

# The Battle of St. Jakob

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## THE BATTLE OF ST. JAKOB a/BIRS.

(26th August, 1444)

The battle of St. Jakob a/Birs near Basle, the 500th anniversary of which is being celebrated now, was the direct outcome of the first civil war in Switzerland, called the old Zurich war.

In order to refresh our memories it may perhaps not be out of place to focus our attention for a moment on a retrospect of the times directly preceding this battle.

Unity was, up to then, the watch-word of the Confederates of the eight old cantons, which enabled them to overcome any external enemy. But suddenly the flames of rivalry broke out, causing disunity and eventually civil war. The main cause of this was the eagerness for aggrandizement by Zurich and Schwyz. At the head of the Council of Zurich was, at that time, the impetuous Burgomaster Rudolf Stüssi, and the leader of the communes of Schwyz was the cool and calculating Ital Reding. Both were ambitious and craving for power. As each of them put the interests of his canton above the common interest of the Confederation, great misery and misfortune was the result.

The actual provocation for the old Zurich war was the death in 1436 of Count Frederick of Toggenburg, who had no children. He left large possessions, like the Toggenburg, the obere March, Gaster, and Uznach. Amongst the number of heirs who claimed a right to these possessions were Zurich as well as Schwyz. The Count after a quarrel with Stüssi, applied for and was admitted into the citizenship of Schwyz, to which he promised that at his death the obere March should become their property. No sooner had he closed his eyes for ever, than Schwyz took possession of that part of the country. Zurich appealed to the Countess, who gave them Uznach. But the citizens of that town refused obedience to Zurich, which threatened punishment, and the inhabitants of the Toggenburg and Gaster, together with the citizens of Uznach, entered into an alliance with Schwyz and Glaris. This so annoyed and upset Stüssi that he closed the Zurich market to the Schwyz, thus depriving them of a great part of their livelihood and causing great misery amongst them. In their plight Schwyz called upon the unaffected cantons for assistance. Several attempts were made to settle the dispute and at the diet of Lucerne the verdict was in favour of Schwyz, but Zurich did not submit to it and, forgetting the old unity Zurich and Schwyz eventually took up arms against each other.

The war started with an engagement at the Etzel, which resulted in a defeat of Zurich and an armistice was concluded. Both parties used this breathing space for further preparations and in the following year the war broke out again. Once more the Etzel was the place of the rencontre, but this time the Glarner, Urner and Unterwaldner joined Schwyz. These forces approaching surprised the Zurcher so much that they even left their meals behind

and took to their boats and retreated across the lake. From their boats they endeavoured to injure their adversaries by discharging their guns. For each shot fired by them the Schwyz set a house in flames along the shore. The whole of the left shore of the lake fell into the hands of the victors and was thoroughly looted and devastated. Zurich had to surrender the districts of Pfäffikon, Wollerau and Hurden, as well as the island of Ufenau, and was compelled to re-open the market to Schwyz.

The defeat thus suffered caused Stüssi to induce the council and citizens of Zurich to enter into an alliance with Austria, the arch enemy of the Confederates.

This disloyalty of Zurich embittered all the Confederates, who gradually took sides with Schwyz and in May, 1443, they declared war on Zurich and Austria and advanced across the Albis towards Zurich. A rather badly organised army of Zurcher and Austrians met the Confederates at the Chapel of St. Jakob o/Sihl and were defeated and fled in disorder towards the

town, the Confederates hotly pursuing them. Stüssi lost his life on the bridge across the Sihl just outside the walls of Zurich. The town itself was saved from being ransacked by the heroic action of a woman who let down the portcullis on the Rennwegtor and thus barred the entry of the Confederates into the town. The few of those who had already gained entry were killed and to avenge the massacre of their comrades the others put the outskirts of the town on fire. Before long the guns on the walls of Zurich forced them to retire.

