

## The Symbolic Paradox

D1

The use of the Edelweiss symbol only dates from the end of the 19th century. Since then, it has held the field with rare historical and geographical permanence throughout the Alpine arc.

Why has this discrete species overshadowed, now as in the past, other more spectacular species (Gentian's, Aster, Rhododendron, etc.) as an alpine symbol?

Its artificial associations with the purity, whiteness and inaccessibility of mountain peaks earlier strengthened its historical appropriation by the Nazi movement, especially in Austria.

## D2 Edelweiss & Linguistics

Although the Edelweiss is the symbolic and federal plant of the Alps par excellence today, this has not always been the case, as is shown by a historico-sociological approach to the phenomenon.

Before the name ‘Edelweiss’ appeared, the first vernacular (traditional) names of *Leontopodium alpinum* and *L. nivale* found in historical flora refer to the appearance and the hairy aspect of the plant. In the 16th century, the Zurich naturalist CONRAD GESSNER (1516-1565) spoke of the ‘Wollblume’ (Wool Flower) (GESSNER, 1541), a name which would later find its French equivalent in the ‘Cotonnière des Alpes’ (Cotton Plant of the Alps), while the German doctor and botanist JACOBUS THEODORUS (1625), known as TABERNAEMONTANUS (1522-1590), talks of ‘klein Löwenfuss’, the literal translation of *Leontopodium* (from the Greek *Leonto* (leo) = lion et *podos* = foot), inspired by the shape and the hairy aspect of the plant.

The shape of the inflorescence has also inspired the names ‘Etoile du Glacier’ (Star of the Glacier), ‘Etoile d’Argent’ (Silver Star) or ‘Etoile des Alpes’ (Star of the Alps). The plant’s ability to retain its shape and colour when dried has also earned it the name of ‘Immortelle des Alpes’ (Everlasting Flower of the Alps), by which name it is known in the French Pyrenees and in the Canton of Graubünden where ‘Alv etèrn’ signifies ‘Eternal White’ in Romansch.

During the 19th century, all vernacular denominations were supplanted by the name ‘Edelweiss’. The first written trace of the name Edelweiß, literally ‘Noble White’, appears in a naturalist study in the Zillertal Valley (Austrian Tyrol) (PAULA SCHRANK and ERENBERT RITTER VON MOLL, 1785). This work recounts a conversation between the naturalist KARL VON MOLL and a Zillertal Valley peasant who informs him that the plant was used as incense; its smoke driving away the spirits which attacked livestock and caused udder infections.

No other flower has such linguistic “Euro-compatibility” and such international recognition.

**Fig. 63**  
An illustration of the Edelweiss by CONRAD GESSNER taken from the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Historia Plantarum*

**Fig. 64**  
‘Löwenfuss’ (Lion’s Paw) in the work by JACOBUS THEODORUS (1625), known as TABERNAEMONTANUS

**Fig. 65**  
Ex-libris, circa 1900

## Romantic Fantasies

## D3

In the collective unconscious, the myth of the Edelweiss as the emblem of the Alps arises from historical traditions. And yet this flower had no cult status until the 19th century. Whole legends have been created to foster these so-called ancestral customs.

The most widely exploited is unquestionably that of the young man risking his life climbing a rock face to gather Edelweiss as a betrothal gift for his beloved.

This legend is related by several writers in the 19th and 20th centuries throughout the Alpine arc, and even as far as the French Pyrenees. These representations of mortal danger, courage and fidelity combined with an amorous sentiment are typically to be found in the cultural roots of modern mountaineering.

Indeed, towards the middle of the 19th century, this essentially alpine sporting practice became a fashionable activity and attracted increasing numbers of enthusiasts, particularly among the British upper classes, with the Alpine Club being founded in London in 1857.

**Fig. 66**  
The legend of the fearless lover who puts his life in danger to offer his sweetheart Edelweiss has been widely exploited. (Source : Munich Stadtmuseum Archives)

## D4 Golden Age of Mountaineering

The idea of climbing mountains to affirm one's virility and thirst for challenge corresponded perfectly to the ideologies of the London elite. A city dweller sporting Edelweiss on his hat thus implied that he had tackled the summits with heroic courage.

The first alpine clubs date from this period in Austria (1862), Italy (1863), Switzerland (1863), Germany (1869) and France (1874), with the Germans and Austrians adopting the Edelweiss as the association's emblem. Mountain climbing became a lesson in courage and the Edelweiss was its symbol.

**Fig. 67**

Emblem of the Deutscher Alpenverein  
(German Alpine Society)

**Fig. 68**

Postcard from the end of the 19th  
century with the logo of the  
Swiss Alpine Club  
(Source : D. Kleiner Collection)

**Fig. 69**

Edelweiss photographed under the  
Moiry

## The Myth of Rarity D5

Having become a symbol, the Edelweiss was described in poems and stories as a rarity only growing on extremely steep rock faces, at the foot of the everlasting snows, even with its roots in the ice...

