

THE EMIGRATION OF THE WALSER DURING THE 12TH AND 13TH CENTURIES

Starting at the end of the 13th century, mountain peasants native to the Upper Valais left their land, usually travelling on the southern slope of the Alps, to settle other alpine regions that were still occupied predominantly by a Romanic population.

These settlers and their descendants were called "Walser". They are thought to have settled in 150 different places distributed along a 300-km long arc. They colonized—at least partially—the Haslital in the Bernese region to the north, and the valleys near Monte Rosa in the south, the Formazza Valley (north of Domodossola), as well as Bosco/Gurin in the Tessin, the Urserental in the Uri region to the east, and parts of the Engadine and the Voralberg. It is believed that the main colonies were situated in the Rheinwald and the Davos regions, which were colonized around 1280. From there, the Walser also spread to the Prättigau, the Sargans region, Liechtenstein and the Voralberg. They could be found as far as the Kleinwalsertal (northeast of the Voralberg, in the Allgäu range) and in the Tyrolean Paznaun.

Walser settlements were also founded in Savoy, and in the regions of Morzine and Vallorcine, but the Valaisan dialect disappeared there long ago: the presence of the Walser in this region is attested, however, by the place name "Les Allamands". The upper valley of the Doveria, beyond the Simplon Pass, was Latin until the settlement of colonists from the Upper Valais in the 12th century: the townships of Simplon and Zwischenbergen are the only Walser settlements in the present-day Valais. Note also the settlement of Bosco/Gurin, which is the only German-speaking town in the Tessin.

The spreading out of the Walser was not an emigration phenomenon: the settlers left their homelands in small groups and at different periods. The Walser did not behave like conquerors, but like discreet settlers. They occupied the lands at high altitudes that were thinly populated or not at all. They did not use force in order to establish themselves, even if some conflicts with the neighbouring population were unavoidable. A distinction is made between settlements of proximity (directly adjacent to the Valais) and distant settlements, much farther away from the homeland. The distant settlements were generally secondary or tertiary colonies; that is, they were not founded by emigrants from the Upper Valais, but by descendants of the Walser who were already established outside of the Valais. For example, the Rheinwald settlement in the Engadine was a secondary settlement: we know that it was founded by Walser who had previously settled in the valley of Formazza, who were themselves descendants of settlers from the Upper Valais. Rheinwald became a home-colony itself, from which other parts of the Engadine were settled. Because of these ramifications, the origin of some Walser settlements cannot be ascertained with absolute certainty.

The principal Walser settlements in the Engadine could freely choose their "ammann", hold lower courts of justice and bequeath their inheritance to their descendants. The Walser probably also formed political communities: for example, a franchise charter in Rheinwald from 1277 authorized the Walser in this region to adopt their own statutes and change them as they saw fit. Local autonomy of this kind did not yet exist in the Valais at the time. These supplementary rights were connected with certain obligations: in return, the Walser had to perform military service and pay annual taxes to the local lord. They were treated like the native Engadiners, and their situation was generally better than in the Valais, where taxes were higher. The main obligation of the Walser consisted in settling the highlands and making them fertile. The Walser also enjoyed a special freedom: when they had paid their taxes in full, they were allowed to marry freely or to

leave their homeland as they wished. This was the core of the "Walsersfreiheit" that was the sole prerogative of Walser colonies, including Rheinwald and Davos. Outside of the Engadine, the other Walser colonies did not have comparable rights.

Wherever they went, the Walser usually settled on the high plateaus above 1,000 meters. They practiced a form of alpine economy, generally breeding cattle. Along the main transport routes—Monte Rosa, Rheinwald, Kleinwalsertal, Gotthard? the Walser played a central role in transportation across the alpine passes. They are said to have played an active part in the political development of the Three Leagues of the Engadine, from a feudal to a democratic regime. Many Walser held important military and political offices. As early as the end of the 15th century, the need for more space and a cooling of the climate led the Walser to leave the highlands for the upper valleys. For centuries, the seasonal emigration of a certain number of able-bodied men was an indispensable resource. This flux was reversed after the discovery of the mountains

as places of recreation in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Walser settlements were not part of a unified or coherent whole: they were spread out in the midst of Latin regions. Thus, because of this relative isolation, some settlements were able to preserve many characteristics until today, while other Walsers quickly adapted and merged with the local population. In the Bernese Oberland and in Savoy in particular, there are no traces of the former Walser colonization. Today, the last visible element of a Walser culture is the dialect, which is related to that of the Upper Valais. However, the Walser dialect lost ground very quickly as a result of the depopulation of the mountain pastures and mixed with the local dialects. In the 19th century, the Walser of the Engadine lost all awareness of the Walser culture, as the memory of the peregrinations of their ancestors faded. In the 20th century, the Walser dialect lost further ground through the development of transportation and tourism, and was replaced by German and Italian dialects. Today, the language of the Walser has largely disappeared in the regions that they initially settled; nevertheless this dialect has survived in certain parts of the Engadine and the Voralberg.

Today, the Walser and the Upper Valaisans can communicate in their respective dialects without worrying about being understood. Yet there is no standard Walser language, only a number of dialects instead. In the Walser and Upper Valais dialects there is only one peculiarity that is not to be found in any other Swiss-German dialect: in some words the s is pronounced sch. Thus the plural Häuser ("houses") becomes Hiischer in the Upper Valais, and Hüüscher for the Walser in the Engadine, while the pronunciation in the other alemannic dialects is Hiiser or Hüüser. Similarly, the inhabitants of the Upper Valais and the Walser can be divided into two linguistic groups: in the western part of the Upper Valais the word schwer ("heavy") is pronounced schwear (like "wear"), while it is pronounced schwäär in the eastern part of the Upper Valais, including Brig. The same linguistic distinction can be found in the Walser settlements founded south of the Valais: in the settlements of the Monte Rosa region, this word is pronounced schwear, while more to the east, in the Formazza Valley and at Bosco/Gurin it is pronounced schwäär. From this it may be concluded that the Monte Rosa settlements were founded by Walsers coming from the valleys to the south of Viège, while the Formazza Valley was settled from the direction of Conches. In the Walser settlements in the Engadine and Voralberg the schwear/schwäär distinction also exists, but the geographical distribution is symmetrical relative to the Valais: the western settlements (Rheinwald) say schwäär, as in Conches, while the eastern settlements (Davos, Voralberg) say schweer, like those to the west of Brig. These linguistic correspondences make it possible to determine the origin of the Walser settlements in the Engadine: the western settlements were populated by Walsers from Formazza (originally from Conches), while the settlements in the eastern Engadine were settled from the south by Walsers from Monte Rosa (originating from the western part of the Upper Valais).

In 1960, the Association of the Walser from Engadine (Walservereinigung Graubünden WVG) was founded with the purpose of preserving the Walser language and culture. In the 1980s, the association diversified its activities to spread knowledge about the Walser culture well beyond their original home region. However, it can happen that non-Walser confuse the Walser and the Valaisans, usually because of the relationship between the dialects. It is interesting to note that the idea of creating a Walser association did not come from the regions in which the Walser originated, but from Chur, while the majority dialects in Chur and the Rhine Valley do not benefit from any linguistic societies.

The founders of the Walser association first placed an emphasis on the preservation of the language alone, but the cultural aspect was added gradually to the aims of the association. The point was not to make the Walser dialect a museum display, but a living language that is still spoken and that benefits from a cultural base.

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