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Autor: [s.n.]
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Switzerland's National Costume



“Tracht” is the German word for the Swiss national costume.

The word “Tracht” had a much wider meaning in German in the sense of “what is carried/worn”. It is connected to the verb “tragen” – to carry/wear/bear. In the French part the Tracht is called “costume”.

With the wearing of a Tracht, Swiss express their closeness and connection to their place of origin in Switzerland.

Switzerland has around 800 different Trachten. The Trachten not only differ in each of the 26 Kantons (states), but also within each Kanton, depending on the region or district. This is particularly so for the female Tracht. Each region also has a different Tracht for different occasions such as: to wear for working; to wear during the week; to wear on Sunday; to wear while mourning; to wear to weddings; to wear on festive occasions; to wear during summer and winter.

The costumes date back to the middle ages and were originally mainly made of darker colours and were made full length.

The social status of a person was reflected in the richness of the materials used, and jewellery worn. The more affluent people and rich city folk wore the most beautiful silk costumes with a lot of embroidery and lace. Country people, mostly farmers, wore Trachten made from cotton, hemp and flax and the Tracht was their working uniform.

As part of the emerging industrialisation in the 19th century, the Tracht disappeared more and more in favour of urban clothes for everyday life. Cheap factory goods replaced handmade goods, and in the cities, women preferred to wear crinolines.

In 1840, there were only about 44 different costumes remaining. These costumes were only worn for very special



occasions, such as church processions in the Catholic regions, special traditional days and in the city of Bern, for agriculture exhibitions.

At the beginning of the 1900s, the Swiss National Trust tried to re-vitalise the Tracht. During WW1, women entertained the sick and injured soldiers with Swiss folk songs wearing their Trachten. Thus, the costume became a symbol of Swiss patriotism.

The re-vitalisation of the Tracht created a lot of work. Most of the farm houses had a weaver's loom and a spinning wheel. Farming wives were producing the most beautiful material for the costumes. In the predominantly Catholic regions, a lot of textiles were produced in convents. The nuns were kept busy weaving and producing the delicate embroideries.

A very strong point of identification is the hat. Almost every region has a different hat. Some are made of straw or lace, horsehair, silk ribbons, velvet or felt.

Men often wear the “Mutz”, a short sleeve black velvet jacket, a blouse, dress shirt or a dress smock. The special tops are generously embroidered with a motive of alpine flowers. In Eastern Switzerland, men wear a richly embellished short sleeve jacket with silver buttons.

To keep up with traditions, women who attend certain agriculture schools in Switzerland still make their own costumes from scratch as part of their schooling.

It has been estimated that over 80,000 Swiss wear and own a Tracht – many of them in the Canton of Appenzell.

The Tracht is an important cultural symbol of Switzerland. Together with Swiss dance and music, they enhance some wonderful traditions.

