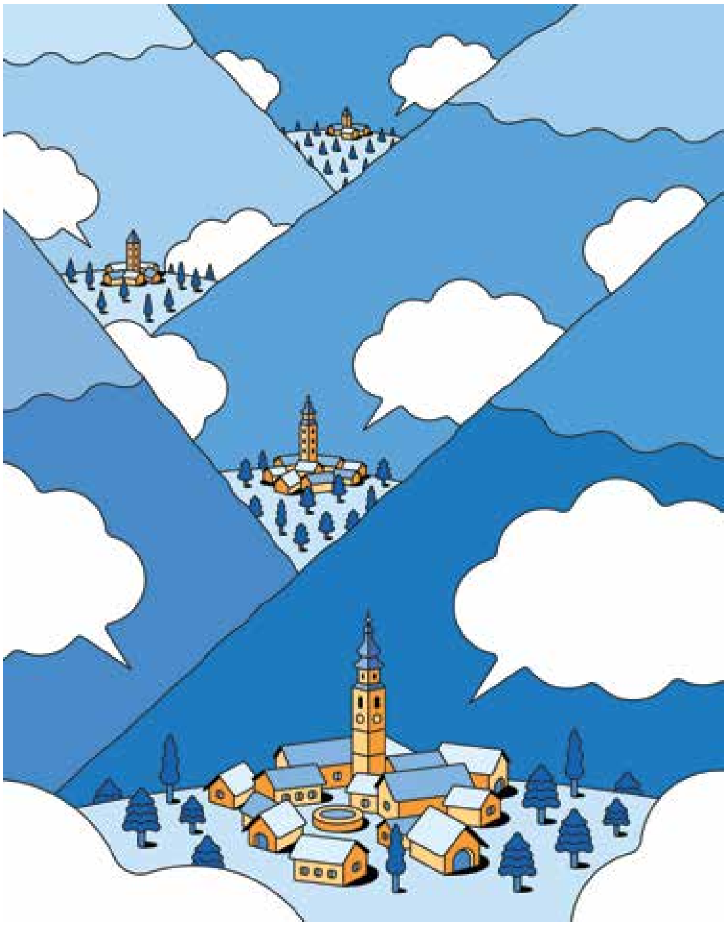
LETTER FROM SWITZERLAND

VALLEY OF BABEL

Reformers tried to standardize a tiny language. Then the shouting started.

BY SIMON AKAM



Romansh, which less than one per cent of the Swiss speak, has five major "idioms."

Ask him how it all began, and he remembers the ice. It was a bitter morning in January, 1982, when Bernard Cathomas, aged thirty-six, carefully picked his way up a slippery, sloping Zurich street. His destination was No. 33, an ochre house with green shutters—the home of Heinrich Schmid, a linguist at the University of Zurich. Inside, the décor suggested that "professor" was an encompassing identity: old wooden floors, a faded carpet, a living room seemingly untouched since the nineteen-thirties, when Schmid had grown up in the house. Schmid's wife served *Rüeblitorte*, a Swiss carrot cake that manages bourgeois indulgence with a vegetable alibi.

Cathomas had already written from Chur, in the canton of the Grisons, having recently become the general secretary of the Lia Rumantscha, a small association charged with protecting Switzerland's least known national language, Romansh. Spoken by less than one per cent of the Swiss population, the language was itself splintered into five major "idioms," not always readily intelligible to one another, each with its own spelling conventions. Earlier attempts at unification had collapsed in rivalries. In his letter, Cathomas said that Schmid's authority would be valuable in standardizing the language. Cathomas wrote in German but started and ended in his native Sursilvan, the biggest of the Romansh idioms: "*Jeu engraziel cordialmein per Vies interess e Vossa attenziun per quest problem.*" Translation: "I thank you very much for your interest and attention to this problem."

Schmid, the man he was counting on, hadn't grown up speaking Romansh; he first learned it in high school, and later worked on the "Dicziunari Rumantsch Grischun," a Romansh dictionary begun in 1904 and still lumbering toward completion. But the depth of his expertise was formidable. By the time Cathomas knocked on his door, Schmid had already sketched a plan for standardizing Romansh: a "majority principle" in which the most widely shared spellings across the idioms would win out.