In Zurich the Federal Party obtained the lead and was able to make peace with the Confederates in Baden, but before it could be ratified by the Council, the Austrian party gained the upper hand and imprisoned the leaders who had arranged an understanding with the Confederates. Three of them: Meiss, Trinkler and Bluntschli were, at the request of the Austrians,

condemned to death and immediately executed.

This breach of the peace increased the embitterment of the Confederates and the territory of Zurich was occupied and devastated by fire and murder. Greifensee, which was ably defended, held out for four weeks, but had to surrender and 78 of the dutiful defenders were condemned to death by a court of the Confederates and were executed, an act which eventually revenged itself.

Zurich itself was beleaguered by 20,000 Confederates. To relieve it Thomas von Falkenstein knavishly attacked the small town of Brugg, looted it for three days and afterwards reduced it to ashes, having imprisoned its leading citizens. When tidings of these happenings reached the Confederates outside Zurich, 1,500 Bernese and Solothurner immediately advanced to the Farnsburg in the Baselland, the property of Falkenstein, to where most of the incendiaries had retired.

In order to secure the victory of the Austro-Zurichian party, the German Emperor Frederick III, himself an Austrian, called upon the King of France for assistance, who sent an army of unbridled mercenaries,



called Armagnacs, mostly heavily armed horsemen, bow and crossbow men, under the leadership of the Dauphin. The object of the campaign was to loot Basle, free Zurich and destroy the Confederation. As this army advanced from the Sundgau towards Basle, the town sent messengers to the Confederates before Zurich, to inform them of the approaching danger. Immediately 600 of their men together with 600 from Lucerne were sent from the beleaguers to strengthen the besieging troops before the Farnsburg.

In the meantime the strong vanguard of the enemy had reached Muttentz and Pratteln and the captains before the Farnsburg decided to undertake a reconnaissance raid. They sent 1,300 men, who were joined by 200 more from Liestal and Waldenburg, under the leaderships of Hans Matter from Berne, Ulrich Hofstetter from Lucerne, Arnold Schick from Uri, Jost Reding from Schwyz, Rudolf Netti from Glaris, Hans Seiler from Zug and Hemmann Seevogel from Basle. They had distinct orders merely to observe the enemy and only at a favourable opportunity to attack, but under no circumstances were they to cross the Birs or engage the main body of the enemy. Three prebendaries from Neuchâtel, who were taking part in the Council of Basle, at that time still in session, being frightened by the approach of the French, were returning home, on their way warned the troops of the Confederates of the tremendous strength of the Armagnacs. To these warnings Hans Matter replied: "We shall consign our souls to God and our bodies to the Armagnacs."

Divided into three groups, the Confederates attacked the enemy in the early morning of 26th of August, 1444, and defeated him, first at Pratteln and afterwards in very severe fighting at Muttentz. After these great victories they pursued the enemy on his retreat toward Münchenstein and advanced enthusiastically to the Birs. About 10 o'clock they saw some enemy detachments on the other side of the river and, believing to deal with these as easily as they did with the vanguard, they disregarded their distinct orders, crossed the Birs and threw themselves upon the enemy. To their surprise, however, continuous new troops arrived and a battle in open territory against a twenty-fold superiority began. The dangerous position in which the Confederates now were, was seen by the citizens of Basle and 3,000 of them went out to their assistance. But hardly outside the walls of the town, they were recalled, as the danger threatening the town of being attacked by the Dauphin, who observed this move and who was after the riches of Basle, was imminent. This recall prevented the attack on the town being made. The Confederates fought with ardent patriotism and with the courage of lions, but after fighting for four hours they were forced to give way to the enormously superior numbers of the enemy, both sides suffering heavy losses. The intention was to retire as far as the Birs, recross it and then retreat as far as Liestal. But the vanguard of the enemy which was thrown back to Münchenstein in the morning had advanced along the river and destroyed the bridge.

