

ROMANSH & SWISS DIALECTS

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ROMANSH LITERATURE **BY RICO FRANCO VALÄR, UNIVERSITY OF ZURICH**

Romansh is Switzerland's fourth national language, alongside German, French and Italian. Most of the roughly 60,000 Romansh speakers live in the canton of Graubünden. In Romansh-speaking areas, school classes are taught in Romansh, and the language is part of the high-school and university curriculum. Radio and television programmes are broadcast in Romansh; newspapers and webpages are published in Romansh; and Romansh music, theatre and literature create a lively cultural scene.

Before the sixteenth century, Romansh was mainly a spoken language and culture, expressed in the form of songs, proverbs, poems, legends and myths. This changed with Humanism and the Protestant Reformation, which led to a written form of the language, which was first used for translations of the Bible, and for catechisms or psalms, and which provided a vehicle for sectarian polemics. Early on, several regional written varieties developed, leading to today's five different written regional traditions, all of which have their own grammars, vocabularies and literature.

While written Romansh was primarily used for religious purposes, it was also used for drafting statutes, legal texts, political verse, patriotic songs, rhymed chronicles, travel descriptions and dramatic forms. It was not until the nineteenth century that Romansh literature began to abandon the fields of

religion and politics. The political and cultural pressure felt by all European minority groups during the rise of nationalism spurred a movement devoted to the defence and revival of the Romansh identity. This resulted in the first golden age of Romansh literature in the nineteenth century. The writing of that period consists largely of poetry and short stories praising the language, the mountains, the homeland, and the freedom and strength of the Romansh community. The main aim was to bolster the pride and identity of the Romansh people, and the prestige of their language. Poems typical of the period include 'A Farmers Freedom' by Gion Antoni Huonder, 'To the Romontsch People' by Giachen Caspar Muoth and 'Tamagur Wood' by Peider Lansel.

In the decades following WWII, Romansh literature enjoyed a second

heyday. The growing risk that Romansh would become extinct, despite the increasing legal and cultural acknowledgement of the language, spurred a new generation to write in Romansh, inspired in part by modern literary movements in Europe. The literature of this generation reflects a desire to break through cultural and literary boundaries, and to promote the language and its relevance to native speakers. Romansh authors began to write as chroniclers of their times: their short stories and novels depict the whirlwind of changes brought by the modern world to remote mountain communities. It is also during this time that poets searched for new forms and new modes of expression and embracing modern trends, including surrealism, symbolism, expressionism, subjectivity, intertextuality and metapoetry.

Partial translations of the major works from the sixteenth century up to the 1970s are available in English thanks to two anthologies: *The Curly-Horned Cow* (by Reto Bezzola, Owen Editions, 1971) and *Romontsch* (by Douglas Gregor, Oleander Press, 1982). The best-known Romansh work worldwide, however, is the children's book: *A Bell for Ursli* by Selina Chönz, illustrated by Romansh artist Alois Carigiet. It was first published in 1945 and became an international bestseller. It has been translated into nine languages, including German, French, English, Dutch, Japanese and Afrikaans.

Since the 1980s, Romansh literature has addressed new topics and

questions, such as ecology, individual liberty, gender and sexuality; it eschews idyllic visions and instead voices controversial appreciations of Alpine society and realities. There has also been a marked interest in linguistic experimentation, language hybridisation and spoken word performance. Poetry remains a very productive field in contemporary Romansh literature. A new trend in publishing – an attempt to reach broader audiences – is bi- or multi-lingual editions (mainly combining Romansh and German) and translations into other languages (mainly German, French and Italian, and occasionally English).

Renowned living Romansh authors, who are both translated and public figures, include: Leo Tuor, Leta Semadeni, Arno Camenisch, Dumenic Andry, Rut Plouda and Jessica Zuan. Dalkey Archive Press publishes English translations of Romansh literature, for example the anthology *Modern and Contemporary Swiss Poetry* by Luzius Keller, and Donal McLaughlin's translations of Arno Camenisch's trilogy: *The Alp, Behind the Station* and *Last Last Orders* (included in this magazine).

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