

# Folk- and Fairy-Tales in Switzerland

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As many of you may know, Swiss people love to play Jass, a game of cards. We spell it *J – a – s – s* and use even the German verb *jassen*: to jass, to play jass. You can meet men and women jassing everywhere in Switzerland, and even in Swiss fairy-tales, as so to speak Swiss-German local colour.

For instance: When the hero of the story about *Strong John* (a Basel-German variant of Grimm fairy-tale KHM 166), falls into a den of robbers, he beholds four of them playing jass. I mentioned this fact in a publication in *Traditional Storytelling Today* (1999). But the American translator knew better: Although I objected twice, he wrote: "the robbers play jazz". This is a quite fascinating idea of Swiss robbers, merrily making music, but objectively wrong.

## Language and Legends in Switzerland

For many people who do not belong to the Swiss Confederation, this vacation paradise with its mountains and lakes is fairy-tale land and a land in which four languages are spoken: German, French, Italian, and Rhaeto-Romanish (Ladin). Both of these assumptions are incorrect.

Switzerland is a land of legends. Mountains, lakes, and the unpredictability of the weather have inspired people to tell each other legends – some of blooming Alps that become accursed; of herds of cows that, in panic, throw themselves into an abyss; of treasures buried deep in mountain caves; and many others. Anyone who, while looking for fairy-tales, opens a Swiss anthology, such as Hanns Bächtold's *Schweizer Märchen* or Johannes Jegerlehner's *Volksmärchen aus den Walliserbergen*, will most certainly, and regardless of its title, find more legends than fairy-tales. Nevertheless I will concentrate on folk- and fairy-tales.

Wrong, also, is the assumption that four languages are spoken in the Swiss Confederation. There are at least five languages. In the German part of Switzerland everyone, from infants to the aged, from untrained workers to university professors, speaks Schwyzerdütsch. This Swiss-German has the function of a spoken national language. Fairy-tales for children and fairy-tales for adults are, as a matter of course, told in dialect, regardless of whether the printed text of a respective collection is given in High German (*Hochdeutsch*) or in one of the many Swiss-German dialects.

Officially, there are only four written languages in Switzerland. Of those, 63 to 64 percent of the population speak the German language, 20 percent French, 6,5 percent learn Italian as a first language, and only 0,5 percent learn Rhaeto-Romanic (Rhaeto-Romance, Ladin), which has a number of separate dialects.

Wealth in fairy-tales and high population numbers seem to stand in reverse proportion to each other. The Rhaeto-Romanic part of Switzerland in particular offers original storytelling personalities and a vast treasury of fairy-tales that have been recorded by industrious field researchers and preserved in anthologies, just as the Rhaeto-Romanic idioms have been endangered for a longer period and had to be protected.

The canton of Ticino, as part of a much wider cultural area, has a strong alignment with Italy both in its language and in its fairy-tale material. In contrast to the German part of Switzerland, speaking in dialect in the Ticino used to be equated with a low educational level

and social standing. As a result, simple folk in fairy-tales speak in dialect, while kings and princesses speak "high" Italian. For her collection *Märchen aus dem Tessin*, fairy-tale expert Pia Todorović-Strähl first had to transcribe the local storyteller's dialect into written Italian before she could translate the text into German.

We are facing a problem that is already becoming delineated: The path of a Swiss fairy-tale from the moment of its being written down until it appears in a printed version in German is a long road and often paved with many stumbling blocks, including the possibility of faulty sources. Such is the case of the difficult dialects of the Jura, where even the first step in the translation process – transcription into French – presents a problem. In addition, the French-speaking North Jura, known as a land rich in fairy-tales, dances out of step with the internationally known fairy-tale types. North Jura's fairy-tales of wonderful and humorous content, called *fôles* (from the Latin *fabula*), have only barely found their way into the large Swiss anthologies of fairy-tales.

