



THE BATTLE OF KAPPEL IN 1531

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Swiss piquier, 15th century

The separation of the Church confessions caused by the Protestant Reformation had led to a split of the Confederation between the cantons of the Catholic confession and those of the new Reformed one. From Zürich, where Huldrych Zwingli proclaimed the restoration of the Church and the State, the Reformed doctrines reached the towns of Bern, Basle, Sankt Gallen and Schaffhausen as well as part of Glarus and Appenzell. The other cantons, and in particular those located at the heart of Switzerland, persisted in the Catholic faith (the Five Cantons).

This polemic overheated their spirits in an exceptional way. It hurled the whole Confederation into a perilous dispute where the most extreme would confront each other. The two parties built foreign alliances in order to protect their positions. Reformers were combined with the towns of Konstanz, Sankt Gallen, Biel and Mühlhausen, while the Catholics aligned with Austria by forming a "Holy Union," which then risked the destruction of the Confederation.

In 1524, the five most active cantons of the center of Switzerland accompanied by Austria prepared for a military confrontation with the objective of striking Zürich, capital of the new Reformed doctrine. The same year, Zwingli wrote his famous "Council for a Military Campaign," which proposed an order by the city of Zürich to go against the five Catholic cantons. This military council was to proclaim a complete mobilization of the army as well as to form a political coalition of Reformers and to study various military options.

In spite of the deep division and increasing tension between the cantons by the two religious doctrines, and in spite of Zwingli insistence for military preparations, all organization failed because Bern Canton had great reserves on hand. In June of 1529, the first war at Kappel was thus planned, but even though Zürich was militarily in a dominant position, no bloodshed



Ulrich Zwingli, humanist and reformer, born at Wildhaus, near Sankt-Gallen, in 1484. As the main proponent of Reform, he abolished celibacy for priests and the celebration of Mass. He won a part of the Swiss over to his doctrine. At his death at Kappel in 1531, some of his partisans reunited with the Calvinists of Geneva and some of Lutherans of Germany (Engraving by Meyer).

occured. Peace was made at Kappel, and Zwingli achieved some of his goals: the Catholic cantons were to withdraw their alliance with Austria, and to make compensation for their threat of a food blockade. Because all the objectives of the Reformers were not achieved, and, most of all, because the five Catholic cantons were not restrained, this peace did not last long.

Zwingli, himself, was assured of this peace failure and realized that only weapons would end the quarrel between Cantons so that his new religious doctrine could spread throughout the entire Confederation. Nevertheless, the Reformed cantons were not in accord with the ambitious policies of Zürich. In addition, the Catholic cantons did not fully observe the conditions of the treaty and, contrary to the councils of Zwingli, now a reverse threat of a food blockade was issued against the Five Cantons.

This means of economic pressure, which had already been employed in the preceding conflict, implied a declaration of war without any preparations. These Catholic cantons were to be hit hard if their vital supplies of grain and salt were to be cut. Hence Zürich forced the Catholics to immediate war because the blockade was a Reformers' attack upon the Catholics' survival.

In the autumn of 1529, the Catholic Cantons, however, took advantage of their situation of having a higher geographical position in central Switzerland. Hence they could decide the moment and place of attack with a surprise blow against their principal adversary. They also considered the decree of the blockade as a serious threat against their right to live, particularly by other members of the Confederation. It is in this climate of exasperation and hatred, as generally happens in civil wars, that Catholics became resolutely warlike.

On October 10, 1531, the Catholic cantons decided on an expedition against Zürich. One consequently heard their drums and their flutes in the area of Zürich as well as the yells and howls of the soldiers of Uri. They raised an army of 8,000 men, to which a foreign squadron of 100 men from Eschental was added. The plan of the Catholics was to carry out a surprise attack on Zürich, before their enemies had time to prepare for combat. Moreover, they thus hoped to thwart the military co-operation of the two Reformed cities of Zürich and Bern.

Foreseeing an attack by Catholics, Zürich had placed a guard of 300 men on its border as of October 8th. In spite of the warnings by this guard about the fast and unexpected mobilization of the Catholic cantons, Zürich had not prepared itself and hence confusion followed. As a first option, an avant-garde of 1,500 men was sent into the area of Kappel on October 10th. It was under the command of Georg Göldli, who had received orders to seek contact but not to engage his avant-garde in a great military operation until fighting the large opposing army furtively.

Thus, the avant-garde of Göldli arrived at Kappel in the afternoon of October 10th, and spent the night there. The six light pieces of artillery under the command of Captain Peter Füsli arrived right before daylight on October 11th.

Early that morning, Göldli established his avant-garde within 500 meters north of Kappel on a hill named Scheuren. The artillery was laid out on the slope facing the plain and the road for the approaching Catholic enemy. From there, it would be more effective. Göldli dropped the idea to reinforce his defensive position and to place their cannons in safety. He did not want to occupy either the Buchenwäldli woods as the first line, nor the left flank from where an attack could come. He was not unaware, however, of the possibilities of approach and of infiltration of his adversaries.

In the same manner, Göldli refused to cover for a possible retreat. In order to get the necessary time for mobilizing large reinforcements, he stuck undoubtedly to his mission to defend in combat against the enemy crossing the Albis mountains by delayed action. Also to guarantee a possible retreat, he exposed this side of the Albis by setting up secure passages on his back. By expecting the arrival of a large reinforcement soon, other precautions were neglected. He also refused any help by espionage, which omission seems incredible. Thus the avant-garde of Zürich stood by passively on the top of the Scheuren and awaited motionless the attack of the enemy.

