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Säntis

The mysterious 'Säntis'.

I have to admit, geography was not my strength as a child. Every time my family drove from Winterthur to Wildhaus to spend a weekend at the holiday house, we made a game out of predicting the name of the next village we would pass. Entirely unable to recall these names, I did not even try to participate. The only thing I did announce, however, was the sight of the Säntis. Once we would see the Säntis, I knew that the holiday house was no longer far away (think Swiss distances). Of course, I could only distinguish the Säntis from other mountains because of its red-and-white-striped tower (a Swisscom telecommunications tower) that majestically watches over the 'Alpstein'.

This tower I would then seek out wherever we went: on a hike to the 'Gamplüt', when eating ice cream at the 'Alpenrose', or before skiing down the slopes of the 'Chäserrugg'. One fine day, we made the journey to the 'Schwägalp' from where we boarded the gondola that took us up to that familiar yet unexplored mountain. 10 minutes and 2307 metres later, we stood 2'501 metres above sea level. Apparently, I should have been able to see not only down to our lovely holiday house and the 'Churfürsten', but also spot Germany, Austria, Liechtenstein, France, and Italy! Given that my only reliable point of reference was right behind me, distinguishing between countries was, of course, impossible for me!

Instead, I decided to look around the weather station. I walked up the stairs to the 'Windmesserhäuschen', holding on tightly to the rail. Even though it was summer, the wind was nasty and the jumper that I hastily put on did not protect me from the cold. I nevertheless listened to my mum who came after me and started reading from the pamphlet we were given down by the station.
As far back as 1879, Switzerland apparently followed the rules of the Meteorologist Congress of Rome to build a weather station on a freely accessible mountain top. In 1882, the Säntis Station was finished and ready for the first meteorologists to work on. Up at this height, with winds reaching 230 km/h, lighting bolts crashing down regularly, and snow depths reaching up to 8 metres, measuring the amount of precipitation or keeping the wheel of the anemometer free from snow must have been extremely strenuous!

In 1887, when the observatory was built and linked to the mountaintop with an underground tunnel, the meteorologists even started to live on top of the Säntis. They relied on some faithful locals to provide them with food but also had to carry out manual labour such as chopping wood. Before measuring the weather was automatized, being the 'Wetterwart' on Säntis was extraordinarily hard! I walked around the weather station a little more until we finally began our five-hour descent to Wildhaus (yes, the Säntis can be reached on foot from various paths, which are particularly safe in August and September when the pathways are free of snow). On the evening of that same day, during dinner with my parents, and when I believed I had finally become acquainted with the landmark, I was informed about its great mystery: the murder of the meteorologist couple in 1922.

Apparently, a man called Gregor Anton Kreuzpointner desperately wanted to be the weatherman on Säntis, and was bitterly disappointed when the position was instead offered to Lena and Heinrich Haas. A few years later, the experienced mountaineer Kreuzpointner decided to hike up to the Säntis on a day where the danger of avalanches was so grave his action could only be considered suicidal. However, Kreuzpointner reached the top intact. He spent a few days with the couple (as an annoying guest); then he shot them, skied back down the mountain, and hung himself. The motives for the murders remain unknown.

These days, when I drive up to the holiday house, I can actually recall the names of the villages before I pass through them (well... most of them). What remains unchanged, however, is the feeling that I get when I see the Säntis: it's the warm feeling that embraces you when you have two days to spend in the peaceful solitude of the Swiss mountains. Luzia Sauer

Book recommendation:
J.C. Heer. Der Wetterwart. 1921.
Online: https://archive.org/details/derwetterwartrom00heeruoft
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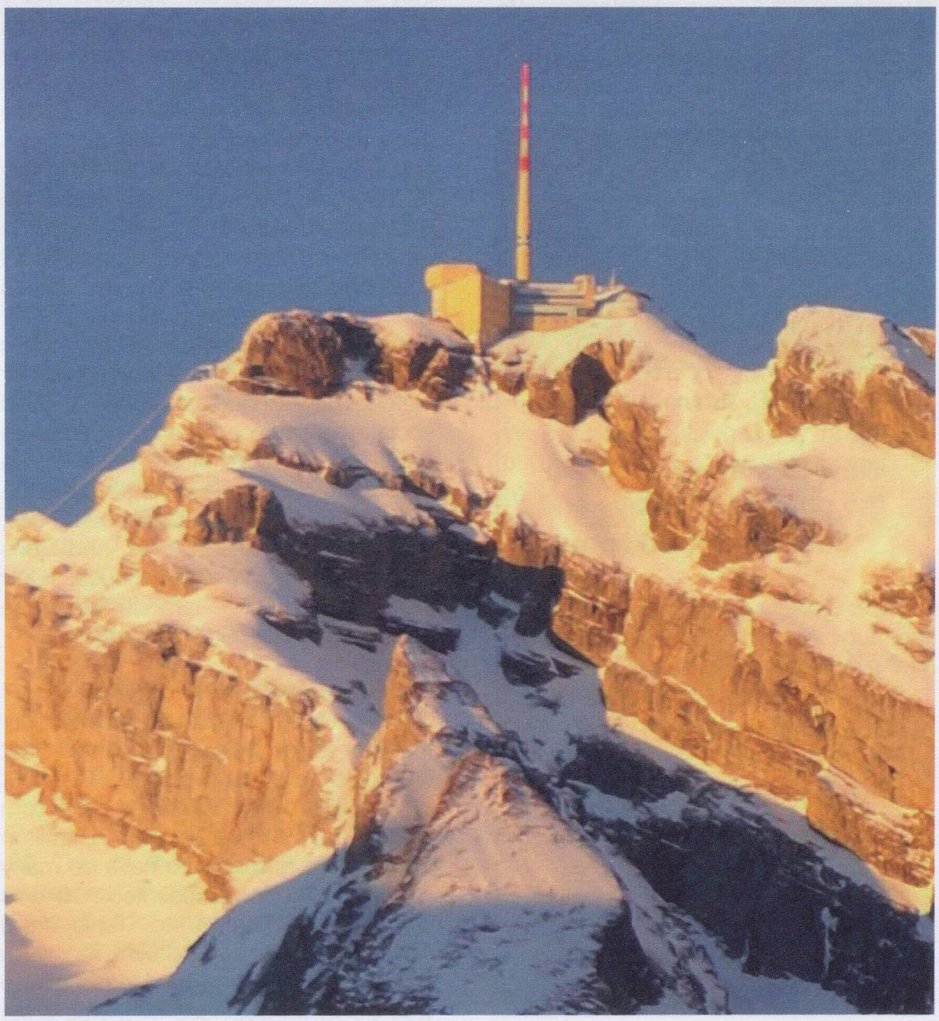

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