This idea of the inaccessible plant still influences our perception of the Edelweiss today and contributes to its popularity, even if in reality numerous other alpine species are much rarer.

The romantic image of Edelweiss has been even more accentuated by the often invented or exaggerated accounts of tragic accidents occurring in the heroic picking of this plant. There are, however, true stories of people falling to their death.

**Fig. 70**

Theatre decoration from around 1905  
(Oberbayern)

**Fig. 71**

'The death of an alpinist' painting by  
ERNST HEINRICH PLATZ, 1893

## D6 Alpine Tourism & the Edelweiss

From the 1850s onwards, the construction of railways linking the alpine valleys with major European cities brought Paris, Berlin and London closer to the Alps.

At first the preserve of the elite, this new alpine tourism, whose heyday was around the years 1870-1900, encouraged the building of luxurious, grand hotels and palaces.

With the introduction of paid holidays, the arrival of tourists from the upper-middle classes greatly contributed to the growth and development of certain alpine regions.

During this period, the creation and printing of 'tourist' posters was a great novelty. Only used up until then for printed railway timetables, they became an important advertising medium in which the Edelweiss played a leading role.

**Fig. 72, 73, 74, 75**

Posters for the resorts of Adelboden, Interlaken, Wengen and Luzern.  
(Source : D. Kleiner Collection)

## Greetings from the Alps D7

This growing popularity was problematic for early mountaineers who did not appreciate the popular use of this noble and symbolic plant. At the turn of the 20th century, the middle classes who had until then mainly practised the activity of walking, began to tackle the elitist bastion of alpinism and mountain climbing. This new passion was considered provocative by the elite mountain bourgeoisie. Their frustration was then crystallized in the loss of their exclusive, or considered as such, symbol : the Edelweiss.

**Fig. 76, 77**

Postcards from the end of the 19th century. (Source : Appenzell Museum)

**Fig. 78**

Postcards, 1920

## D8 Souvenirs & Tourism

On the fringes of this rise in mountain tourism, the inhabitants of the alpine regions attempted to boost their meagre incomes by selling souvenirs to tourists.

Since the Edelweiss retains its shape and immaculate colour when dried, it can bring back memories of a mountain visit for many years.

With the development of tourism, this typical image of the mountains became fixed in the minds of people from the valleys. It was only a matter of time before the flower was used to represent products which no longer had any direct links with the mountains. Just like the crossbow and the Swiss flag, Edelweiss is presented as guaranteeing a 'quality, seriousness, preciousness or purity that is typically Swiss'.

**Fig. 79**

Greetings cards decorated with Edelweiss, c.1900  
(Source : Appenzell Museum)

**Fig. 80**

Greetings cards decorated with Edelweiss, c.1900  
(Source : Appenzell Museum)

**Fig. 81**

Today, as in the past, there is not a tourist location without at least one hotel or chalet named 'Edelweiss'.

**Fig. 82**

The logo of the organisation 'Switzerland Tourism' employs a golden Edelweiss combined with the Swiss national flag.

## Costumes & Integration D9

Edelweiss is a striking example of the rapid integration of a new element into local customs and traditions. Deriving from 19th century legends, several 'neo-traditions' centred on the Edelweiss sprung up during the course of the 20th century. In the 1920s, shepherds were already decorating their hats with Edelweiss and Black vanilla orchids for the feast of St Martin at Calfeisental sur Vättis (St. Gallen). In Bielle in the Ossau Valley (French Pyrenees), the gathering of Edelweiss has become an unmissable summer festival.

The infatuation with the Edelweiss, which started at the end of the 19th century, eventually endangered it. Increasing numbers of tourists and mountaineers wanted to take this trophy back to the valleys. In the holiday resorts, Edelweiss meadows were signposted and open for people to pick their own flowers. The demand was so high in the towns and cities that businesses soon started selling souvenir cards with the dried flowers attached to them. There was a real 'Edelweiss industry' with large-scale harvesting and pickers.

**Fig. 83**

Price list for Edelweiss on sale at Lucerne in 1910  
(Source : Burgerbibliothek Berne)

**Fig. 84**

A postcard of William Tell, a Swiss national hero, with some real Edelweiss

**Fig. 85**

The Appenzell 'Strausser' Franz Anton Koller (left) and Hans Manser who, as a hobby, plait straw and alpine flowers. In the middle of each is the federal cross made with Edelweiss

## D10 Protection & Conservation

To meet this high demand, thousands of plants were dug up and sent to the public and private gardens of major European cities. Soon the threat of increasing rarity and then of extinction of the plant arose. Strong measures were required to protect and preserve it. Its most ardent defenders were to be found in the mountain climbers. In 1874, during the general assemblies of the German and Austrian alpine clubs, a ban on picking it was decreed (Zeitschrift d. dt. Alpenvereins, 1874). In Switzerland, the Canton of Obwalden banned the digging up of the plant in 1878, not with the aim of protecting this flower, but instead the small Edelweiss vendors, with 'normal' collection still being permitted.

