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The Legend of Swiss Jass



Crusaders, mercenaries and other adventurers probably brought the Jass cards to Switzerland. The game was also played at the foundation of the Federal State. Three in every five Swiss adults are thought to play Jass today.

Card games first appear during the stormy closing stages of the Middle Ages. The area then covering the Switzerland we know today was almost certainly one of the first homelands of the card game. For example in today's capital Berne, the playing of cards had been forbidden by 1367.

Its origin is highly disputed. However legend and a great number of researchers seem to agree on the fact that card playing was first registered in the Orient. And as to who brought it to Switzerland and cultured its development? Returning crusaders, inquisitive pilgrims, gypsies? Thinking back to the tarot cards, once well loved in the alpine regions, we will recall that the old card games had just as many fantastic symbols.

Love of Fours even in Jass

What the cards of the Middle Ages have in common with their modern counterparts is the division into four suits or colours. This still holds true for our game of Jass. When playing with German cards we speak of bats, bells, roses and acorns, whilst the French cards are divided into spades, diamonds, hearts and clubs. This division into four suits shows a continuation of the ancient love of fours: One has always spoken of the four elements, also of four seasons



'Female Pope' card of a tarot game around 1760 (Photos: R. A. Stähli).

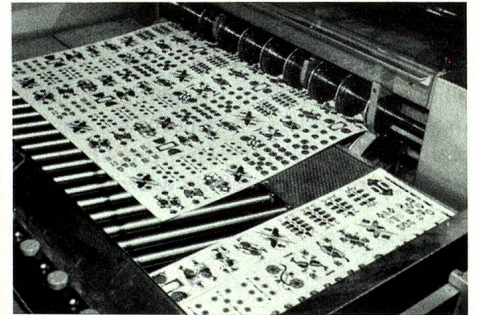
and phases of the moon, the humours of the body as well as the directions of the wind.

The appearance of large armies helped to develop card games enormously. The military history of the end of the Middle Ages serves to prove this fact: The mixed forces of the Armagnacs, Gunglers, Charles the Brave or the Italian war lords were wanting to fulfil ambitious power schemes. Quixotic people, who could hardly converse with one another were brought together in these various armed forces.

Mercenaries and Fairy-tale Kings

The only thing that could be understood in this babylonian hubbub was the common passion for any rakish game. Card games created something like a common name for these adventurers from East and West.

The closer we approach the Renaissance and the Reformation, the more frequently we find representatives from the poor alpine



The playing card printers Müller in Neuhausen produces around 50 000 playing cards a day. Most are for export.

valleys amongst these wild troops. The services these men performed for sovereigns or for the rising trade centres or even at foreign card tables appeared to them as an attractive possibility to improve their fate. Admittedly, only very few managed to reach their goal of returning home to wealth through their efforts...

In any case we shouldn't envisage these foreign services as being all too blood curdling. The responsible and strong men from the mountains often had to do endless watch duties - more likely to have been boring than dangerous: Even today «Suisse» in France or «Schweizer» in Russia means nothing more than «keeper of an entrance gate».

Thus the strong alpine men kept themselves amused with all sorts of games whilst on watch at castle gates or customs posts. And of course these games have become modernised from one empire to the other.



King, Queen, Knave

The meaning of the division into four suits of the court cards (King, Queen, Knave) can be interpreted in many ways. For the onward moving warrior they were almost certainly a good indication of their chaotic lifestyle: They served the one ruling pair and then the other. Their successes and losses were decided by the goodwill of the ladies and gentlemen from the four «wind directions».

Knave or Farmer

Their fortunes were also in the hands of the knaves, to be understood through fables as being the cunning (knavish) court advisors. This third picture card has also been called the Farmer. All indications lead one to believe that this figure was of no less importance than the crowned leaders at the beginning of the Middle Ages. He was the leader of peasant uprisings, the agitator who knew how to entice adventure seeking mercenaries to undertake perilous tasks.

The French Revolution which overran the Confederation in 1798 was supposed to bring an end to the complex mercenary system in the principal states. However quite to the contrary the revolution merely served to bring the system to a height albeit in another guise. A great number of Swiss followed the Emperor Napoleon to his battlefields at all corners of the earth. Card games were played as never before by the campside fires between Spain and Russia.