"He really already had everything," Cathomas recalled. "He had worked it all out in his head."

What Cathomas hadn't reckoned with was how quickly the tidy scheme, once loosed into the valleys, would ignite quarrels that engulfed Swiss classrooms, newspapers, and eventually cantonal politics—a parable of how an attempt to secure a language's survival can feel, to those being standardized, like an assault on what makes them distinct.

Every European language originated in a squabble of dialects. Standard English rose from East Midland varieties, its momentum gathering after Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales," in the fourteenth century. In Germany, Luther's New Testament was a catalyst for making the Saxon dialect the linguistic default, at least on the page. French proved the most consequential case. For centuries, the monarchy promoted a version of the Parisian dialect, and the French Revolution—linking linguistic unity to republican virtue—only hastened the process of linguistic standardization. Elsewhere, the French model of uniformity imposed from above became the template. "There's a big difference between languages standardized before the French Revolution and after," the Romance philologist Paul Videsott told me. "After Napoleon, language becomes the strongest means to define a people."

Romansh, which sounds closer to northern-Italian dialects than to the modern language spoken in Florence or Rome, is a battered remnant of spoken

ILLUSTRATION BY TILL LAUER

Late Latin which escaped standardization mostly by being tucked away in the Alps. The Grisons, Switzerland's only trilingual canton, is dominated by mountains; an area roughly the size of Delaware contains nine hundred and thirty-seven named peaks. (*Piz*, Romansh for "peak," clings to dozens of summits like linguistic snowpack.) The terrain is daunting. Even today, travelling by train from Disentis, a Sursilvan-speaking town, to Poschiavo, Italian-speaking and just sixty miles away, takes more than four hours.

Chur, the capital of the Grisons, was devastated by fire in the fifteenth century. An influx of German-speaking workers arrived to help with reconstruction, and the town's language altered to German before Romansh had established a literary tradition. And the fact that wider political authority was decentralized meant that linguistic fragmentation found little resistance. Until the start of the nineteenth century, the canton was governed by three bodies with names fit for a Wes Anderson caper: the League of God's House, the League of the Ten Jurisdictions, and the Gray League. During the Reformation, villagers could put big questions—whether to turn Protestant or remain Catholic—to a vote. Among the surviving Romansh idioms, Sursilvan reigns in the upper Rhine Valley; Sutsilvan in the posterior Rhine Valley; Surmiran in the Albula Valley and Oberhalbstein; and Puter and Vallader in the Engadine. In Cathomas's estimation, Sursilvan accounts for just over half of all Romansh speakers, Vallader about a fifth, Puter and Surmiran each about ten per cent, and Sutsilvan about five per cent. (These five idioms, Cathomas notes, are themselves a standardization of perhaps twenty-one linguistic varieties that arose over time.) Greetings shift on either side of a watershed and can vary even within a town. Among speakers of Romansh, you could find dozens of ways of pronouncing the first-person pronoun. "Avalanche" varies, too—*lavina* in Sursilvan, Vallader, and Puter, *lavegna* in Surmiran and Sutsilvan. With both courtesies and catastrophes refusing to conform, the canton's school board, publishers, and clergy were forced to produce multiple editions of primers, textbooks, and catechisms; sometimes five parallel print runs were needed for a population the size of a town. To the reform-minded, it was plain that something had to give.

I met Bernard Cathomas at his home in Chur, a white-walled modernist house designed in the style of Rudolf Olgiati, the Swiss architect known for making starkness feel Alpine. Tall and slender, with retreating white hair, rimless glasses, and a careful, though not unamused, expression, Cathomas carried himself with the formality of a cultural functionary and the low-key stubbornness of a man who has spent a lifetime defending a fragile language. He remains better known in the valleys of the Grisons than he might like; his name can still provoke sharp opinions. The death threats have passed. The indignation has not.

Inside, we sat by some Le Corbusier armchairs—"Not always very comfortable," he remarked—while his wife, Rita, brought out what felt like a culinary tour of the valleys: a barley soup dense with grains and vegetables, grated potatoes fried slowly in butter until crisp, and plates of *charn setga dal Grischun*, dried meats from the Grisons. Cathomas was born in 1946 in Breil, a village situated on a terrace on the north side of the Anterior Rhine, forty-two hundred feet above sea level. He was the second of fourteen children, in a Sursilvan-speaking family.

