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The story of jass

Legacy of the mercenaries

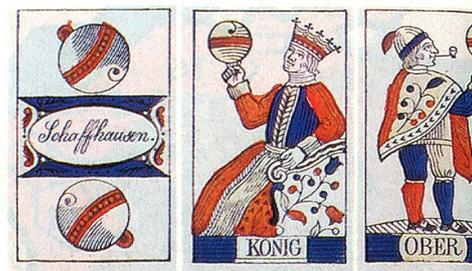
Cards have been played for 650 years. This is a Swiss tradition which is almost as old as Switzerland itself.

The popularity of card games in the Alpine countries goes back to the days of the mercenaries. Author and card-playing expert Sergius Golowin writes: "The only thing that brought people together in that Babel-like mishmash of languages was the common passion for every foolhardy game. So amongst adventurers coming together from east and west cards created something which may be described as a common denominator". The one thing that the cards of those days shared with those of today was the fact that they were divided into four suits. Where did the card game actually come from? Its forebears were apparently dice and chess. The ingenuity of the game of

cards, however, comes from the depths of anonymity, and no country and no one great spirit can lay claim to its discovery. Peter F. Kopp, art historian and expert on playing cards calls it "a cultural achievement of the people for the people".

A game without frontiers

The first mention we get of card-playing is its prohibition in Berne in 1367. Ten years later a Dominican known as Johannes von Rheinfelden describes the game of cards. Its main figures were four kings, of whom each held a different symbol. Every king had two



marshals one holding in his hand a sign upright (over) and the other a sign hanging (under). The four kings had ten numbered cards each, so that the game had 52 in all.

In 1389 the authorities in Schaffhausen also prohibited the playing of cards. It was thought that these games had some inherent power to unleash passion which could lead to recklessness and brawling and might plunge whole families into disaster.

When the reformers gained control of

A multicultural jass evening

Looking for concord

The game draws together. It smooths out differences and creates partnership, sometimes even concord. But it may also erect barriers, trouble minds and sow discord. The clarity and precision of the rules applied play a determining

role in this regard. And if a game of cards between habitués at the Café de Commerce does not need any particular preparation, it is quite a different matter when the players come from different quarters. Swiss Review decided to ex-



Inter-cultural jass game: a pleasant evening with instructive discoveries about friendly federal relationships.

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Old jass cards are coveted collectors' items. Cards made from wood engravings were individually designed and therefore have more character than present-day mass-produced ones.



Schaffhausen in 1529 the puritan clergy took over the struggle against fanatical card-playing. Laws, prohibitions, fines, even banishment, followed upon each other's heels. But they all availed nothing; the addiction to cards was stronger and produced ever new evil offshoots. This was the language of the ruling clergy who incessantly attempted to deal with the "drinking, gorging, dancing and playing" with drastic metaphors such as "scraping out the barrel".

Innocents from the countryside

Jass itself seems to have "immigrated" into Switzerland towards the end of the 18th century in the company of Swiss mercenaries returning from Holland. In Dutch the figure of the farmer as trump is known as "Jas" – and the "Nell", the second highest card, also comes from Holland. The first mention of the word "jass" comes from the village of Siblingen in Canton Schaffhausen. In this cattle-dealing village card-playing seems to have been particularly rampant, and the local priest, Balthasar Peyer, inveighed against it from the pulpit, crying out that "cards are often played right through the night on Sundays as well as on workdays". When none of his words were heeded he reported a number of farmers whom he had caught playing cards in the village hall to the Council in Schaffhausen. The main accused, Max Tanner and Sebas-

tian Weber, were called for questioning. They admitted that they had played a game "which is called jass over a glass of wine, more than that they cannot be reproached for". The Council contented itself with "a severe caution in order to keep them away from card-playing".

AB

A single-headed card (left) made from a wood engraving, and a double-headed card (right) printed by lithography. Cards have been double-headed since 1934, so that you never have to turn them round. (Photos: Max Baumann, Peter Mosimann)



periment with such a situation, which after all must be very familiar to you, my expatriate friends. Please do not think we are trying to teach you a lesson. It was simple curiosity, and a touch of gamesmanship too, that inspired the experiment.

Around a table in a café in Berne we find Charlotte Zehner, a Romansh-speaker from the Engadine, Agnes Rüesch, originally from Toggenburg, Michel Turberg, a Jurassien from Ajoie and yours truly, replacing at the last minute an Italian-speaker prevented from joining us by the call of duty. Introductions – and then the first rule: everyone would speak his or her own language. This did not last long, and very soon we were all speaking Swiss-German dialect. After all, we were in Berne, and not everyone feels at home with "Rumantsch ladin".

On the green mat three packs of cards: an old-fashioned German pack brought by Michel Turberg, a modern German pack and a French pack. German cards or French cards? It was decided to play a German game and then a French one. The German game first. It would go as far as 2,500 points; bell (Schelle) and crown (Schilte) to count double, from high to low (obenabe) and from low to high (undenufe) to count triple. In Toggenburg, says Agnes (we are soon saying "Du" to each other) you go up to 3,000, and low on high counts quadruple. For the calls no problem, it is

the same for all of us – except for Agnes, her again, who thinks six cards in a run count 120.

Although very interested and curious, Michel and yours truly are happy at the thought of soon getting back to the French pack; the German one is a sore trial to our concentration. Agnes will soon be having the same difficulties as us, although Charlotte is equally at ease with either. The Romansh are condemned to multiculturalism!

With the French pack we choose the classic "Schieber" game. As in the German one we make a whole series of detailed rules to prevent any future misunderstanding: match to the opponent in the event of a mistake; ban on putting down the suit shown in the case of a wrong opening by your

partner; stöck, calls, tricks counted in that order to win; the partner of the one who goes trumps waits for the latter's decision before raising his cards; in the first round the seven of diamonds is trumps in the "Schieber", the ten of clubs or the ten of roses in the German game.

Mere details, some will say. But they do have their importance, and they played a large part in the spirit of concord which pervaded that evening devoted to jass. An evening which must be repeated!

Pierre-André Tschanz

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