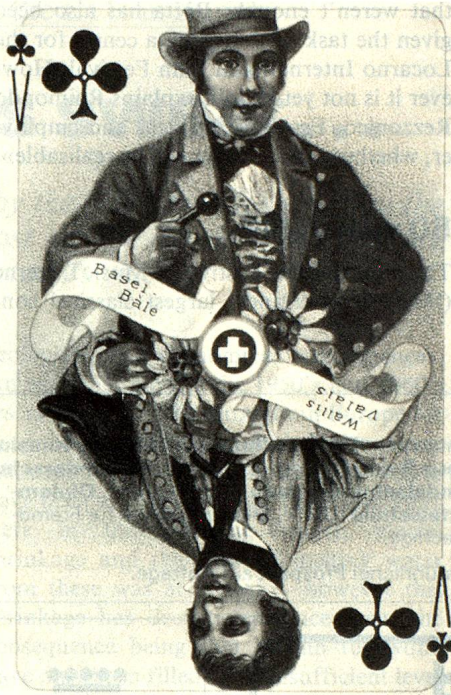
A Federal State of Cardplayers

The unified Confederation with a permanent capital appeared in the wake of the nightmare of war and revolution. With it came the development of the typical Swiss Jass. Both the preceding phases, seemingly quite different, undoubtedly had a strong influence on each other.

Before the Confederation, regional peculiarities were the rule of the day in the provinces, these being only loosely connected to each other. The independent Republicans made links and bonds in all directions with the consequence that their card playing varied accordingly. It wasn't until the 19th century that a State was established which tried to find economic support in the industry emerging in all directions. Young men were now needed in administrative positions and factories. Thus bans were issued to an ever increasing extent on the once so widely spread foreign legion service.

«Minger-Rüedu» played Jass too

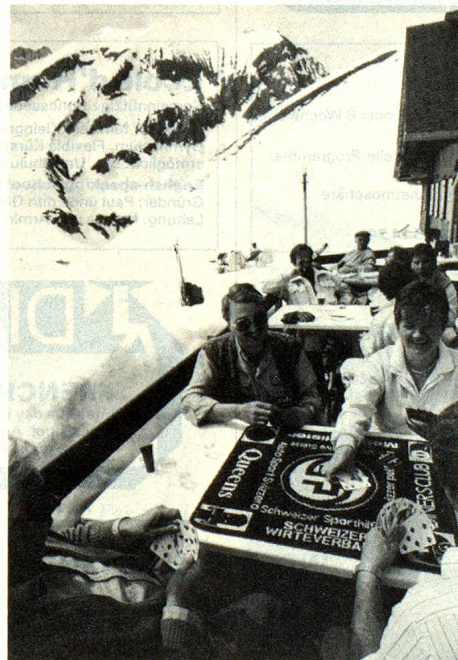
Since kingdoms struggled to retain existence for several generations around the Federal



The knave of clubs from the card game 'La Suisse historique'.

State, the citizens of the newly founded Switzerland were left to organise themselves whether they wanted to or not.

Rifle meetings and similar pictorial events served to encourage such an integration. Writers such as Gottfried Keller wrote about them, artists like Ferdinand Hodler



Open-air Jass on the Engstligen Alp in the Bernese Oberland.

painted pictures of them. Nearly everyone relaxed by playing a hand of Jass following shooting, wrestling or public debate.

Legend assures that even the most popular Federal Councillors, from a Jakob Stämpfli to a 'Minger-Rüedu', were also highly proficient Jass players. Even today we talk of the legendary inns, which served as important central meeting places for the people of the day who were highly active politically. 'What should be happening in the land' was regularly battled out over a game of Jass in these 'Zimmermania' or 'Moospinte'. In other words – the prominence of this turbulent era probably got to know each other whilst playing cards. It was easier to recognise what was to be expected from a future councillor over a game of Jass than in the feature articles of the newspapers of the day.

The European conflicts such as the Franco-German war of 1871 and the two world wars of 1914 and 1939 played their role too. What would once have been thought of as unthinkable became reality: Young people from Geneva to Appenzell and from Basle to Ticino were forced together in ever conforming field-grey uniforms and somehow had to make these difficult hours more tolerable. The French cards logically took preference in western Switzerland whilst the German cards appeared more in the east. The playing rules however soon came into line with the uniform appearance. Even if one had difficulty in understanding one another, the customs and expressions used whilst playing Jass overcame every language barrier.

The regular meetings of the people coming from the same region created a feature which could only be envied by the citizens of the neighbouring states. Whilst our mercenaries were more than prepared to wager their whole pay until well into the 19th century, the stake placed in Jass was (nearly always) very conservative. Usually a symbolic amount was bet such as a ½ litre of wine or a beer...

In 1945, when one thought that one had survived the last of the great wars many thought of the game of Jass as an expression of bourgeoisie, of intellectual narrowness, of imprisonment within one's own four walls. Today, with dreams of a free and peaceful world in ruins, the game of Jass is experiencing its renaissance. Even amongst women and young people domestic television programmes on Jass are some of the most popular.

Sergius Golowin