The family straddled eras: their habits belonged to the region's past, their livelihood to the new era. His father worked as a wheelwright until rubber tires killed the trade, then built wooden molds to cast concrete for hydroelectric projects. "My first and deepest wish was to become a medical doctor," Cathomas said, "but, because my family lacked the money for a secondary-school education, I gave up on that idea." In the mid-fifties, the family visited the Benedictine monastery at Disentis, which operated a school. Cathomas recalls standing in the Baroque church, beneath a fresco of St. Placidus carrying his own severed head, while monks asked his father if they could pay for tuition. They could not. Nor did Bernard have any desire to be a priest or a monk. He stayed in his local school, trained as a teacher in Chur, and eventually earned a doctorate in German studies.

By the seventies, Romansh was losing ground; although the number of speakers inched up, the share of the Swiss population who spoke it shrank. German seeped into daily speech, bringing its gadgets with it: vacuum cleaners were *schtaubsugers*, televisions *fernseers*, tents *zeltas*. Decline had a ratchet effect. "Languages need what we call in economics 'network externality,'" Clemens Sialm, a finance professor at the University of Texas who grew up speaking Romansh, told me. "A language becomes more useful the more people speak it." In the early eighties, someone suggested to Cathomas that Romansh should be allowed to "die in beauty"—the proposal itself phrased, with a touch of fatalist elegance, in Vallader.

Switzerland had declared Romansh its fourth national language in 1938, but the gesture was symbolic. Without a standardized written form, nothing official could be produced in it. The breakthrough for Cathomas came during his doctoral studies, when he encountered the work of Harald Haarmann, a linguist who showed how German had gradually emerged from a patchwork of dialects. "I thought, Yes, that's incredible," Cathomas recalled. "And, when I joined the Lia Rumantscha, I said, 'We absolutely must do something like that.'" What Cathomas perhaps overlooked was that German had unified itself by erasing languages like Romansh.

After meeting with Cathomas, Heinrich Schmid rapidly produced a dense forty-eight-page pamphlet, outlining a scheme for the new language, which he called Rumantsch Grischun—that is, Grisons Romansh. Given Schmid's strategy of taking the most common form of a word across the five idioms, sometimes nothing had to change—*clav*, or "key," was *clav* everywhere. Sometimes there was a clear majority: *tschiel*, or "sky," instead of *tschêl*. And sometimes Schmid split the difference, smoothing verbs that varied wildly from valley to valley.

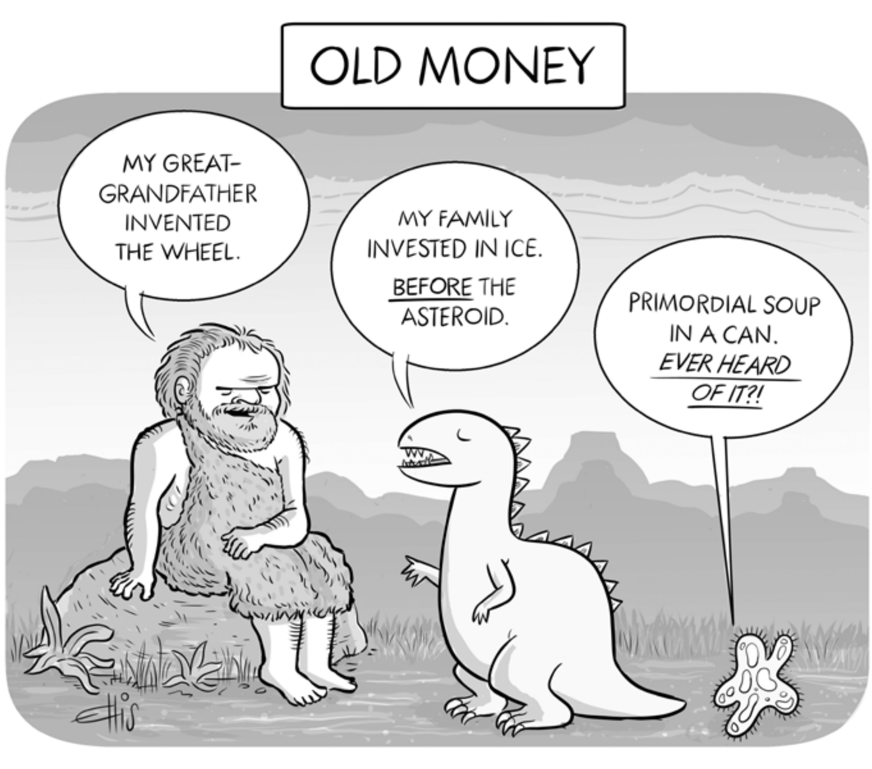
Cathomas wanted Rumantsch Grischun, or R.G., launched fast. At the Lia Rumantscha, a handful of young linguists set about producing grammars and dictionaries, translating government documents, and coining words on the fly. The mood was feverish. "It was such a pioneering time—you had a feeling that anything was possible," Anna-Alice Dazzi, a former student of Schmid's and an early R.G. evangelist, recalled.