In their now desperate position the Confederates occupied the chapel and garden of the hospital for incurables (Siechenhaus) of St. Jakob, which was surrounded by a stone wall. They fought with absolute disregard and contempt of death and great acts of heroism are handed down to us, such as arrows torn out of wounds and shot back at the enemy, broken hal-

berds used as battle axes, etc. Many sorties were made from there, causing death and destruction in the ranks of the Armagnacs, who, although constantly attacking, could not overcome the Confederates, but succeeded in setting the Siechenhaus alight.

The Dauphin's troops, realising the undauntedness of the Confederates, in sight of their destruction, intended to give up the fight when fresh Austrian troops under Hans von Rechberg arrived, who by their knightly oath to destroy every one of these peasants instilled fresh courage into the flagging morale of the French and a new attack began. Heavy guns were brought into action by the Armagnacs, who were thus able to shoot some breaches into the thin wall. Before resuming the attack, however, the Dauphin requested the Knight, Burkhard Münch, from Landskron, who acted as guide to the enemy, to call upon the Confederates to surrender. When riding up to and looking over the garden wall he disdainfully called out, seeing all the wounded and dead, "I am looking into a rose garden," Arnold Schick, from Uri, with the words "Here you dog, eat one of these roses," threw a heavy stone which hit him full in the face and felled him dead from his horse. Refusing to surrender, fresh breaches were shot into the wall, causing terrible destruction amongst the Confederates. It was about 6 o'clock in the evening and from all sides the superior numbers closed in on the defenders, whose only aim now was to sell their lives as dearly as possible. Gradually the wall was completely demolished and the Confederates were now without any further protection against the fury of the revengeful hordes. Fighting to the last breath, one after the other fell a victim to the strokes of the halberds or the shower of bullets or arrows, a great number also finding their death in the flames of the Siechenhaus, where they retired to dress their wounds and to have a short rest before taking up the fight again. Slowly, as the Confederates died a hero's death—not conquered, but tired of vanquishing—the battle drew to its end towards eight o'clock. "Oh, Greifensee, your revenge is hard," was uttered by many a dying hero. Only 200 of the 1,500 who entered the battle survived, most of them severely wounded. The loss to the enemy amounted to 8,000.

Respecting and admiring the heroic stand of the Confederates, the Dauphin ordered his army to retire and concluded an honourable peace with them at Ensisheim in Alsace, much to the disgust of the Austrians. Although victorious, the Dauphin had no further desire to continue the war or to advance deeper into "this terrible and wonderful country where it required the whole of his might to destroy a handful of peasants."

When the news of the sacrificial death of their companions in arms reached the Confederates outside Zurich, they ended the siege and withdrew the troops from outside the Farnsburg. The war then developed into some isolated pillaging and destructive expeditions against Zurich and Austria, of which the last one was at Ragaz, where 1,500 Schwyz and Glarner defeated an Austrian army of over 6,000. This victorious encounter was the last important incident in this deplorable civil war. As a direct result of the battle of St. Jakob on the Birs, Zurich had to relinquish its treaty with Austria in 1450 and the two parties of the Confederates, tired of fighting each other shook hands and made peace. Zurich received back the lost districts, with the exception of Pfäffikon, Wollerau,

Hurden and Ufenau, which remained the property of Schwyz.

Because the canton of Schwyz was the leading party in this war the Confederates gradually came to be known as Schwyzers and this later was the foundation of the national name of the "Swiss" which in time gave rise to the universal designation of "Schweizer."

J. J. S.

### ME DÄNKT . . . .

Me dänkt mäggmol in schtillle Schtunde  
An allerhand für Sache  
Und losst im Geischt d'Vergangeheit  
Parade mache.

Viel Liebs and Guets, viel Schöns und Grosses  
Wird läbhafft neu erläbt  
Wenns nur in der Erinnerung  
Nit an no Schatte gäbt.

