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Autor: Martinis, Marika de
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1988: 50-year jubilee of Romansch as national language

«Rumantsch Grischun»: Noah's Ark?

It was published for the first time on 20th June 1988 – the maiden issue of a Romansch daily paper, «La Quotidiana». The title in the letter from the Lia Rumantscha, the umbrella organisation of the Romansch-speakers in the mountain valleys of the Grisons, to the journalists came like a cry of joy: «Ella è qua – la Quotidiana.» Efforts to preserve living Rhaeto-Romanic speech and culture have become increasingly diverse over the last few years. Certainly, the project of most interest has been the creation of a standardised amalgam of «Rumantsch Grischun», the native language of Graubünden.

Fifty years ago, Rhaeto-Romanic, Switzerland's fourth language, was constitutionally admitted as a national language in a memorable referendum. It is spoken by about 50,000 people – some 0.8% of the whole population – and is in acute danger of becoming extinct. This was the starting point for «Rumantsch Grischun», for up till then the 0.8% of the native Grisons Romansch-

speakers had no homogenous standard language; they used a collection of not always mutually intelligible idioms: Sursilvan, Sutsilvan, Surmiran, Vallader and Putér.

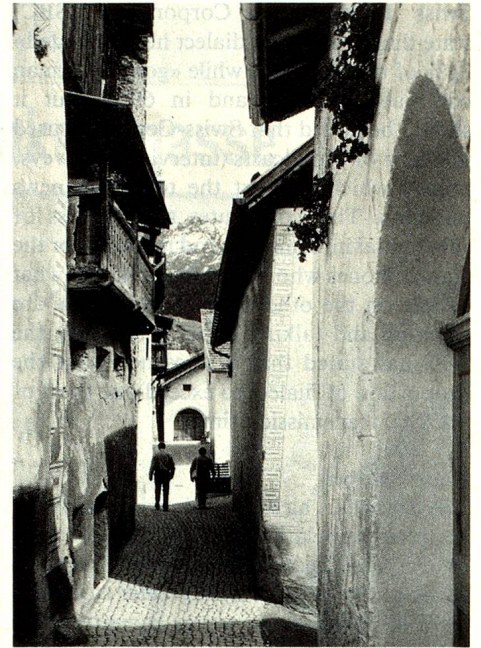
Has «Rumantsch Grischun» a chance?

This question is often asked. By Dr. Iso Camartin, too, Professor for Rhaeto-Romanic literature and culture at Zurich University and the ETH (Federal College of Technology), in the «Uni-ZH-Bulletin». He writes that it is certainly a luxury for the 50,000-odd Rhaeto-Romanic speakers to have five languages. Today it is generally acknowledged that there can be only «one Romansch or no Romansch». There are historical reasons why none of the standard idioms could be given preference. So, a «second-best» solution was suggested: the creation of a neutral standard language. Dr. Bernard Cathomas, Secretary of the Lia Rumantscha, and a linguist with a good nose for linguistics, had wisely charged an outside expert with this delicate task. So it was in 1982 that the Zurich Professor for the study of Romance languages and literature, Dr. Heinrich Schmid, presented his «Guidelines for the creation of an all-Grisons standard language, «Rumantsch Grischun»», to an astonished public. And by 1985 a first «Rumantsch Grischun» dictionary and grammar had been published.

A glimmer of hope

As an observer of the evolution of Alpine region languages, Dr. Erwin Diekmann, senior academic counsellor at the professorship for Romance languages of Mannheim University, W. Germany, said at a recent conference in Coire: «It isn't every day that a new standard language comes into existence. That's why «Rumantsch Grischun» is of such interest for linguistic circles». Dr. Diekmann conducted an opinion poll among selected groups of people in the Romansch-speaking valleys of the canton of Grisons in order to judge how «Rumantsch Grischun» was going down with Rhaeto-Romanic speakers. «All in all, the «Rumantsch Grischun» has caught on well», he says (even though the poll was not regarded as fully representative). Is «Rumantsch Grischun» then a Noah's Ark for the Neo-Latins of the Grisons?

Marika de Martinis, Domat/Ems



Ardez in the Engadine: the idyllic picture is misleading – a language is fighting for survival here. (photo: Feuerstein)

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LIA RUMANTSCHA

Dictionary and grammar book for
«Rumantsch Grischun».