But there were already signs of mission creep. Christian Erni, a primary-school headmaster, remembers a conference in the eighties where Cathomas assured teachers that R.G. would never enter classrooms. "It would just be for signage and communication between canton and municipality, a written language," Erni recounted. "The teachers believed it, too." That promise quietly expired. Cathomas "wanted to get to the goal too quickly," Mevina Puorger, a scholar who had also studied with Schmid, recalled. "As soon as he had the guidelines, he started making translations. That was too early. He didn't give the language a chance to grow."

The first serious backlash came in 1988, at a cultural gathering in Scuol. The linguist Chasper Pult gave a lecture in favor of R.G. One designated respondent, Theo Candinas, a writer and an outspoken critic of R.G., was furious that the moderator denied him a chance to deliver a proper rebuttal. To some in the hall—those who saw R.G. as a lab-grown construct foisted on Alpine communities by distant planners—the silencing confirmed their suspicions. "The opposition was probably already frustrated," Dazzi recalled. "They felt all the energy, all the money, was going into Rumantsch Grischun. This was the last straw." The following day, Candinas complained to the press that he'd been censored, and denounced R.G. as a bureaucratic affront to the authentic cadences of the valleys.

The opposition remained a minority, but a verbally resourceful one. The new language was denounced as a "bastard," a "castrated" tongue, an act of "linguistic murder." Nazi analogies abounded: Candinas, in a much discussed article, seemed to liken Cathomas to Josef Goebbels; one editorial accused the Lia Rumantscha of staging a "Kristallnacht" against the idioms. Others borrowed from the anxieties of the eighties, from AIDS to Eastern Bloc repression. In 1991, three thousand people signed a petition to the federal government in Bern claiming that the imposition of R.G. violated their rights. Cathomas received threatening anonymous letters and calls. Strangers let him know exactly how they felt. "The reason it's so contentious is that it's not about language," Oliver Mayeux, a sociolinguist at Cambridge, told me. "It's about using language as a symbol, a totem, around which you organize your social movement." But Cathomas was determined to stay the course until R.G. joined German, French, and Italian as one of the languages in which Swiss government documents are published. In 1996, it happened.

Cathomas left the Lia Rumantscha and went on to run Pro Helvetia, the Swiss arts council. The opposition subsided. The publisher Dorling Kindersley's Eyewitness Books were reborn as Collecziun Egls Averts. Microsoft released its Office suite in R.G. Even the Beatles arrived in Romansh: the Swiss vocalist Corin Curschellas sang "Norwegian Wood" as "*Jau vev in'amur / U duess jau dir / L'amur veva mai . . .*" After concerts, she'd sometimes ask audiences: Which idiom had she sung in? Sursilvan? Vallader? Surmiran? No one ever guessed R.G.


OLD MONEY
MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER INVENTED THE WHEEL.
MY FAMILY INVESTED IN ICE. BEFORE THE ASTEROID.
PRIMORDIAL SOUP IN A CAN. EVER HEARD OF IT?!

By the turn of the millennium, the language had seeped into daily life. The journalist David Truttmann read some short texts on Romansh radio in R.G. He recalls that at the post office in Müstair, where locals speak Jauer, a close relative of Vallader, a postal clerk once said, "You told some funny stories. But they weren't really in Jauer, were they?" They weren't—but the fellow had understood them. Later, a pastor clear across the canton griped about another broadcast. For Truttmann, the complaints were the proof: R.G. could serve as a lingua franca.

