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1965 The Year
of the Alps

CAPTAIN SPELTERINI, SWITZERLAND'S BALLOONING PIONEER

International High Alpine Ballooning Week.

Born at the hamlet of Neuhaus, Bazenheid-Kirchberg (St. Gall), on 2nd June 1852. His real name was Eduard Schweizer, son of Sigmund and Maria Schweizer-Sütterli. The "Neuhaus" is the oldest group of houses in the village of Oberbazenheid, dating from the seventeenth century. Later it was partly converted into a beer-brewery (Edward's father, as a matter of fact, was a beer-brewer and an inn-keeper at the Neuhaus country inn).

The Schweizer family seems to have moved to Northern Italy before Edward was six. When he was eighteen, however, it appeared that he had gone through the schools of Lugano, Southern Switzerland. At that time he applied for a Swiss passport and went to Milan and Paris to study music.

His ambition was to become a professional singer. He had such a wonderful voice. At the Paris Conservatoire of music he was one of the most highly gifted students of that period. He then fell seriously ill with pneumonia, which threatened to interfere with his promising career. When he was recovering a chance led to his first participation in a balloon flight. He was much impressed by this experience that he decided to switch from music to civil aviation. He became a student at the Paris Academy of Aeronautics, and after his 200th flight he was appointed a member of the Académie d'Aérostation Météorologique de France. Even after becoming a celebrated "balloon driver" under the self-styled pseudonym of "Captain Spelterini", he remained an artist and continued to lead the life of a bohemian. He was an attractive man, "with dreamy blue eyes, powerful and determined features, an artist's forehead framed by dark curly hair and the charming manners of a man of the world". Despite his stockiness, he was the favourite of all ladies.

In September 1887, he flew from Vienna to Oldenburg, Hungary. He searched the world of the stars for names to give to his beloved balloons. He named them "Urania", "Wega", "Jupiter", "Stella" and "Sothes" (the holy star of the old Egyptians). On 16th August 1888, when he undertook a flight over Leicester, England, he took along a representative of the newspaper "Midland Free Press".

He undertook flights from and over Bucharest, Athens and Salonika and then went on to Cairo. On 4th March 1890, he flew over the Pyramids in his balloon "Urania". His passenger list included high British officers headed by General Dormer, commander-in-chief in Egypt, and two newsmen. When, later in 1890, he chose Naples for several successful flights in which a number of Italian socialites took part, he was acclaimed as a hero by the local population.

Another city he was reported to use as a base for several balloon flights was Istanbul, then called Constantinople.

In 1891, Spelterini discovered his own country, Switzerland, as the most fascinating playground for balloon flyers. On 26th July of that year he made his first

start aboard the "Urania" from a public square in Zurich. His two passengers were a Zurich alderman and a young school-teacher, J. C. Heer. This latter young man came along as a part-time news reporter. His enthusiastic reports on the flight were so well written and successful that he made up his mind to be a writer — and actually became one of Switzerland's most famous authors of alpine novels.

Also in the 'nineties, Spelterini was flying "expeditions" in high altitudes to study the effects of the mysterious "mountain sickness". It was on account of this legendary disease that the Swiss federal authorities first hesitated to authorize the construction of the Jungfrau railway, as it was pointed out that passengers travelling up to an elevation of over 11,000 feet above sea-level were likely "to fall ill and even die from the mountain sickness".

Towards the end of the year 1893, Spelterini temporarily left Switzerland. He was believed to show up in St. Petersburg and Moscow. In 1894 he was reported to be in Belgium, 1895 in Italy, traversing Mount Vesuvio. At that time he began to take photographs from the balloon basket. With his friend and frequent passenger, the Zurich geologist Prof. Albert Heim, Spelterini had earlier discussed the possibility of traversing the Alps by air. A trans-alpine balloon flight conference eventually took place at the Federal Meteorological Institute in Zurich, on 29th January 1898, in the presence of several eminent scientists and military big-brass. On 3rd October of the same year, the "Wega" started from Sion, capital of the Valais. But instead of being driven into the Alps, it was blown off the mountains by a strong "Föhn" wind deep into the French territory, in the direction of Paris and the Channel coast. The crew, however, decided to land, at about 4.30 p.m. beyond the French town of Besançon. The "Wega", in five hours and forty-four minutes, had covered a distance of 230 kilometers and, for the first time, a balloon had actually been flown over part of the Alps.

