



Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft  
Société suisse d'utilité publique  
Società svizzera di utilità pubblica  
Societad svizra d'utilitad publica  
Swiss Society for the Common Good

## **The Rütli – a bridge between the past and the future**

### **A place of freedom and independence**

In the 13th century, the region around the Lake of Lucerne didn't have an economic importance, despite the fact that the Gotthard was by then a major trade route. When King Rudolf IV of Habsburg died on the 15th of July, 1291, the Forest Cantons around the lake felt insecure and wondered who would now afford them protection. Legend has it that in early August 1291, the deputies of the cantons of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden, respectively, met on the Rütli meadow and swore an oath of allegiance. For many people, the Rütli and the Oath of 1291 remain a symbol of freedom, independence and resistance to this day.

### **Combined with the myth of Tell**

During the French Revolution, the Rütli experienced a renaissance as a symbol of freedom and assumed a new significance in the context of William Tell. In the late 18th century, the German writer and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing suggested that someone should write a drama with a plot focusing on Switzerland's attempts to cast off the yoke of Habsburg rule. In 1804, Friedrich Schiller wrote his play "William Tell". Schiller brought together the strands of two 14th-century legends: the oath taken by the three cantons, and Tell's famous shot at the apple placed on his son's head, which Schiller located on the Rütli meadow. Most of the people who visit the Rütli today are more taken by Schiller's exposition than the reality.

### **Saved by the Swiss Society for the Common Good**

When the new Swiss state was founded in 1848, the Rütli initially lost much of its historical significance. This was probably the reason why the owner of the land decided to build a hotel complex there. At this point, the Swiss Society for the Common Good (SCCG) came onto the scene. The SCCG was founded in 1810 and held its annual meeting in September 1858 in Schwyz. After the meeting, members of the committee took a steamer to Flüelen in order to view a channel built to correct the course of the River Reuss. As they passed the Rütli, they saw masses of wooden poles, which suggested a major construction project. The Swiss Society for the Common Good organized a nationwide fund-raising campaign, bought the Rütli and decided to donate it to the Swiss Confederation on condition that the Rütli should not be sold to anyone and that the SCCG shall manage the affairs further on.

### **Serving the cohesion**

During the Second World War, the Rütli experienced another historical moment. The army commander General Henri Guisan assembled all his senior officers at the Rütli on 25 July 1940. Guisan stressed the importance of resisting Switzerland's totalitarian neighbours and announced an operational defence strategy based on the redoubt concept. With his call to action in 1940, Guisan revived the association of the Rütli with resistance.

Since the Second World War, the Rütli has lost much of its iconic status as a symbol of freedom, independence and resistance and been abused as a vehicle for conservative, patriarchal and xenophobic propaganda. The Swiss Society for the Common Good (SCCG) tries to avoid that. The Rütli shall serve to the cohesion of the different cultures and groups in Switzerland and express the openness of Switzerland to the world. The Rütli shall remain a quiet, unspectacular meadow and, at the same time, be a place of exemplary hospitality and vivid cultural exchange.