Earlier this year, Cathomas agreed to take me on a tour of the region whose linguistic future he'd once tried to reprogram. We left Chur in a train and then boarded a PostBus, climbing into the upper valleys. At just below five thousand feet, we stopped in Vrin, a village whose church had a portico lined with human skulls—a memento mori and, in the past, a resting place for the dead before burial. Then we descended into the main valley of the Anterior Rhine, to Disentis and the Benedictine school that Cathomas's family hadn't been able to afford. The monastery, rebuilt at the end of the seventeenth century, sported a concrete addition, brutalism with a clerical accent. Standing in its shadow, I asked Cathomas how Switzerland's near-sacred devotion to order—visible in trains, typography, and almost everything else—squared with its tolerance for linguistic chaos.

"You know, that's just the fascination of small things," he said. "If you hold small things in high esteem, that's a good attitude. But, in practice, it leads to difficulties. As soon as you don't adhere to certain standards, you're struggling."

It became evident that in the Romansh world, six degrees of separation would be overkill. Mention a name and you may be offered coffee, champagne, or a cousin. When I brought up Clemens Sialm, the finance professor in Texas, I found myself ushered up the stairs of the Hotel Alpsu, which is run by Sialm's family. His sister leaned out of the kitchen; among the drinkers on the terrace was Elmar Deflorin, a singer and a filmmaker who, in 1986, had turned a satirical poem about R.G., written by a teacher, into a valley-wide rock anthem.

After some coaxing, Deflorin sang the opening verse, which translated to: "Good heavens, what's coming? / A new thing, a new language! / Gather yourselves, you valleys, with axe and club, every child! / We don't want Rumantsch Grischun!" Later stanzas mocked purists who would "rather die than change" or "experience the world only in German." Cathomas reprinted the poem in his (German-language) book on the Romansh-language wars, "A Path to Unity in Diversity." When I asked Deflorin what he thought of the value of R.G. today, he didn't hesitate: "I think it's existential."

The next day, Cathomas and I went southeast, to the Engadine, where Puter and Vallader are spoken. In Pontresina, a village of palatial hotels, its mayor, Nora Saratz Cazin, explained that even here, in a Puter-speaking zone, speech could fray into micro-dialects. "The Pontresina dialect is very broad, doughy," Cazin said. "We say *primaveeerer*, with a lot of *eeeer* and *neer*. In Zuoz"—eight miles away—"it's *primavaira*." Cathomas added that Pontresina people sounded slightly different from their neighbors in Celerina. How far away was that? She pointed out the window: "Celerina is the houses over there."

The second wave of resistance to R.G. began, predictably, in schools. For decades, the Grisons had printed textbooks in five Romansh idioms—a baroque solution that invited a more rational one. In the mid-two-thousands, the canton launched a trial program, subsidizing schools that taught in the standardized language. A new textbook series blended modernity with Alpine flourishes; one spread on hunting showed a smiling woman with a hooved carcass slung across her shoulders like a sweater, blood streaking her sleeve.

Between 2007 and 2009, dozens of schools signed on to teach R.G., with a plan to eventually make it the language of instruction. Then children came home spouting phrases that sounded off, even foreign. Outrage followed. A bridge language never meant for speech was suddenly being spoken—and enforced as correct.

In 2010, indignant parents in the Engadine founded an opposition group, Pro Idioms. Its leader, Domenic Toutsch—a farmer turned insurance executive turned village president—saw R.G. as a professional-class takeover. "The professional Romansh, the Romansh élite, bypassing the people, sought to introduce the Rumantsch Grischun project in an undemocratic, dictatorial manner," he told me, "with money, coercion, and so on, under the leadership of Bernard Cathomas, among others." Then, with a farmer's finality, he added, "Bernard Cathomas is not my political Romansh friend."

Soon, a second chapter formed in Surselva. One of its leaders was Tresa Deplazes. When her daughter started third grade in an R.G. school, Deplazes recalled, "that's when we really got a sense of what it meant. She'd bring home homework, and we'd encounter something that just sounded wrong and looked wrong. Really wrong."

