

Cultural life in Switzerland

Autor(en): **Huber-Renfer, F.**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1956)**

Heft 1279

PDF erstellt am: **21.09.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-692101>

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CULTURAL LIFE IN SWITZERLAND.

By DR. F. HUBER-RENFER.

The Burgdorf Castle.

Whilst we are on the subject of castles in Switzerland we must certainly speak of the castle in Burgdorf, which is one of the stateliest among them. Perhaps some of you may have seen it already, when travelling by rail from Zurich to Berne. Soon after having passed through the tunnel by the little town of the same name, you may glimpse it for a few moments, on your left, rising above the valley from a rocky ridge. A still more impressive view of it is obtained by those who journey to Burgdorf, through the Emmenthal. This mighty building, with its imposing breadth and ponderosity, rises skywards, dominating the whole of the surrounding landscape.

Here, on the spot where now stands the castle, cave-dwellers lived, in time immemorial, in the so-called Dragon's Hole; the remains of walls and coins which have been found there, testify to the fact that the Romans also engaged in some building here, and it is to them that is attributed the forty-eight metre deep well that is to be found here. A belt-buckle found here recalls the time of the migration of nations.

The most brilliant period of the existence of this hill which bears the castle was, however, at the time of the Dukes of Zähringen, who, as Rectors of Burgundy reigned at that time over practically the whole of the territory which now constitutes Switzerland. It is alleged that soon after 1127, Conrad the Second began with the work of building the Watch-tower, which was the principal tower of a mediaeval fortified town, and the inner circle of the Burg. Berchtold the Fourth and Berchtold the Fifth, the latter being the founder of Berne, continued his work and by building the great hall of the castle, they raised it to being the imposing residence suited to the power and the wealth of the Dukes of Zähringen. From this safe retreat, the reigning family could often once again build up its position, that had been shattered by unruly feudal lords.


And what unusual proportions were given to the various buildings! The Tower Gate alone, which was erected in 1560 and built of huge square sand-stones, stands before us as a symbol of restrained power. Its loopholes tell us that it obtained its present structure, after the discovery of fire-arms. Passing by the guard-house, the outer works of the castle, the barns and stables, and the afore-mentioned well, we come to the principal entrance, above which rises the watch-tower; this is ten by ten metres square and thirty-three metres in height. The openings to be found just under the roof betray its true destination. For it was not built for the purpose of being lived in, but as a watch-tower from which the watchman could see far away, across hills and dales and report the appearance of any approaching enemies. But it is the enormous central hall which gives the seignorial touch to the whole building. With its superficial area measuring 25 by 12 metres and its height of 31 metres, this hall speaks with all the impressiveness of its architectonic language of the greatness and power of its builder.

To these mighty towers, rising towards the heavens, there are added some living quarters on the north and on the east, as well as the South Wing which was built in 1430. The latter stands above the

Dragon's Hole, in which, according to legend, a fierce dragon lived in Celtic times.

No sooner had the Zähringers consolidated their power than Berchtold the Fifth died, in the year of Our Lord 1218. As he was without children, his possessions in our country went to the Counts of Kyburg. It was under them that the castle lived through its most glorious days. It became the place of lively, colourful banquets, of the clash of swords, and the splintering of lances in brilliant tournaments. Very soon, however, the wealth of the castle-owners was gone, and with it went also all the gay doings. But, meanwhile, the town of Burgdorf that had grown up under the shelter of the castle, had sprung forward tremendously. Methodically, the municipal authorities bought up the woods and farms which the Kyburgers wanted to sell in exchange for the money that they needed so badly, and in 1273 the town obtained a Charter for its rights and liberties. Indeed, it obtained suzerainty over nineteen Communes, which it had administered by two bailiffs. Burgdorf became an independent little town, fully conscious of its aims, and protected by mighty walls and a wreath of proud towers, a little town which has preserved a great deal of its charm up to the present.

In 1384, the town and the castle went over to Berne, by deed of sale. The castle became the residence of the Bernese High Bailiff, who acted as Mayor of Burgdorf. To day, it is the seat of the Cantonal Authorities, but maintains in its Knights' Hall and in its Chapel, ancient treasures, of which we will speak another time.



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