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THE BEARS OF BERNE.

Berne, delightful old town with its cool arcaded streets, its magnificent Renaissance fountains, its fine historic buildings and churches — what a wonderful evocation of the past it is!

The enchanted visitor will sooner or later find his way to the Nydegg Bridge close to which lie the famous bear-pits, the home of the beasts whose picture adorns the coat of arms of the town and canton.

There are other places in Switzerland which display a heraldic beast in their cantonal crests. Bâle has its fabulous basilik, Uri its steer, Zurich its lion, but none of them dominates the towns in the way the bear dominates Berne. You find it on the front of houses, on the fountains, on the wood carvings of the choir stalls in the Minster, it appears on documents, it fills the shops. And, above all, it lives in the pit, an attraction to natives and visitors alike, an attraction of which they never tire. As M. D. Hottinger puts it: "What the banks are to Bâle, the bear is to Berne".

What is the origin of this ursine cult? Tradition has it that Berchtold of Zaehringen, the founder of Berne, having organised a great chase, vowed to call his town after the first quarry he should slay. It is doubtful though whether in the 12th century there were any bears in the vicinity. It may well be that the cult goes far back into Celtic or Roman times since in the Historical Museum can be seen a bronze, probably Roman, showing "Dea Artio", the goddess with the bear.

By the 14th century the bear was well established in the history of Berne. The earliest chronicles show it and it appears in all the drawings and miniatures that have come down to us from the middle ages. In the famous drawing by Diebold Schilling which shows the men of Berne setting out for the battle of Laupen (1339) the bear is boldly displayed on their banners and armour; he appears on every occasion when the Bernese warriors went into battle, at Granson, Morat, Marignano and right through history to the present time. The importance of the bear to the Swiss from Berne was well understood by their allies. Returning from the battle of Novara in 1513, the captain of the Bernese regiment serving in the French army brought back a young bear presented to him by the French Marshal.

At least one live bear was kept in captivity in the 15th Century. In 1549 the first pit was constructed, a new and larger pit was made in 1764; the present pit near the Nydegg bridge was opened in 1857.

Today some 20 bears are kept in the best possible conditions. Climbing trees, a bathing pool and comfortable stabling are provided. The animals breed and bring up their young. The largest of them, called Moritz, weighs some 500 lbs. When he was supplied with a mate he seemed dissatisfied and used to climb the tree looking wistfully across the partition which separated him from another female. In due course he was allowed into the adjoining enclosure and was happy ever afterwards.

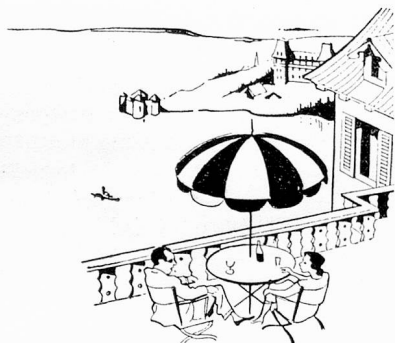
Many distinguished visitors have watched the bears, from Fenimore Cooper to Field Marshall Montgomery.

Is it too far-fetched to see in the ponderous strength and the unhurried dignity of these bears something of the characteristics of the human Bernese?

We were prompted to write this short sketch by an attractive illustrated brochure published by the Verlag Hans Huber, Berne under the title "Der Mutz und sein Graben" by Paul Senn.

J.J.F.S.

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