Other cantons and alpine countries followed suit some years later, at the instigation of the Association for the Protection of Plants founded in Geneva in 1883 by members of the Swiss alpine club, including the horticulturist HENRY CORREVON, who set up poster campaigns in several languages that were displayed in tourist locations to inform people of the precarious situation of this then threatened species.

**Fig. 86**

In 1920, the Bergwacht (Mountain Watch) of Bavaria was particularly vigilant with regard to the Edelweiss and made use of its symbolic impact.

**Fig. 87**

In 1900, the German and Austrian alpine clubs founded an association for the protection of alpine plants.

**Fig. 88**

Opportunist advertising by the brand Leica making use of the protected status of the Edelweiss : 'Picking flowers is forbidden, but taking photographs with Leica is permitted'.

## Symbol & Nationalism

## D11

During the second half of the 19th century, the Edelweiss became the official national symbol of several alpine countries like Switzerland, Austria and Germany.

The European aristocracy was infatuated with this noble flower which became the favourite of emperors and kings. As shown in certain paintings, the Emperor FRANZ JOSEF OF AUSTRIA and his wife ELISABETH (known as 'SISSI') had a preference for Edelweiss, just like LUDWIG II OF BAVARIA who nursed a passion for this mythical flower.

In Germany, much written propaganda sanctioned the Edelweiss as ADOLF HITLER's favourite flower. The Wehrmacht, founded in 1935, was an alpine unit which used the plant to decorate its uniforms. This alpine division, with or without floral decoration, was anything but innocent : it was responsible for numerous war crimes in Greece and in the Balkans.

Towards the end of the war, the Edelweiss became, on the other hand, the symbol of German resistance against Nazism. Several youth movements in the Ruhr basin joined together under the name Edelweißpiraten, (Edelweiss Pirates), formed mainly of young workers who had left the mass organisations of national socialism and who organized open resistance to the regime. These pirates cultivated a cultural identity through songs and a recognisable style of clothing, which of course featured the Edelweiss.

**Fig. 89**

The EMPRESS 'SISSI' was immortalised by FRANZ XAVIER WINTERHALTER with Edelweiss decorations in her long hair. (Source : Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna)

**Fig. 90**

KING LUDWIG II in his general's uniform with coronation mantle.

**Fig. 91**

The favourite flower of Hitler, the Edelweiss played a symbolic role in Nazism.

**Fig. 92**

Postcard in aid of the German people in winter (December, 1938)

## D12 Symbolic Flower : of what? of whom?

### An Asiatic Plant as a Patriotic Symbol?

The use of a plant with far-off origins in the Asian steppes as a national symbol was not to everyone's taste, especially in Switzerland where this glorification of Edelweiss was first rejected (Christ and Burnat, 1881). For some patriots, this new fashion introduced by German tourists was not justified by any tradition. Nevertheless, since the beginning of the 20th century, the Edelweiss is to be found on the stripes of the highest Swiss military grades and, since 1922, on the Swiss five franc coin.

In other alpine countries, the Edelweiss also became an ideological symbol of patriotism in the inter-war years, particularly within conservative and reactionary groups.

**Fig. 93**

The insignia of the highest grades of the Swiss military are ornamented by a set number of Edelweiss : Brigadier (1), Major General (2), Corps Commandant (3) and General (4).

**Fig. 94**

Since 1922, the Edelweiss has been used to decorate the Swiss five franc coin.

**Fig. 95, 96**

The Edelweiss was used in the Tyrol as a unifying and patriotic symbol.

## The Edelweiss in Swiss Costumes

## D13

Until the end of the 19th century, the decorative embroideries on traditional Swiss costumes did not include the Edelweiss. From 1890 onwards, this new alpine symbol started to appear on the costumes of city societies, especially on those of men, for which no ancient tradition had been preserved. The sudden appearance of Edelweiss embroidered in large numbers on men's costumes could be seen, for example, in the Cantons of Uri, Obwalden and Unterwalden and then in Appenzell and Gruyère.