### **The German Speaking Part of Switzerland**

With seven-league boots we have rushed through the Rhaeto-Romanic, Italian, and French parts of Switzerland and now arrive in the German part of the country, familiar in its geography, linguistics, and cultural history. It cannot be denied, the German part of Switzerland is Grimm country. Most fairy-tales show a clear connection to German fairy-tales. Characteristic German-Swiss thoroughness is present not only in everyday matters but also in fairy-tales, starting with the shiny cleanliness of the baking oven in Frau Holle's house, up to the double-underlined moral at the end of the fairy-tale about herding the hares.

Many German-Swiss fairy-tale anthologies are geared toward an audience of children and believe they cannot forgo the moral of the story. We know from Katalin Horn's research on modern telling of fairy-tales in German-speaking Switzerland that indigenous tellers of fairy-tales are charged with an important role in the linguistic discovery of identity, particularly by children who have not quite mastered the written language. The Brothers Grimm had in mind a comparable audience for their "children's stories and house fairy-tales" without, however, overemphasizing their moral usefulness. They refrained from using usual children's language and created an artistic style that may be called literature.

One example for comparison, from "Der Wolf und die sieben jungen Geißlein" (The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids):

Grimm: "Not long thereafter the old goat came home from the woods. Oh, what a sight she found!" ("*Ach, was musste sie da erblicken!*" [KHM 5])

Swiss-German: "Gli druf ist's Muetterli hei cho. Wos vo witem gseh hät, dass d'Hustüre offe-n-ist, isch es schüli verschrocke und wos erst na die Unornig gseh hät, wo de Wolf gmacht hät, häts denkt, da seig allweg öppis Dumms gange" (Louise Müller / Hedwig Blesi: *Erzählungen und Märchen in Schweizer Mundart*. Für Kinder von 4-7 Jahren, Zürich – Leipzig: 1928, p. 149).

I try to translate this into modern English: "Shortly after little mother came home. When she saw from far away that the door of the house was open, she was terribly frightened. And when she, what is more, beheld the disorder made by the wolf she thought that something very stupid must have happened."

### **Typical Motifs and Fairy-Tales**

In our short excursion through Switzerland, we have determined that fairy-tales are more or less connected to the local language. But despite language barriers, there is also some

connection in the fairy-tale treasures of this multi-language country. Typical throughout the confederation are a number of fairy-tale motifs and decorative features that stem from historical experiences as well as experiences that are countrywide. Some developed from the long tradition of democracy, from the experience of landscape, but above all from bitter poverty.

In Swiss fairy-tales there is frequent mention of someone having to hire himself out, of children being exposed, of emigrating, of distant travels, and repeatedly of the suffering from hunger. Even Betheli, the hard-working girl in several German-Swiss variants of Frau Holle (Mother Holle) was not made to *freeze*, but to become so *hungry* that "her ears almost fell off" (Hanns Bächtold: *Schweizer Märchen*, Basel 1916, p. 176; Robert Wildhaber / Leza Uffer: *Schweizer Volksmärchen*, Düsseldorf-Cologne: 1971, p. 5; Hans Peter Treichler: *Märchen und Sagen der Schweiz*, Zürich-Wiesbaden: 1989, p. 98), or that "her ears *shook*" (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen aus der Schweiz, gesammelt von Otto Sutermeister, neu bearbeitet von Fritz Gafner*, Basel, Switzerland: 1977, p. 12); or that "her nails almost fell off her fingers and feet" (*Das Schweizer Märchenbuch, neu mitgeteilt von Curt-Englert-Faye*, Basel 1971, p. 44). That sounds suspicious! Have the publishers copied from each other? And incorrectly, yet? We must follow up on these questions.

