

The Birth of a Warrior

The first rays of the morning sun filtered through dew-laden pine trees, and between the stone and wood buildings surrounding the city square called “Charity.” Typically, the square came to life gradually, the way a person likes to wake up on a weekend. But on this early morning, the usually quiet streets teemed with life. The crisp air resonated with the mingled sounds of shuffling leather, jangling steel, and whinnying horses—all of which aroused the curiosity and anxiety of the town dogs, who added their voices to the melee. Thousands of boots clomped their way through the narrow, winding streets. The boots were worn by men donning the best military equipment they could muster on short notice—thus the jangling steel. Most of the bearded, rough-looking men carried pikes—spear-tipped sturdy poles easily three times as tall as the men who carried them. The pikemen also carried either halberds—a cross between a staff and an ax—or longswords, both of which would be used in close, hand-to-hand combat.

The previous night, alarm bells had pealed from every tower in the canton, or state, of Zurich, Switzerland, beginning at the center of the capital city with the same name. A volunteer army began to assemble to halt the advancing enemy. At full daylight, the city streets resembled what happens moments after a curious boy disrupts an enormous ant hill. Some of the citizen-soldiers raced to the city arms locker to find weapons. Others, increasingly clustering into small groups, returned with what weapons they could find. Their faces showed warrior determination, even if their hearts were filled with fear of the unknown. Most of the activity led to various cobblestone squares where small bands formed into larger ones. Between the bands of men, roamed horses, their hooves clattering at the prodding of their riders. Cannon, borne on iron-reinforced wooden wheels, bounced rhythmically along the stone streets.

Army captains, who had only recently been given marching orders, desperately lobbed commands into the mounting confusion.

“Men, we must march!” The company commander—also the town butcher—turned on his heels toward the rising sun and marched down the steep alley that led to the narrow, northern tip of Lake Zurich.

As if on cue, the solid wooden door of the stone house that still cast a shrinking shadow on the remaining soldiers swung open. Three children tumbled down the steps and sped toward the curly-

red-haired man who was dismounting his horse to meet their embrace.

“Papa! Don’t go, Papa!” Seven-year-old Regula struggled to catch her breath after blurting out the words between violent sobs. William and young Ulrich, two and four years younger than their sister, nearly knocked her over as they flew to clasp their father’s legs.

The soldier, a minister by calling, removed his helmet to look into his children’s faces one last time. For nearly the first time since meeting each of his children on the days of their birth, the preacher was lost for words. As he looked up to gather his thoughts, and be relieved of the unbearable pain etched in his children’s faces, the door of his house opened a few more inches. His “two Annas” seemed to glide toward him without touching the ground, wrapped in a cream-colored shawl. His baby, only a year old, squirmed in her mother’s arms, her face set between a smile and a scream. His wife wore a similar expression.

“Goodbye, Ulrich ...” she started, then faltered. She bit her quivering lip. Her eyes squeezed shut, as if to block out the painful scene.

Ulrich scooped up Regula and nearly dragged his sons on his legs to cover the last few paces that separated himself from his bride of only seven years. For a second, the confusing scene that had been swirling around the family seemed to freeze as they locked their heaving bodies.

Everyone waited for the father to speak.

“The hour has come that separates us. Let it be. It is God’s will.” He tightened his arms as emotion tightened his throat.

The words of her pastor, and spiritual friend, strengthened Anna. “We shall all see each other again if it is God’s will.” Thinking of the children, she added, “And what will you bring back when you come?”

“A blessing after the dark night,” he answered.

Ulrich pressed his family to his heart for as long as he dared. As he pulled away, he forced his best smile before donning his helmet to shroud his tears and his contorted face. As horse and rider turned the corner of the street, Ulrich turned back for one last look and a wave.

Regula broke free of her mother’s arms. Her father cringed at the sight of her tear-soaked face and wriggling lips. He turned his face away just before her shrill voice pierced through the noise of the crowd.

“PAPA!”

Over and over, the word rattled in his brain as his broad-sword rattled at his side.

“Papa! Papa!”

Tears began to blur Ulrich’s vision as his mind drifted from the image of Regula’s pleading face to an image of his own pleading face, from a day nearly fifty years earlier.

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“Papa, I’m scared.” Five-year old Ulrich Zwingli’s voice was barely audible. His damp face was buried deep in his father’s leather jerkin.

Ulrich's father and namesake reassured his third child. "Son, you'll only be a day's hike away and Uncle Bartholomew will take good care of you."