Me dänkt wie in de Jugendjohr  
D'Zyt fascht no ruckwärts gloffe n'isch  
Jetzt mälde sich die erschte graue Hoor  
Verby fliegt Wuche, Monet, Johr um Johr.

Me dänkt ans Eltrehuus, and d'Kinderzyt,  
Kei Wölkli wyt und breit,  
Het alles g'hah, het alles gnoh,  
Mit gröschter Sälbschtverständlichkeit.

Me dänkt an d'Lehrzyt, an d'Rekruteschuel,  
An all das jungi, schtarki Hoffe,  
Wie mänge Traum, wie mänge Plan,  
Isch doch im Sand verloffte.

Me dänkt ans erschti Rendez-vous,  
Ans warte, hoffe, blange, bange,  
Worum nur isch die säl'gi Zyt  
So schnäll vergange.

Me dänkt an d'Abfahrt in die wytti Wält,  
In Wirklichkeit so glei,  
Was hämmer welle, hämmer gsuecht?  
Was het is g'fählt deheim?

Me dänkt au oft an d'Heimet zrugg,  
So wärschafft, suber, flyssig, allersyts,  
Gott schütz Di hütte, morn und immer,  
Du liebi, liebi Schwyz.

—J. P.

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## HOW SWITZERLAND CULTIVATES HER FORESTS.

(From "The Swiss-American," June, 1944).

By MARIE WIDMER.

Switzerland, in the year 100 A.D., is described as being covered with swamps and great impenetrable forests and the latter offered indeed tremendous obstacles to colonisation. The necessary land for pastures and agriculture had thus to be taken away from the forests and the history of the colonization is consequently closely connected with that of the forests.

Not much attention was paid to the cultivation or preservation of the forests in those early days when the Alemanni, Burgundians and Franks swept through the land, but in the time of the latter, when Charlemagne was king, a general and remarkable improvement of the conditions took place. History relates that Charlemagne's grandson presented in the year 853 A.D. the now famous Sihl Forest of Zürich to the Convent of Fraumünster in that city, which indicates that the Sihl Forest is actually one of the oldest cultivated forests in Switzerland.

Gradually, as settlers began to scatter all over the country, their attention was drawn to the forestry problem and it is shown that in the 13th century there were already a number of villages which had prohibited the cutting down of certain forests, as the same provided protection against the ever threatening peril from the avalanches. Thus we find Altdorf and Andermatt in the Gotthard route each with their "Bannwald." For some time the great Vaudoise forest of Risoux in the Joux valley was also considered as a "protecting forest," as its presence could facilitate the defence of the frontier towards France, in a case of emergency.

However, only in the 13th century was there voiced a general demand for better cultivation and preservation of the forests and in this respect the cantons of Zürich, Berne and Aargau were the leaders, with the others following after a short interval.

The latest statistics of forestation in Switzerland show that 30% of the entire area of Switzerland is covered with forests; 55.6% is devoted to agriculture and pastures and 22.6% is non-productive soil (rivers, lakes, roads, railways, building sites, rocks, glaciers, etc.).

Statistics further show that about 67% of these forests belong to individual villages and 4.5% only pertain to individual cantons. The ownership by canton, village or private persons shows a remarkable variation in the case of each canton and we thus find that the cantonal governments of Valais, Ticino, Grisons and Uri possess practically no forests. The biggest percentage of forests owned by villages, i.e., 94.3% is, however, found in the Valais and the highest percentage of private-owned forests, i.e., 78.8%, is to be found in the canton of Lucerne.

The most extensive forest conservation is found in the Jura region of Switzerland, i.e., in the cantons of Schaffhausen, Aargau, Basle (Land), Soleure, Berne, Neuchâtel and Vaud, where as much as 60% of the productive soil is devoted to forestation. While the high mountain regions appear thickly wooded at first, their production is poor.

Forests, as previously indicated, are considered a safeguard against natural forces, such as avalanches, landslides and inundations, and as a consequence there are certain laws prohibiting their injudicious cutting