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Autor: Baumann, Alice
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Playing jass – an important part of Swiss popular culture

Full of fun

Whether jack, queen, king or ace – they all look beautiful and are very seductive. Jass cards are revered by about half Switzerland's population. The proportion of jass players in the Fifth Switzerland is probably very high too. But be careful, for the cards betray the origin of every Swiss player.

Atable, four chairs and 36 cards are usually enough to get the evening going. Jass warms the heart, starts you ticking and at the same time gets the adrenalin flowing. At home, in the café, in a mountain hut, during military service,

Alice Baumann

on ship or train, jass mats are rolled out and cards spread over the table. Hard and fast rules there are none. It is a good idea to make sure you agree before you start playing.

It is a matter of keeping your cards close to your chest, of bidding or making choices, of putting your cards on the table, of outdoing your opponent, of laying down trumps at precisely the right moment.

But even the cleverest strategy does not guarantee victory. It is exhilarating to have a good hand – but cockiness seldom does any good, since experience shows that even the best horse can lose. You can have good or bad cards, and if you are playing in pairs you can get on well with your partner or not.

Jass is 50% a game of luck. But concentration, patience and a good memory are also helpful. "Chess players play the best jass", says one passionate player, "they are far-sighted and think three moves ahead".

What exactly is it that makes three and a half million Swiss, 60,000 of them championship players, so attached to jass? "I play because it relaxes me", explains self-appointed Swiss-German jass pope Göpf Egg. It also makes for good conversation. "Looked at in this way jass deserves the word entertainment in more than one sense".

For the last thirty years Egg has been organising jass tournaments for both men and women, writing advisor columns in newspapers, talking about jass on the radio, organising jass holidays abroad, giving courses in jass, writing books about jass and taking part in trade fairs to advertise jass.

In 1965 television interviewer Kurt Felix brought him on to the small screen. Since then jass programmes – with names like "Stöck – Wys – Stich" taken from the jass vocabulary – have been regularly aired. Jass shows

have also become a tradition on Swiss French-language television. Such broad publicity has apparently whetted the appetite of the Swiss people as a whole.

Warring jass barons

In his younger days Göpf Egg journeyed around Switzerland as a textiles salesman. Perhaps it is because of this background that he is at daggers drawn with one jass group which absolutely denies him the rank of jass expert. This title can be used by anyone in Switzerland of course, but there is no such professional qualification – that is the criticism. His "Official Swiss Jass Regulations" – published by AGMüller Neuhäusen ("Puur – Näll – As" in Swiss-German and "Valet d'atout" in French) – is now in its seventh edition and has already sold 62,000 copies. But it is condemned by his detractors as "incomplete and unnecessary". He puts "extremely strange and even grotesque ideas about jass into people's minds", writes Peter Hammer in his anti-Egg

manual, "Jass-Fahnder" (Jass Detective).

Mathematician Hammer thinks it is wrong to try to set up uniform laws binding the whole country. Every family, every group of friends, every jass community has the right to agree on its own conventions instead of applying Egg's "imprecise hairsplitting rules". Such formality makes a game sterile and deprives it of all its variety. If jass is to remain alive the game must be flexible. "Jass is a part of our old cultural heritage, and it has many local characteristics. This fine tradition should be continued", Peter Hammer's "Jass Statement 1990" was aptly illustrated by an Art Nouveau jass card from the year 1921. The bellman uses his big bell to push out strict rules and his small bell to ring in a new jass era based on tradition.

Card barrier right across Switzerland

As if there were not enough jass barriers already, three-quarters of the Swiss population play with French cards and a

Two different sets of jass cards are used in Switzerland. In the central and eastern regions, Swiss-German cards dominate with the bell, shield, rose and acorn suits, while in the rest of the country the French ones are used with hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades.



Jass for the asking

Starting with "Aucho" and ending with "Zuger", Göpf Egg's so-called "Official Swiss Jass Regulations" counts as many as 70 different jass variants. If we assume that such a list can never be really complete, it may be said that the rules of the game change almost from one round to the next. Crafty jass players will always think up new spiels, so that the list of jass types actually played is literally endless.

The most often played is probably the "Schieber". This has four players, with two against two. But even this has different sets of rules, starting with the simple way of counting up to 1,000 points until the "Coiffeur" (from the French "Quoi faire?" meaning "What to do, what trump suit to choose?"). Provided you do not want to take part in the Swiss jass championships, fantasy knows no bounds with regard to the rules.

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modest alcohol consumption of jass players, which irks innkeepers. Those who play jass do not drink much, and when they do it is the cheaper drinks like beer or cider that they order. They also stay put for a long time, and it is usually the jass players who make the most noise.

Politically correct for everybody

Jass is a politically neutral game and crosses party boundaries. Former Social Democrat Federal Councillor Otto Stich was known to invite parliamentarians from other parties to play jass with him at the Bern Hotel every Monday. The mentality is the same: there is much common ground between political calculation and jass strategy. You first have to have the trumps, and then you have to play them at the right moment...

But be careful, in both cases loners are not loved over much. At the end of the day the winner is the one who co-operates best with his partner. There is no lack of combinations in the cards. Göpf Egg says: "Jass players never hold the same set of cards twice in their whole lives". And indeed there are 91 million different ways of laying the cards on the table...