"But why can't I stay here with you and Mama and everyone?" Ulrich stammered. As the boy turned his face toward his mother, his father quickly wiped away the tear that was gathering on his own eyelid.

"You're too smart to live in this tiny village. Besides, do you always want to be outnumbered by sheep and cows?" his father offered, trying to force a laugh.

It was nearly impossible for Ulrich to imagine living anywhere other than in the rustic village of Wildhaus, Switzerland, surrounded by the massive foothills of the Swiss Alps. Life in Wildhaus was good, especially for the Zwinglis. The senior Ulrich was the chief magistrate of the village, earning him a good living and the respect of all his peers.

From the front of their home Ulrich could watch the young men, including his older brothers Henry and Nicholas, drive the cattle and herds from their winter grazing grounds in the valley to the tops of the surrounding peaks in the warmer months. Only in summer were the sun's rays powerful enough to sprout grass in the highlands. The animals' bells rang as gently and steadily as the brook that ran between the mountains. As a young child, Ulrich often lost himself in thought and song in the meadows around his house.

The Zwingli home was better than most. Still, his large family—several more children followed after

him—lived snugly in a small log home with wooden shingles held down with rocks to protect against the intense winter winds that ripped between mountain ridges. In the glow of the kitchen fire, Ulrich and his siblings often listened to their father talk politics, religion, and history.

“Boys,” he would say, “Did I ever tell you about the time that your grandfather shot an apple off my head with his crossbow?”

“Papa,” crowed the boys, politely rolling their eyes, “Grandpa wasn’t William Tell.”

“Ah, so you’ve heard of him, have you?” grinned the elder Ulrich as he took a slow draught from a mug of apple ale. “It was about 200 years ago. Our confederacy was as young as I am now—though not half as strong.”

The boys grinned.

“But already, the future of our cantons was unsure. The Habsburg Empire was breathing down our necks, threatening our independence. One foreign overlord raised a pole in one of our villages, placed his hat on it, and required everyone to bow to it.” Their father leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and stared intently from one son’s face to another. As the tension built, he slammed his fist on the table. “But the Swiss bow before no one!” he shouted.

“This was just what William Tell said to his boy as they strolled through the village together one fine afternoon. He refused to bow and was bound with ropes in consequence. Knowing the stories about Tell’s

near-magical powers with the cross bow, the Habsburg judge gave the punishment: ‘You can escape my sword if you shoot an arrow off your son’s head!’ Tell was good, like all Swiss men should be, but just in case, he drew two bolts from his quiver. ‘The second’s for you, if the first flies untrue,’ he hissed in the direction of the judge.”

For effect, the storyteller placed an apple on young Ulrich’s head and reenacted Tell’s perfect shot, sending the apple flying with a thrust from the tip of a powerful finger. The boys cheered.

If he stayed in Wildhaus, Ulrich could grow up to drive cattle, log timber, or build furniture. Or, like William Tell, he could become a soldier. The trouble was in those days, most Swiss soldiers fought for the glory of killing and the gold of foreign kings, not to defend their homeland. As a local official, Ulrich’s father had surely observed the steady incline of demand for Swiss fighters, especially from the French. Young Ulrich had also often heard him discussing with his uncle the negative impact of mercenary soldiering. While experienced Swiss warriors returned home with stories of valor and handsome rewards, the soldier’s life often led to moral degradation. Ulrich had once overheard his father and mother talking. “Young Ulrich is gifted, dear,” his father had said. “Perhaps he will be a different kind of warrior. Maybe he will fight evil with words.” His mother had said nothing; she only offered her husband a lip-bitten smile.

“Well, my boy, your bag is packed with enough cheese and bread to get you to Weesen. Provided...” Ulrich’s father cleared his throat and glanced playfully at his brother, “provided you can keep the bag away from Uncle Bartholomew.”

“A teacher has to be paid somehow!” replied Bartholomew, as he stooped to grab his own bag. He rejoined his staff, which he had leaned against the house upon entering. As the boy turned to follow, his mother dropped to her knees on the rough wooden floor; her strong arms said what her tear-choked voice could not.

Young Ulrich raised himself to the extent of his little frame and offered—in the manliest voice he could muster, “I’ll be all right, I promise.”

“With God’s help, you will be,” said his father. “But just to be sure, I’ll go with you a few steps.”

“If you do become a scholar,” Ulrich overheard him whisper, “it’ll be too seldom that we see our boy in this humble countryside.”