In collections on the subject that are described as Swiss fairy-tales, one finds next to real fairy-tales and genuine myths a range of mixed forms such as found in Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* – comical tales, legends, etiologic tales, and so forth. They belong, to a large extent, to international storytelling material. Throughout Switzerland, not only in the German-speaking area, variants of "Frau Holle" (*Mother Holle*), "Sneewittchen" (*Snow White*), "Aschenputtel" (*Cinderella*), and "Tischchendeckdich, Goldesel und Knüppel aus dem Sack" (*The Magic Table, the Golden Donkey, and the Club in the Sack*) appear with more than average frequency.

"Tischchendeckdich, Goldesel und Knüppel aus dem Sack" has lost some of its detail on its travels through the Swiss cantons, especially when it had to overcome language changes in the Ticino and in Rätien (Walter Keller: *Tessiner Sagen und Volksmärchen*, Zurich 1981, pp. 229-232; Pia Todorović-Strähl / Ottavio Lurati: *Märchen aus dem Tessin* # 22 [1984]; Leza Uffer: *Rätoromanische Märchen* #2 [1983]).

## Translation Problems

In transcription from dialects, in translation from one language into another, and during preparation for printing, there are always instances of making the original material worse in order to make it better, most frequently and noticeably in Switzerland, land of many languages. Texts that have undergone the "making worse before making better" treatment become traditional during their written and oral travels. That is how original material and stories worth preserving are created, but also how many irritating mixtures of form are added. Many a fairy-tale that has been "told out" (*zerzählt*) gives the impression of being illogical.

With contamination of different story types, making original sources worse before making them better, and language problems, it is not without reason that researcher Ursula Brunold-Bigler admonishes publishers of Swiss fairy-tale anthologies to be more critical about their sources. Working critically with one's sources is often difficult or even tedious, but it can lead to exciting results.

I have taken 22 magical fairy-tales, all from collections that appeared between 1869 and today, and analyzed them microscopically, and I have analyzed an additional dozen favorite fairy-tale anthologies. From this analysis, I have determined that Switzerland is and remains a land of legends, but the German-speaking Swiss knew how to turn this to their advantage by turning their relatively small fairy-tale treasury into an extensive volume. They accomplished

this by copying old texts, rewriting them, translating them, translating them back, working the material, and telling. Nevertheless, not a few publishers have vouched for the authenticity of their texts and the national characteristics of their informants, and they make assurances that the local dialects, even those written down from memory, have been reproduced in an unadulterated form.

The question arises of how do story tellers recognize the quality of a text that has been transcribed from a different language or from a dialect into German? Is the French author Voltaire correct when he says that translations are "like women, either beautiful but not faithful, or faithful but not exactly beautiful?" I do not wish to bore anyone with theories about translations; we will stay with the practice of language and the requisites for story-telling.

In Switzerland, fairy-tales usually are told in dialect and primarily are printed in the appropriate written language. The reverse also happens and is often particularly revealing. Swiss dialect is difficult to understand for many. But Schwyzerdütsch, like no other language, is suited for the telling of fairy-tales. Why?

### **Telling in Schwyzerdütsch**

Schwyzerdütsch is an unusually flexible, efficient language that offers the user a rich and differentiated choice of words for daily living and for the expression of his feelings. The Swiss-German dialects, which are different from one region to another, distinguish themselves for their great vividness and strength, onomatopoeic word construction, and archaic expressions with which the user associates ideas such as original, true, or suitable.

Schwyzerdütsch, the spoken mother tongue, is considered to be the language of the heart and of comfort (*Gemütlichkeit*). A large majority of the German-Swiss population finds the dialect more direct, warmer, more personal, more natural, and more free than High German. The relatively more informal everyday language, which is more than a dialect, fosters community in its use in the telling of fairy-tales as well as in church. A priest made this point: "When I am trying to lift people up to God, I use the standard language; however, if I want to bring our dear Lord down to the people, I speak in dialect."

Let us look at the special ability of the Swiss-German to add the suffix *-le*, or *-ele*, almost randomly to any verb. For instance, from the German verb *plaudern* (to chat) one can create *plaudere* and *pläuderle*, a neat way to carry on this activity. The clumsy German word combination with the verb *werden* (to become) can be sidestepped by the verb itself in dialect: *hübscher werden* (to become more beautiful) is said as *hübsche*.

