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Autor: Epsetin, Eugene V.
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THINGS SWISS

by
Eugene V. Epstein

Mark Twain seems to have slept in almost as many places in Europe as George Washington did in America. As a matter of fact, if we were to compute the number of hours the good humorist is supposed to have spent in various European resorts alone, we would find that he lived to the ripe age of three hundred and twenty-seven years. And when he wasn't sleeping in every hotel on every European byway, Mark Twain was creating aphorisms and local bits of humour, much of which is as valid today as when it was written.

In one particularly famous piece, he took apart the German language in such a devastating manner that it will probably never recover from the onslaught. Among other helpful suggestions to tourists, he pointed out that one can speak German quite acceptably with a vocabulary of but three magic words. The first of these was *Zug*, with a total of 544 different meanings (drawing, expedition, blast, railway train, flock, migration, platoon, inclination, etc.).

If this first attempt should fail to elicit an intelligent response, the next word to try was *Schlag*, with only 392 basic meanings, but far more colourful and more likely to be universally understood (punch, rhythm, carriage-door, tilled field, fit of apoplexy, etc.). Should fate nevertheless spare one the satisfaction of being understood with either *Zug* or *Schlag*, continued Mark Twain, the last resort was to stare your conversational opponent in the eye and say: "*Also!*" I may be misquoting the author of *A Tramp Abroad*, but this was, in any case, the general idea.

It's too bad that Mark Twain did not have a go at the Swiss-German language, for here he would have found a wealth of material at his disposal. But the subject is still virgin territory, with the exception of those well-known remarks comparing Swiss German to a throat disease or some other illness. It is furthest from my thoughts to malign the most widely spoken language in Switzerland or to discuss expressiveness or musical values or whatever else passes for scientific evaluation of other people's native tongues. On the contrary, I want simply to offer my personal advice to those visitors who would like to get along in Swiss-German:

Grüezi — Most important word in Switzerland. Means, roughly, "Hi, neighbour", and is generally followed by a nod of the head and a very quick smile.

Grüezi mitenand — Same as above, except that *mitenand* means "all together", hence "greetings, all together", when more than one person is present.

Guet Nacht mitenand — "Sleep well, all together."

Oder? — "Or" Frequently used. May be substituted for the period in every Swiss sentence and is the first known instance of phonetic punctuation in a modern language. Means, "If you don't agree with what I'm saying, you can very well leave the premises."

So — Means almost anything, but used chiefly whenever a conversation seems to be slowing down to prove that the participants are not falling asleep. With great inflection, the combined form, *So-So*, may be repeated incessantly to mean, for example: "Last week while visiting my aunt in Winterthur I heard the most remarkable account of her trouble with the local plumber who insisted on dismantling the hot-water pipes while the children were in the bathtub but I told her not to worry that's one of the disadvantages of prosperity and the time will come again when these people will be happy when a few crumbs are tossed their way."

Ja-Ja — "I couldn't agree with you more." On certain occasions, natives of northern Switzerland can be overhead conversing in these unique short forms, of which every other modern country should be envious:

Fritzli — (Entering a typical local inn in Switzerland): Grüezi, Ueli.

Ueli — Grüezi, Fritzli.

Fritzli — Ja-Ja.

Ueli — So-So.

Fritzli — Isch wahr (how true)! *Oder?*

Ueli — Glaubstsch (think so)? *Oder?*

Fritzli — Ja-Ja

Ueli — So-So.

So much for our first lesson in the Swiss-German language. Now, to reduce what we have learned to the barest essentials, keep the following rules in mind:

1. If it says *Grüezi* first, say *Grüezi* back.
2. If it moves or seems alive, say *Grüezi* anyway.
3. If it doesn't move or seem alive, pick it up, and help keep Switzerland looking neat.

Those readers interested in furthering their knowledge of one of the world's most fascinating languages may write to the author, requesting a copy of the interesting booklet, *The Development and Derivation of Swiss-German from Its Earliest Known Beginnings in the Pleistocene Period to Its Present-Day Form and 93 Dialects*.

This publication will be available for distribution as soon as the necessary research has been completed.

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