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William Tell's statues: A New Zealand twist

The legend of William Tell is a lasting mystery. True or false? It certainly sounds all too real. Remember: William Tell travels to Altdorf, Uri, with his son Walter in November 1307. Fatefully, he refuses to bow to the hat which the Habsburg Bailiff Gessler has placed on a pole in the town square to enforce the submission of his subjects.

Gessler threatens with execution unless Tell shoots an apple off Walter's head with his crossbow. It's a bull's eye and Walter survives. When Gessler finds out that a second arrow in Tell's hand was intended for him should Walter have died, he arrests Tell and has him taken by boat to his castle at Küssnacht. On that stormy journey, Tell manages to escape via the "Tellenplatte". Set for revenge, Tell runs cross-country to Küssnacht. He ambushes Gessler at the "Hohle Gasse" (hollow way) between Immensee and Küssnacht and kills him with his second arrow. It is said that this event sets the scene for the Rütlischwur and the old Swiss Confederacy.

Tell's defiance of the Habsburg overlords made him a national hero. It is not surprising that Tell has been memorised in many chronicles, songs, poems and also a series of statues.

The location of the event was initially marked by a Lindentree in Altdorf's town square, first chronicled to be there in 1257. In 1563, the tree was cut down. A fountain featuring the first statue of William Tell replaced it in 1583. Unfortunately, no picture of this exists.

Around 1786, Josef Benedikt Curiger of Einsiedeln (1754-1816) designed a new fountain and William Tell statue. Stone masons used granite boulders from the famous "Tellenplatte" to carve the fountain.



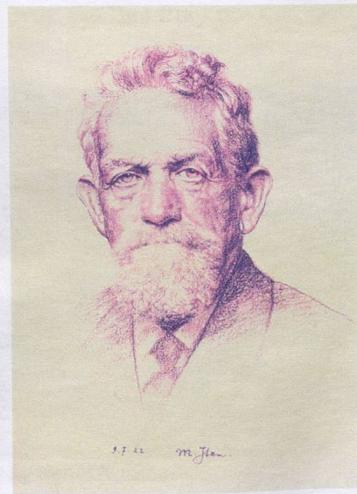
Josef Curiger's Tell statue
©www.museen-uri.ch



Gottfried Siegfried's Tell statue
© www.antiquaprintgallery.com



Richard Kissling's Tell statue
Roland Zumbühl / www.picswiss.ch / GFDL
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Dominik Iten at age 72
Drawing by Meinrad Iten

Josef Curiger's statue survived for some 200 years, when new events overtook it. On the occasion of the Swiss Federal Shooting Competition in Zuerich in 1859, Heinrich Siegfried of Wipkingen (1814-1889) created a new statue of William Tell.

The people of Uri loved it and asked the City of Zurich whether it would gift the statue to Altdorf. The city agreed and soon the statue was inaugurated with much fanfare in the Altdorf's Kirchstrasse (Church Street). Curiger's statue was relegated to the "Zeughaus" (armoury). Later, the people of Bürglen, Tell's assumed place of birth, discovered it. They transferred it to Bürglen's church square where it remains to this day.

Despite the fanfare, Tell's third statue did not last for long. From 1865, new plans emerged for yet another, fourth statue. These efforts were intensified in 1888, when both cantonal and federal organisations got together to organise a competition. In 1892, Richard Kissling's design emerged as the winner from a total of 30 competitors. The model for Kissling's Tell was no other than Dominik Iten, grandfather to Hans Iten of the Auckland Swiss Club (refer to the blue box for the story).

Kissling's Tell had a rapturous reception. It captured everyone's feelings with its simplicity, life, strength and pride, and the evidently trusting relationship between Tell and his son Walter. The monument stands eight meters high in front of a tower in Altdorf, displaying a painted background designed by Hans Sandreuter. The monument cost the considerable sum of SFR 142,457, of which SFR 109,565 was paid as fee to Richard Kissling.

Story based on an article published in the "Zuger Kalender".

Dominik Iten

Dominik Iten (1850 -1929) was a well respected farmer, cattle trader and cheesemaker in the village of Unterägeri - not far from Altdorf. One day, Dominik travelled to Altdorf's cattle market. Here, Kissling happened to be searching for his "Tell" and spotted the formidable Dominik. How appropriate for this discovery to take place in Altdorf itself. Dominik agreed to Kissling's proposition to be his model and they exchanged addresses.

There being no phone, trains or busses - travel by horse-drawn carriage was the only means of transport - Kissling arrived unannounced in Unterägeri. Dominik was out making hay and Kissling waited outside Unterägeri by a chapel. Here, he eventually spotted Dominik returning from the fields, scythe across the shoulder, and holding the hand of one of his young sons. Kissling immediately formed his vision of the future statue of Tell with his son Walter.

Dominik agreed to sit for the sculptor on a log outside his farmhouse. There was no ceremony, no combing of hair, no dressing up - much as we imagine William Tell himself. Kissling returned to Unterägeri many times to sketch his modest model and to get a true feeling of his "Tell". The only payment Dominik accepted for this was a "Zabig" (dinner).

Dominik Iten was 42 years old when Kissling made his sketches leading up to 1892. Sadly, Dominik fell victim to a random political attack later in his life. Stabbed several times, he survived but was not able to continue work.

Thanks to Hans Iten for generously sharing this story and also the beautiful sketch of an older Dominik Iten below.