The alliance between the two chapters required delicacy—the gap between the Engadine dialects and Sursilvan is the widest in the Romansh family—and participants sometimes had to ask one another what certain words meant. The group's website published everything twice, with a short German summary as a backup for outsiders. On one point, however, everyone was unified and unyielding: no single Romansh should rule them all.

Pro Idioms' most effective weapon was procedure. In the Grisons, the canton where villagers once voted on whether to become Protestant or remain Catholic, individual communities could still hold a vote on which Romansh to teach. From 2011 to 2013, Pro Idioms campaigners trudged from hamlet to hamlet, insisting that the canton didn't have the authority to dictate. "Every municipality had the right to decide its own language," Deplazes said.

In the spring of 2011, the writer Leo Tuor thundered in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* that the debate over R.G. had "destroyed linguistic peace in the Grisons and squandered the trust of the population." Pro Idioms claimed that the way R.G. was introduced damaged children psychologically, fractured cohesion, and undermined identity.

Not everyone admired the tenor of the revolt. "Perhaps Switzerland's democratic principles were also somewhat undermined," Fabian Huonder, a translator for the canton government, said. "If anyone spoke up for Rumantsch Grischun, they were interrupted, sometimes forcefully." Still, the campaign worked. Most schools that had adopted R.G. reverted to an idiom.

Yet Pro Idioms' triumph had the markings of a Pyrrhic victory. With local schools rejecting R.G. textbooks, international publishers cut back their Romansh editions. The canton kept the colorful R.G. series for the few communities that continued to use them, but largely reverted to a modular system, plugging variant idioms into a single content-management framework. A professor commissioned by the Grisons government to develop teaching materials gave me the numbers: "We print eight sets of textbooks—five in idioms, one in Rumantsch Grischun, one in German, one in Italian. Sutsilvan, the smallest idiom, has just one school. Maybe twenty or thirty students."

In 2021, about forty thousand people—half a per cent of the Swiss population, fourteen per cent of the Grisons'—identified Romansh as their main language. The numbers haven't budged much, but Romansh now sits in a kind of bureaucratic stalemate. Official publications appear in R.G., as do the Romansh broadcaster's website and its radio news and bulletins, but almost all TV broadcasts are in the idioms. The daily newspaper *La Quotidiana* maintains an idiomatic equilibrium.

David Truttmann, the paper's publisher, took me through a recent edition with a ballpoint pen, charting linguistic shifts like a field commander repositioning troops. With square glasses and gray-flecked dark hair, he had the calm, thoughtful demeanor of someone long accustomed to handling complaints. The lead story—on a wind-power project—was in R.G. Two of the briefs were in Sursilvan. A photo spread was captioned in Puter. Inside, he pointed out Vallader and Surmiran.

"I think this is the only newspaper in

the world written in six different variants," he said. The ads, inevitably, were mostly in German.

It could almost seem that the invention of a uniform Romansh has encouraged further fragmentation. In Sedrun, a village below the Oberalp Pass, locals maintained that they spoke not Sursilvan or Sutsilvan but Tuatschin, a micro-idiom of their own. "About twelve hundred people live here," one woman said, "but only about five hundred are Tuatschiners."

That night, in a hall attached to a compound for holiday groups—a bar on one side, a mandala-like cloth draped over the back wall—I attended an evening of prose and song. Pascal Gamboni, a musician with a graying mod cut, sang in Tuatschin: "*Mo sil tschiel mirel, mo sil tschiel*"—"Only in the sky, only in the sky." Flurina Badel, a novelist, read from her new book, "Tschiera" ("Fog"), which is in Vallader and concerns Engadine villagers who are being priced out by second-home buyers. With her red-brown hair drawn back and her lips rouged, she read with the steady interior focus of a writer communing with her own sentences. I couldn't follow her in Vallader, and I had the sense that I wasn't alone.

When she switched to German, everyone relaxed. "The quality of literature," she told me afterward, "has nothing to do with the language in which it is written but with how that language is used."