The importance of onomatopoeic action words in storytelling is well known. The impression of a spontaneous experience, of lively and immediate telling is delivered by the verb in dialect through typical application of the "compound perfect"; the more distant written-language "imperfect" is no longer in use.

To illustrate the problems in translating from German into dialect, and from dialect into German, let us concentrate on a known Swiss fairy-tale. It came into Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* by way of Swiss informants, from Grimm by way of Otto Sutermeister's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen aus der Schweiz* back to its homeland, and then into the hands of studious translators and creative tellers of known stories. # 166, *Der starke Hans* (Strong John), appears with the Brothers Grimm in High German. We cannot here delve into detailed questions about the origin of the Swiss contributions to Grimm fairy-tales, but we want to try to examine what happened to # 166 with so much transcribing going on.

From among many observations, I would like to present here two of 16 translations of the

fairy-tale *Der starke Hans* (ATU 650A and 301), one of which I believe to be miserable (from dialect into a stilted written-language German) and an interesting one, though not without problems (from Grimm # 166 into Basel-German).

### Strong John

As early as 1869, Otto Sutermeister, the "Swiss Grimm", presented two variations of this fairy-tale – which continues to be popular in Switzerland – one of them in High German and one in dialect. In 1977, a publisher in Basel decided to republish the Sutermeister fairy-tales and, in view of the "reading problems with original dialects" that would be presented, to reedit them. The reviser was to maintain a closeness to the dialect to ease later telling of stories in dialect. But what did Fritz Gafner do with Sutermeister's *Der Bueb mit dem isige Spazierstecke* (The boy with the iron walking cane)? He made him into a "Knabe mit dem eisernen Spazierstöcklein." This *stöcklein* (little walking stick) weighs, in both versions, ten hundredweights! No one other than the hero is able to lift it.

The Sutermeister version begins, "*Do hend d'Räuber die Frau gstohle, hend sie in e Höhli gschleikt, und do hed sie ihne müesse choche und wäsche.*" Gafner does replace the perfect of the dialect version with the high language imperfect, but he forgets to translate the word *gstohle* (stolen) into written German; people are usually said to be abducted or kidnapped. The many periods create a staccato that holds back the flow of the telling. "*Aber unterwegs wurde sie von Räufern gestohlen. Die schleppten sie in ihre Höhle. Dort musste sie bleiben und für die Räuber kochen und waschen.*" (*Kinder- und Hausmärchen aus der Schweiz*, collected by Otto Sutermeister, revised by Fritz Gafner, Basel 1977, p. 28).

The list of awkward use of language could go on and on. For instance, Gafner often turns Sutermeister's verbs, which give a lively impression, into bloodless creations. Unfortunately, he has undone the beauty and immediacy of the dialect version of the text and has been unable to make up for this loss with a transcription into correct High German. Gafner's translation is neither literature nor suited for storytelling.

Translating also means "thinking along" (*mitdenken*). Someone who has thought along and partly thought ahead is Curt Englert-Faye, whose voluminous fairy-tale books are enormously popular in Switzerland but disdained by fairy-tale researchers as not being worth citing. In Grimm # 166, when Hans beats up the robbers he is 10 years old, a few hours later he is already 12. Englert-Faye has corrected this error in logic in his dialect version of the Grimm fairy-tale. In an effort to turn German literary language into a Swiss fairy-tale written in everyday dialect and to create a piece of writing suitable for oral delivery, he made small but striking changes in his translation, or refrained from making them. He seasoned the original with all sorts of Swiss "ingredients," with invented interjections ("*Jo guet Nacht!*"), weighted adjectives ("*das fräch Männli*"), and local Swiss colour (when the robbers play *jass*).

