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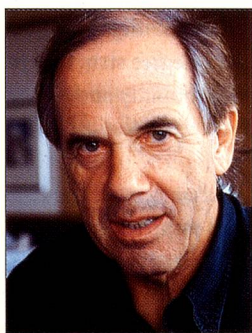
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On heroic Tell and the solemn Rütli oath

On 17 March 1804, an important event took place in the city of Weimar: the première of the play "Wilhelm Tell", written by Germany's best-loved playwright, Friedrich Schiller, and directed by Germany's greatest poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Over 200 years later, on 23 July 2004, yet another première will take place when the drama about Switzerland's national hero is staged on the historic Rütli meadow.

William Tell is the most powerful figure in Swiss history. Around 1440 Hans Schriber, an Obwalden clerk of courts, blended chronicles of central Switzerland with an early Norse saga about a hero and a murderous tyrant, to create this impressive legend of liberation. His "White Book of Sarnen" is the oldest version of the Tell story and was used by Schiller as a basis for his theatrical drama. If ever there were any documentary evidence that proved that Tell was a real person, it no longer exists: important documents that may have provided such proof were destroyed in the great fire of Altdorf in 1789. Certainly, Tell's deeds were mentioned by reformer Ulrich Zwingli and other contemporaries around 1500. And even today, historian Jean-François Bergier describes Tell as "scarcely a mere fantasy figure". Yet leading literary and historical experts have allowed his deeds to become the stuff of legend, and in the process turned the brave man with a crossbow into a hero of mythical proportions. Schiller's play catapulted Tell onto the world's literary stage. The Tell monument in Altdorf by sculptor Richard Kissling and the painting of Tell by Ferdinand Hodler turned our national hero into an icon. "The political will of Switzerland kept Tell alive. This political will demanded that history be true, and so it became true," explains literary expert Peter von Matt.

Is the Rütli oath also a myth? At the beginning of August 1291, the three confederates from Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden swore their allegiance and solidarity for all eternity. The Federal Charter of 1291 is kept in the Federal Manuscript Archives in Schwyz, but the circumstances of the time give historians cause for doubt. At that time the confederate oath was more of a pledge sworn by three men from central Switzerland to set aside their private feuds. They had no intention of sharing their power either with the people or with for-



Rolf Ribi

The political will of the Swiss kept Tell alive.

eign rulers. The word "freedom" is not mentioned in the Federal Charter. 1291 was designated the founding date of the Confederation only 600 years later, in a turbulent era when the young federal state was only half a century old, major new powers were emerging in Europe, and the seeds of nationalism were beginning to sprout in many countries.

So it was that, in 1891, the Swiss drew on their ancient confederate myths and declared 1291 to be the founding date of the Confederation and 1 August as the new Swiss National Day.

Can we modern Swiss accept William Tell as a mythical character, the Rütli oath as a legend and Friedrich Schiller's play as fiction? "Every country thrives on myths and legends, despite historians' claims to the contrary," writes Urs Altermatt, a professor of contemporary history. "Myths are part of a country's cultural treasures," says historian Georg Kreis. Indeed: how poor our national soul would be without courageous Tell and the solemn Rütli oath!

Rolf Ribi

Translated from German



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COVER: Ueli Hiltbold

SWISS REVIEW

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