At first, Gamboni and Badel looked like specimens of a venerable Alpine culture. That picture shifted once I spoke with them. Badel is a first-generation Romansh speaker: her father is of Italian descent, her mother Swiss German. They had moved to the Engadine partly for the cheap housing, which has long since disappeared. At home, Badel spoke French, Italian, and German; Vallader came later.

She enrolled at the Hochalpines Institut Ftan, an élite school that educates both international boarders and local Swiss of more modest means. Later, while studying creative writing in Vienna, she was disappointed to find that everything was conducted in just one language. Did her devotion to Vallader have a convert's zeal? "I also have a strong affinity for linguistic innovation," she said. "And when I write in Romansh I'm very close to innovation. I can help invent new words." She sometimes submits suggestions to Pledari Grond, an online dictionary: *giattera* (cat flap), *tschüffasömmis* (dream catcher).

Gamboni had once spent a decade in England chasing rock stardom. In the early two-thousands, he moved to Bristol with his band, Cléan. Their sound was a serviceable version of Britpop; Gamboni sang in English. A few years later, though, the band was gone. The manager was gone. Gamboni had turned toward the obscure, scraping bows across guitar strings, recording snowmelt, making art films in derelict buildings. He looked worn out. His mother was worried.

One way of telling the story is that Badel and Gamboni represented a younger generation intent on a Romansh revival. Another is that Romansh became a refuge when your larger ambitions went to ground.

On the cantonal level, Romansh's survival comes down to money. From the nineteen-fifties on, the Grisons went from rural poverty to Alpine affluence on the backs of tourism, high-tech industries, and hydropower. Today, its budget stands at $3.9 billion. Against that, the amount spent on supporting a minority language is, as Daniel Spadin, the canton's top civil servant, told me, "negligible." In his office building, he ushered me into a chandeliered chamber where a walnut table stretched beneath a rococo ceiling, gilt mirrors lined the walls, and a floral carpet spread underfoot. Federal and cantonal governments combined now spend the equivalent of about seven million dollars a year to keep Romansh alive, including subsidies for the Lia Rumantscha. (A separate levy brings in funds for public broadcasting.)

"You get onstage very quickly," Johannes Just told me one evening in his Chur apartment. He would know: for more than two decades, he was part of Liricas Analas, a Romansh rap crew. The name, literally "Anal Lyrics," nods to the old "Parental Advisory" stickers that warned of obscene language. After six albums, the group disbanded in 2022. "From the living room to the stage, the transition is quick," Just said. "The hard part is what comes after—trying to go from amateur to professional."

Liricas Analas revelled in regional clichés. In one 2012 video, a mountain rube putters to Zurich on an undersized motorbike and swaggers into a night club; offered cocaine, he counters with snuff. In a promotional image, the members pose beneath a schoolhouse panel in Trun that reads "PROTECT YOUR OLD ROMANSH LANGUAGE." None of them, however, could live on rhyme alone. By 2022, the surviving m.c.s were in their late thirties or forties, commuting from day jobs.

Book publishing functions in much the same way—small triumphs, bounded horizons. Nadina Derungs, who runs Chasa Editura Rumantscha, in Chur, told me that a typical Romansh title might sell between four hundred and six hundred copies. The outlier was "Uorsin," a 1945 children's story about a boy stuck with the puniest cowbell at a fête, which was published in fourteen languages and sold a million copies.

Derungs had bold glasses, black teardrop earrings, and a bubbly, curated energy. "We don't publish everything we're sent," she said. For younger readers, the Lia Rumantscha translates international hits by big names—Richard Scarry is the latest. But since the revolt against R.G., even Scarry has to appear in multiple idioms. The result: fewer new books, more versions of the same ones.

When I asked Derungs if she had ever dreamed of working at the German publishing giant Bertelsmann, she sighed. "Of course it would have been great," she said. "But just getting an internship there—no chance. In the Romansh world, as soon as you want to work for the community, everyone comes and says, 'Come to us.' "

"This is a protected environment," another Swiss woman told me when I mentioned the peculiarities of the Romansh cultural ecosystem. She had grown up speaking Romansh in Silvaplana, but she had since moved to Zurich. We were talking in German: "*Das ist ein geschützter Rahmen.*" But now she switched languages. "Safe space," she added, in English.