Spelterini's most famous "trans-alpine" balloon was his old "Sirius". On 12th August 1910, he again made it ready for a jaunt, this time starting from Mürren, Bernese Oberland. His two invited passengers were Baron L. Rothschild and Dr. Ed. Etthofen. Off they went over the mighty Bernese Alps, the Matterhorn region and the adjacent giants of the Valais and Savoy Alps. The balloon began to lose height over the Aosta valley and eventually came to a landing on the slope of the Monte Basso above Turin, Italy.

After several more flights in the Alps and elsewhere in Switzerland, Spelterini again went abroad. Back in 1904, he had again flown over the Suez Canal and the Giseh Pyramids, in 1906 over Athens and the Acropolis. On 19th July, 7th and 23rd August 1911, he took a flight over the diamond fields and the city of Johannesburg, South Africa.

In August 1914, all these activities came to a sudden end due to the outbreak of the first World War, and the "captain" retired to the village of Coppet on the Lake of Geneva. He had acquired quite a big fortune, but, as many others, he lost everything in 1918 through the inflation. The 66-year-old balloon flyer, in the post-war period, tried in vain to revive once again his glorious past. To make some money, he joined a "circus", as he put it, by doing some of his ballooning tricks at the Tivoli amusement park in Copenhagen.

He eventually retired to a small hut at the Austrian village of Zipf where he lived on charity from his friends. Then his eyes failed, and an expensive operation seemed

inevitable. In order to raise the money for it the 74-year-old, on 16th September 1926, went on his last balloon trip aboard the "Zurich", starting from the Zurich suburb of Schlieren and taking along three passengers.

The trip ended with an emergency landing on the rocky walls of Mount Oferl in the Vorarlberg Alps. No one was hurt. Blindness soon befell Spelterini, and he passed his last years in complete darkness and solitude. He died on 16th June 1931. He was later declared Europe's No. 1 Promoter of Air Tourism, and is was certainly his merit that the Swiss became "balloon-conscious". Up to this day, balloon flying has been a popular sport in Switzerland, and there is hardly a popular festival without at least one balloon start. Captain Spelterini, in the forty-three years of his activity, undertook 570 balloon flights with a total of 1,237 passengers. Recorded flights took place from thirty-one cities and towns in Switzerland as well as from places in Egypt, Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Germany, England, France, Greece, Italy, Austria, Poland, Russia, Romania, South Africa, Turkey and Hungary. Legend has it that he also visited India where he started from Bombay. Within three decades he gave more than 600 lectures in four different languages, from Stockholm to Cape Town.

F.B.

Translated and condensed from Dr. Erich Tilgenkamp's "Schweizer Luftfahrt", published in 1941/42 by Aero Verlag, Zurich, under the auspices of the Aero Club of Switzerland.

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By courtesy S.N.T.O.

ACROSS THE ALPS BY BALLOON

The Week of Ballooning, which will be held for the fourth time at Mürren during the last half of August, seems particularly appropriate in this Year of the Alps. In addition to the balloon pilots and their passengers, who will be there for the competition flight across the Alps, there will be other pilots, ground-crew personnel, and meteorologists from all over the world, assembled at Mürren as spectators of the exciting event. The week's program will include an attempt on the World Record for Accuracy of Pilot Flight Reporting, as well as courses on Alpine ballooning, meteorology and navigation.

[S.N.T.O.]

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