One can argue about the sense of arbitrary additions by translators. In the case of Englert-Faye, the result is artificial emphasis on the oral character ("*künstliche Mündlichkeit*"). We know by now that even Wilhelm Grimm sought to give the impression that the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* originated directly with the oral storytelling material of the rural population. He succeeded, for instance, by inserting proverbial expressions. But Grimm's formulations are still much too literary for Englert-Faye – not enough day-to-day language.

With Grimm "*machten sie sich einen Braten zurecht und waren guter Dinge*" was translated by Englert-Faye as, "*händ si die Sau am Fyr knuschplig brun brote, und die Drei hiind yne bige, was numme yne gange-n-isch.*"

Grimm: Hans "*tat seine Arbeit in der Küche, wie sich's gebührte*" (John did his kitchen-work the way it had to be done).

Englert-Faye: Hans "*het ene welle-neppis ganz bsunders gschmäckigs koche*" (John wanted to cook something specially tasteful for them).

It seems that Swiss cooking is done with more love and expertise...

Enough of critique. Translating is difficult – I know that from my own experience. Whoever wants to translate well must struggle with every word, find the appropriate picture, try to carry across proverbial expressions, and, wherever possible, take the storytelling rhythm into account. Anyone who wants to translate fairy-tales should not only study variants and be critical of sources but also listen and pay close attention to good, conscientious storytellers, preferably in German and in dialect.

### **The Swiss Folk- and Fairy-Tale Society**

Okay, I informed you roughly about the special telling-situation in Switzerland. Now I am glad to tell you that we have many of quite conscientious story- and fairy-tale tellers in our country. Here you find more than one hundred Swiss-German professionals and semi-professionals: [www.maerchengesellschaft.ch](http://www.maerchengesellschaft.ch). Several of them won international prizes for excellent storytelling.

The *Schweizerische Märchengesellschaft SMG* (Swiss Folk- and Fairy-Tale Society) is a literary association of noted academics from various disciplines, along with well-known tellers and a wide range of members interested in fairy- and folk-tales. This Society was founded in 1993 as a Section of the European Folk- and Fairy-tale Society, with which it remains associated and shares the same goal of encouraging research, cultivation and dissemination of fairy- and folk-tales. Across the country, i.e. in the individual Cantons and in all of Switzerland's language zones, there are regional representatives and fairy/folk-tale groups actively supporting the Society, which is led by a five-person, voluntary board. The experienced team feels it its duty to take an open approach to the various themes and directions of research, providing a forum for important aspects of fairy/folk-tale and saga research. All forms of in-depth events are represented in the SMG: seminars, workshops, lectures, small conferences, interdisciplinary discussions. Similarly well-attended are the frequent regional and interregional storytelling sessions.

The SMG academic events' primary goals are: to deepen knowledge and understanding of fairy/folk-tales; to assist start-up of research; to become acquainted with various methods, categories and peoples; to communicate the basic elements in the literary, folkloristic, psychological, pedagogical and culturally historical research into fairy/folk-tales. The SMG storytelling events aim, above all, to be stimulating, i.e. to enhance enjoyment of folk-tales. Especially significant in the SMG is telling in local dialects.

Within the SMG framework events are often organised in which folk-tale research and telling interplay their rightful roles. Examples of this include: the seminar series "Greek Mythology and Folk-Tales" (in 2008 in Zurich) and "Significant Folk-Tale Collections of the World" (in 2009 in Biel), folktale-telling festivals in Switzerland's four official languages, and the interdisciplinary symposium "Woman Power that Moves" (in 2009 in Frauenfeld).

In 2002, on behalf of the European Folk- and Fairy-Tale Society, the SMG invited participants to the first international folk-tale conference in Switzerland on the theme "The Wish in Folk-Tales". Since 2005 there is an annual event "Sagas where they happened" – e.g. in October 2009 "What the dead tell us" on the Belalp in Canton Valais.

Welcome to Switzerland, land of five languages, land of tellers...