idea: the huge savage beasts far below, defenceless, with the crown of creation looking over the edge high above. In addition, bears of course have to be a natural brown like a chocolate bear or a teddy bear". Too little used to be known about the genetics of bear breeding, but things are different today: "All European zoos work together. They make genetic decisions, catalogue the bears in captivity and work out which couples should breed. It is all done in the supposition that the animals may one day be let loose".

A wild courageous animal

Bears living free attack humans, tear up calves and sheep and destroy whole fish stocks, someone complained in the Austrian press not long ago. The bear is as fascinating as it is terrifying. As a beast of prey dangerous to humans, it releases irrational fears and prejudices. Its natural habitat has been increasingly restricted over the millennia. At one time it roamed over large parts of the northern hemisphere, while today it has been intentionally wiped out in some countries. But at the same time it is often thought of as a sort of reflection of mankind run wild. In this way its reputation moves from one extreme to another, from hairy brother to evil beast. But history also relates how it can degenerate into the foolish dancing bear. It is supposed to be a lazy loner with a sweet tooth. In Kipling's Jungle Books, it is





Berne, a golden section between city and canton.

(Photo: Alice Baumann)

good-tempered teacher Baloo, both droll and wise. And incidentally bears use the same educational methods as humans: a loud voice combined with a blow from the paw.

Bear's ear and bear's foot

Bears have also crept into our languages, especially German. English has the bearberry, as well as bear's ear for auricula and bear's foot for hellebore. But in the Bernese dialect many quaint and curious plants like heraculum, ramson, milk vetch and spignel are named after the bear because it likes their taste. And people like to eat biscuits in the shape of a bear's paw - it is supposed to be lucky. Christian names like Björn and Bernhard, Urs and Ursula, remind us of Master Bear. It looks down upon us in two of the night sky's constellations, the Great Bear and the Little Bear. Brown bears sell well as the trusted teddy bear or as tasty chewing gum. Bears are supposed to love with a singular passion. There is a silly German ditty that goes: "Love sticks like liquorice (bear dirt) - you can't get it out of your heart".

As an allegory of wildness and courage, the bear embodies man's longing to go back to nature. Mystics speak of the bear tracks in the soul, referring to our inner wilderness. In dreams and trances, in ceremonies and songs, in

A Ticinese in Berne

What does Berne mean for a Ticinese like me, who came here almost seven years ago, after spending a decade in Rome? Certainly Berne gave me the chance to take on an interesting and stimulating job (although hard work) as a parliamentary correspondent. But over and above this what kind of relationship do I have with the city?

When I was a little boy Berne played a very positive part in my mind. How I loved the bears and - of course - the yellow and black of the Young Boys soccer team. Later when I got a little bigger I thought of Berne as the capital of my country; I valued it politically and saw it as a sort of multi-lingual federal city, which was home to Italian-speaking Swiss as well.

And today? Berne is very beautiful with its well-kept old quarter, its pleasant arcades, its fountains, its innumerable leafy walks, and the great door to the cathedral which turns our thoughts to the mysteries of life after death. One should admire Berne from high up, descending slowly from the Rose Garden, gazing at the geometry of the roofs which conjure up images of life around the domestic hearth.

The climate of the city makes one lethargic. How difficult I find it (much more so than in Rome) to get up in the morning. For the sky is often grey, and we are in a trough of low pressure . . .

And the Bernese? Contact with them is rare, the odd "good-morning", a few sentences, no more. My social life centres mainly around parliament, which I see as an extra-territorial and multi-lingual enclave. There you can make yourself understood in high German, French and Italian. And there I am not faced with the problem of understanding the local dialect and having to speak it. I consider over-use of this language to be a great obstacle to better understanding within the country. Perhaps it is also because of this, or precisely because of this, that my contacts with the Bernese are limited - although otherwise friendly. If I insist on this, it is because I do not want to lose any part of my identity as an Italian-speaking Swiss because of pressure to speak Swiss-German.

Berne is beautiful. I am fond of its people. But do not ask me to describe the Bernese any more precisely. I would not be able to do it.

Giuseppe Rusconi ■

fairy-tales and legends, we come across the bear over and over again. It is associated with strength and wisdom. Someone who has the strength of a bear is courageous and dexterous as well as strong - to the point of being overpowering. The famous abbess and mystic, Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), recommended covering the breast with bear-skin as a cure for anxiety, since it is the warmest and softest cover anyone can think of. The teddy bear has the same purpose.

King of the forest

What was it that made Berne identify itself with the bear? Every city and every canton has an emblem. On the arms of Berlin and Appenzell the bear commands respect as a fighter. It is rampant, extends long red claws and flashes its tongue. The Bernese bear, which looks no less dangerous, strides upwards along a diagonal golden beam. Identifying oneself with an animal of such strength boosts one's own self-confi-

dence and may intimidate an enemy. When the sovereign of a state adopts the escutcheon of a bear he is playing on its significance as king of the forest. In our latitudes it is not in fact the lion which is king: the greatest, strongest and most intelligent wild animal of our forests is the bear.