Technology may yet decide Romansh's fate. Several years ago, executives at RTR, the public broadcaster in Chur, asked a computational-linguistics team at the University of Zurich whether the language could be brought into the world of automated translation. The timing was favorable: neural networks were replacing statistical models in mainstream machine translation, dramatically improving fluency. The Zurich researchers had spun out a startup, later folded into a larger language-services firm, Supertext,

C.P.A.
m.e. mcnair

"If you have any bones hidden in other countries, now is the time to tell me."

and saw Romansh as a perfect test case. Statistical systems could "see" only a handful of words at a time; neural models could take in whole sentences, and, later still, large language models could weigh even broader contexts.

RTR agreed to co-fund a pilot to test new tools for its editorial team. The appeal for the developers was the engineering challenge it posed. Corporate clients often expect high-quality translation of internal jargon that behaves like a private dialect; Romansh, with its sparse training corpus and multiple variants, was a real-world version of that puzzle. The team trained its first system on roughly a hundred and twenty thousand aligned segments, a far cry from the billion-plus that a tech giant would have used for German-English. To compensate, they pretrained their system on equivalent Italian and German texts, and they machine-translated texts from major European languages to Romansh to bulk up the corpus.

The resulting system worked well enough that when Bernard Cathomas switched to Romansh in an e-mail exchange, I could reply in kind. It performs better translating out of Romansh than into it, and it produces only R.G., though it can handle the idioms as input. A new project, backed by the Lia Rumantscha and the University of Zurich, aims to support all five major idioms, as well as R.G. The training base is meagre, mostly drawn from the news, but organizers hope for a working system by 2026.

The Lia Rumantscha is also asking the International Organization for Standardization to classify each idiom as a separate language. Some people doubt that this hyperlocalism will pay off. One member of the Zurich team told me about a Swiss firm that sold a G.P.S. device with directions spoken in Swiss German. "No one bought it," he noted. "People said, 'That's not *my* Swiss German.'" You can give the machine a voice, he suggested, but people still want it to sound like their cousin.

It's a long way from Zurich to Schnaus, and not just geographically. Where the tech world prizes scalability and fluency, the anti-R.G. camp measures success in familiarity, cadence, the feel of something handed down. When I mentioned Cathomas to Tresa Deplazes, a founder of Pro Idioms, she warned me not to be "blinded by his demeanor." Over lunch at her carefully restored old home—fresh pasta, prompted by a glut of eggs from her hens—I was struck by its contrast with Cathomas's existence in his austerely modern architectural dwelling in Chur.

That evening, Deplazes and Francestg Friberg, a schoolteacher and a Pro Idioms member, led me up a hillside where Friberg kept his horses, Carmelot and Amarena. He distributed hay, grilled sausages, and gave me the Romansh names of a brook thundering in the dark.

"We kept the idioms in schools," Deplazes said. "We're proud of that. It was a big job—very difficult."

"I don't feel like a victor," Friberg added. "But that's well said. We achieved something."

It was the sort of sentiment Cathomas, from the other side, would have understood. "Minorities tend to make themselves smaller than they are," he'd warned me. "At the same time, they also make themselves bigger. They feel like they can do anything. Both attitudes—the inferiority, the megalomania—are dangerous. In the middle, in reality, that's the hard place." But who decides where the middle lies? Between tradition and reform, the coördinates shift with every village.

Later, I asked Friberg if his unusual first name was native to the area. "Yes, but it's dying out, like Romansh," he said. "I am the last of the Mohicans."

Rain lanced through the beams of our flashlights as we descended, the horses cantering around us. On the wall of a grotto, someone had scrawled "*il drag*"—"dragon," though the official name was *la cauma da nuorsas*, the sheep's haven. In Dardin, Friberg pulled a blackened stack of alderwood disks bound in blue twine from his barn and explained a seasonal custom, *trer schibettas*: heating the disks until they glowed, then hurling them into the valley with whittled sticks. "Over centuries, it became increasingly prohibited," Friberg explained, given the risk of starting a fire. "Many villages banned it." His own affection for the custom seemed undimmed; he demonstrated the technique by sending a disk skidding into the night.

Driving back to Chur, I thought less of the hazards than I did of the stubborn beauty of the custom—the arcs of fire flung into darkness, small acts of defiance against the pull of forgetting. ♦