**Fig. 97, 98**

Traditional folk costumes did not make use of Edelweiss until the end of the 19th century. (Appenzell Museum)

**Fig. 99, 100**

The Edelweiss started to appear on folk costumes at the beginning of the 20th century, especially on men's costumes of the cantons of central Switzerland and on those of Gruyère and Appenzell. (Sources : Gruérien Museum, Bulle ; photo by Louise Witzig, Lac Noir 1949. Graciously made available by Schweizerischen Trachtenvereinigung, Bubikon)

## D14 The New Ethnic Trend

Until the 1990s, the Edelweiss had a rather antiquated and traditional image. Then a new ethnic trend began, thanks, amongst others, to the watchmaker Michel Jordi who in 1989 gave a breath of fresh air to the flower's image with the creation of the 'Swiss Ethno', a watch decorated with Swiss symbols (cows, cheese, the Swiss cross and, of course, Edelweiss). This new fashion, aimed at young people in the cities looking for 'Swissness', was quickly emulated and Edelweiss became 'in', while at the same time being right on the mark for Asian tourists. Even if the momentum of the 'ethnic boom' declined to some extent towards the end of the 1990s, the image of the Edelweiss had by then changed and advertising campaigns could target new audiences.

**Fig. 102, 103**

'Ethno' design for jewels and watches by MICHEL JORDI

**Fig. 104**

The 'peasant' shirt decorated with Edelweiss is a common feature of the Swiss wrestling tournament.

**Fig. 105, 106**

Famous people can be seen dressed in shirts decorated with Edelweiss for an advertising campaign to promote agriculture.

## Words, Musical notes & Images...

## D15

Mountain tales have their roots far back in the past. But since the Edelweiss only became popular in the 19th century, it does not feature in stories written earlier ! Recent literary production has, however, often given it centre stage.

The famous legend of the 'The White Lady', found throughout Europe in various guises (fairies, witches, washerwomen), who generally heralds a death, has been adapted to explain the origin of the Edelweiss in the Alps :

'Above the eternal snows, there lived a White Lady who had once been Queen of the Snows, surrounded by imps who all carried lances of crystal. Whenever an imprudent hunter or mountaineer took it into his head to climb up to the White Lady's refuge, she smiled at him encouragingly. And he became hypnotised. Unaware of the danger, he climbed higher and higher. All he could see was the beautiful face of the Queen of the Snows. Then the imps attacked him and pushed him into the ravine. The White Lady began to cry. Her tears fell on the glaciers and flowed down to the rocks where they turned into Edelweiss.' (CHAVOUTIER, 2005)

The comic book Asterix in Switzerland, originally published in French in 1970, has created a lasting image of the intrepid Asterix scaling a snow-covered mountain in search of the inaccessible Edelweiss, an essential ingredient in the antidote for the poison administered to the Roman tax collector.

**Fig.107**

'Edelweiss - for the sentiments and hearts of women' a selection of modern and contemporary poems by DR. KARL ZETTEL, around 1900

**Fig.108**

Recent photo-stories in German also use the romantic image of the Edelweiss. (HEIMAT-ROMAN, 2008)

## D16 Star of the Alps : Film & Music

The musical career debut of the Edelweiss coincided with its early notoriety in the 19th century in the form of patriotic songs, mainly performed at middle class parties, about the hard but happy life of mountain peasants.

In the 20th century, this music reached an increasingly wider public with the first recordings and then the radio in the 1920s. Musical use of the Edelweiss diversified into a greater variety of styles, ranging from military marches to popular music, retaining the traditional themes of love, nature, the nation and God.

However, a revival of the Edelweiss in patriotic songs came with propaganda linked to the Second World War.

After the war, the Edelweiss once again found its traditional place in popular music and numerous groups adopted its name.

It featured in the famous musical comedy 'The Sound of Music' of 1965 in the cult song 'Edelweiss'

**Fig. 109**  
'Edelweiss Glide', piano solo,  
E.E. VANDERBECK, c. 1935

**Fig. 110**  
Maxi single cover 'Edelweiss',  
HEINO, 1973. EMI Electrola.

**Fig. 111**  
Maxi single cover 'Starship Edelweiss',  
EDELWEISS, 1992. Warner Music.

**Fig. 112**  
'The Sound of Music', musical film by R.  
WISE (1965), which contain the famous  
'Edelweiss' song

## Your Edelweiss

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Come and visit the exhibition 'EDELWEISS - MYTHES ET PARADOXES'. It will hopefully interest and amuse you while informing you about the Edelweiss.

We'll hope that this exhibition will not leave you indifferent and that it will arouse your interest.

With this in mind, we purpose that you finish your visit by responding to the questions below :

- ◆ Is the Edelweiss your national flower?
- ◆ What importance does it hold? Does it represent Switzerland well?
- ◆ Do you know any other national flowers?
- ◆ What is, for you, the value and the power of a national flower?
- ◆ Is the Edelweiss, for you, a unifying symbol for the Swiss population or a tourist image?
- ◆ Would you offer someone a bouquet of Edelweiss?
- ◆ In your view, does the Edelweiss still retain its image of inaccessibility and purity now that is domesticated?
- ◆ Have you already seen Edelweiss in its natural habitat?
- ◆ Has your perception of the Edelweiss changed after visiting this exhibition?