The first Bernese bear

Legend has it that the founder of the city of Berne, Duke Berchtold V of Zähringen, put paid to a bear on a hunt in 1191 and named his city after it. Legend always contains a grain of truth. Some of the characteristics of the bear appear to fit the Bernese mentality: good-naturedness and friendliness have remained features of the city and its inhabitants throughout its turbulent 800-year history. Berne's ponderousness is also proverbial. Old-established Bernese do not like to be clapped on the back too easily; a little reserve is expected.

"Musica Helvetica"

Swiss Music Worldwide

Swiss Radio International (SRI) considers music to be a key element in the portrayal of Swiss culture abroad. But shortwave has certain limitations when it comes to broadcasting music programmes. So more than twenty years ago SRI started to make recorded music productions available to radio stations all over the world.

Within a few years SRI was supplying some 400 radio stations with recorded music, first in the USA and then in many other countries. Since then the number of clients has risen to well over 1000. The LP gramophone records originally used have been superseded by high-quality recordings on compact disc (CD). The range of recorded music now available includes specifically Swiss works, music played by Swiss artists and international music events taking place in Switzerland. Thanks to these recordings many Swiss composers and musicians have won high critical

acclaim abroad. Research carried out by SRI in 1993 showed that many of the 150 titles then available in the "Musica Helvetica" series had been broadcast several times.

Up till now these recordings were financed by SRI and distributed free of charge. In future SRI will be working to a greater extent with other organisations in Switzerland and will market selected recordings on a commercial basis. SRI believes that in this way it can uphold the integrity and independence of this cultural service. It is SRI's intention that originality and quality will continue to distinguish "Musica Helvetica" productions from the ordinary range of mass-produced music recordings. This strategy is also in line with the "SRI Selection" policy under which SRI promotes quality Swiss productions internationally.

As soon as SRI has suitable satellite channels at its

disposal and has secured the necessary financing of production and distribution, the range of music offered by

SRI will be directly available to a wider international audience.

W. Fankhauser, SRI

Several SRI music recordings on compact disc (CD) can be obtained directly from SRI at the price of 35 Swiss francs each (incl. postage and packing). If you would like any of these recordings, please complete the coupon below and send it to:

Swiss Radio International, Programme Services, P.O. Box, CH-3000 Berne 15

Please arrange payment either to our postal account or via credit card. Records will be dispatched following confirmation of payment.

PC 30-16302-5 or

___ VISA, ___ MASTERCARD or ___ AMEXCO credit card:

Card number:

Date of expiry:

Date:

Your signature:

Name:

Address:

Please send me the following record(s):

___ copies of CD "Dances and Tunes for House Organ, Violin and Dulcimer"

___ copies of CD "Musique Espérance" (Mozart, Brahms)

___ copies of CD "Swiss Composers I" (Hess, Schoeck, Sutermeister)

The oldest known city seal – dating from 1224 – already carries the bear as its symbol. The first definite mention of a bear pit in Berne stems from the year 1441 and takes the form of an accounting item: the city council ordered some sacks of acorns as fodder for the bears. In 1513, we are told by a chronicler, the victorious Bernese returning from the Battle of Novara brought back with them a live bear amongst their booty. A kennel was built for him by the city

moat outside the middle gate, exactly where the Bärenplatz, or Bear Square, is today.

Since that time there have always been bears in Berne. With one single exception: in 1798 the French army took the bears to Paris along with the contents of the city treasury. Only one small dead cub remained in the bear pits. You can see it stuffed in the Historical Museum of Berne labelled: "The last bear of old Berne".

bear pit as "a really miserable hole in the ground". After complaints about cruelty to animals had brought the tourist attraction into disrepute, a renovation of the bear pit worth Sfr. 2.4 million was started at the end of 1994.

By 1996 the hitherto bare bear pit will be decorated and furnished in a way befitting its inhabitants. Soon these hunters and gatherers – who can weigh up to 300 kilos – will be able to bathe in fresh water, catch trout, trot about on sandstone without hurting their feet and when they are tired return to their dens – all things which are natural for townspeople. By the end of the century the hairy symbol of Berne will again attract tourists the way a honey pot attracts bears. There is also plenty of entertainment: to stop the bears getting bored the tourists make the oddest gestures and grimaces for them, wave at them, throw carrots into the pit and simply beam at the bears. And the bears do the same to the tourists.

(Foto: Ruben Sprich)



"A really miserable hole in the ground"

The old bear pit was moved several times before it found its present site near the big Nydegg Bridge. Up to twelve animals sometimes lived here at a depth of 3.5 metres. They were admired and fed every day, but people also had increasing sympathy for their plight. Even zoo director Müller describes the