On the other hand, Göldli had advised to occupy the hill of Mönchbühl instead of Scheuren. Such a position would have placed his troops closer to the Albis mountain, and allow a faster retreat for Zürich with more safety. Mönchbühl's front could be better covered than at Scheuren because this position benefitted from the ditch by the brook of the Kappel Mill and from its marsch, both of which would have impeded the advancing enemy. Likewise, a faster withdrawal towards the Albis would have been allowed.

Nevertheless, the position on Scheuren was tactically stronger. This height was difficult to climb in a frontal attack and permitted a better observation of an unfavorable attempt. With the occupation of Scheuren, it was possible to defend against the enemy from capturing of a place which dominated Mönchbühl.

On the evening of October 10th, the City Council of Zürich decided on new options, but the policy of delay tactics by the anti-Zwingli circles prevented fast action. It was finally decided to give an alert for a large army, but regretfully and in all haste only 800 men responded. Being poorly prepared, the troops were in great confusion. The horses to draw most of the cannons and wagons were lacking. Thus, the soldiers arrived at their destination without organization and with an insufficient armament.

About midday of October 11th, a detachment left under the command of Hans Rudolf Lavater on a forced march to Kappel. Zwingli accompanied them as a military chaplain. The troops were pressured so that the army arrived at their destination at three o'clock in the afternoon, but exhausted and in poor condition. At this time there were approximately 2,300 Zürich troops on the front.

The enlarged army was not so weak but it had been dispersed: 400 men with 4 arquebuses at Bremgarten, 500 men with 4 muskets (rifles) at Wädenswil, and 500 others in support. Most of the soldiers carried swords, axes and halberdes. The Zürich forces had to be dispersed in this dangerous manner because there were various accesses to this area, all of which could be attacked in short order on account of the favorable geographical positioning of the five Catholic cantons.

In the morning of October 11th, the Catholic army from Zug-Baar crossed the border at Kappel. At the head was a strong avant-garde of 600 men, including the 100 from Eschentaler. The major army of approximately 7,000 men followed them immediately. Around midday, the trumpeter of Lucerne announced the attack to the Zürich defenders.

As the enemy approached, Göldli commenced his strategy of battle. A detachment was held on Scheuren, and another protected the left wing on the front. But with the sight of triple superiority of the Catholic Army, the Zürich military chiefs wondered whether they would already have to move back to Mönchbühl. In Council of War, however, it was decided to continue to keep their positions. They would avoid at least dishonor by withdrawing at the simple sight of the enemy. They also knew that a larger army from Zürich was approaching, but they were unaware of how exhausted it would be.

Das sechst büch



Second battle of Kappel, October 11, 1531. On the left, the ditch that has been fatal to the Zürich troops.
On the back right, the cloister of Kappel (Chronic of Stumpf, 1548).

The avant-garde of the five Catholic cantons was soon visible from Scheuren. It went towards the west, passing in front of Kappel, and it approached approximately 400 meters from the right side of the Zürich troops. There, it was blocked on the spot by a violent barrage of artillery fire which had begun in spite of the prohibition made by Göldli. Although the Catholics also brought cannons, their movement of surrounding the defenders did not progress.

Usually artillery was to be used in the continuing of a frontal attack by a large army. Incomprehensibly, Göldli prohibited his troops in making a counter-attack, which would have appreciably reduced the enemy avant-garde when isolated in its advance position. Then, the major army of the Catholics was diverted, and they reached the southern village limit of Kappel.

The violent cannonade, which they aimed at the Catholic avant-garde, gave the impression that the remainder of the Zürich Army was much stronger than actually it was. For this reason, the commanders of the Catholics did not want to attack the front any more, but sought, on the contrary, to advance on the left side of Zürich Army by a revolving movement. To this end, the Catholic Army advanced towards the east and arrived, without being intercepted, at the southern edge of Buchenwäldli. It remained there on standby. And with the shorter days of October, their commander searched carefully for a site to bivouac during the night.

The Zürich Command did not count on any more attacks by the Catholics for the day. Their army, which camped close to Buchenwäldli, withdrew their cannons and also the observation of their enemy. The Council of War of Zürich had decided late in the afternoon for a retreat to Mönchbühl. Göldli was opposed because this action was carried out in an indecisive and inappropriate way. That evening the infantry was to reassemble, while the artillery was to remain at its positions in order to withdraw later behind the infantrymen.

In the camp of the Catholic cantons, the soldiers were dissatisfied with the evolution of the offensive. Therefore, Provost Jauch of Uri Canton with some men took a risk to get a closer look at the Zürich position. He discovered not only that the enemy had retreated, but also were less

forceful than had been previously presumed. The provost understood immediately that the moment was favorable.

Jauch called together the Catholic Council of War to authorize a volunteer reconnaissance corps. Without delay, 400 men gathered around the provost, all burning with the desire of going after the enemy. This squadron, crossing the woods of Buchenwäldli, immediately attacked the enemy to inflict the greatest possible losses during their retreat. The vigorous attempts at exiting the woods were rebuffed several times by the Zürich forces. Jauch attempted to exit first by the west, then by the east, but Reformers had each time a robust line of defense. In this action of dealing with the enemy, the Catholic troops came down from high level ground and thus gave up their dominant position.

The combat exploded. To weaken the Zürich forces in their retreat was no longer intended. Once more in the history of the Swiss wars, the warlike heart of the soldiers had started a battle which had not been intended by their command. Volunteers answering a call to aid the reconnaissance corps initiated the attack, and now the major Catholic forces were going to carry out that decision.

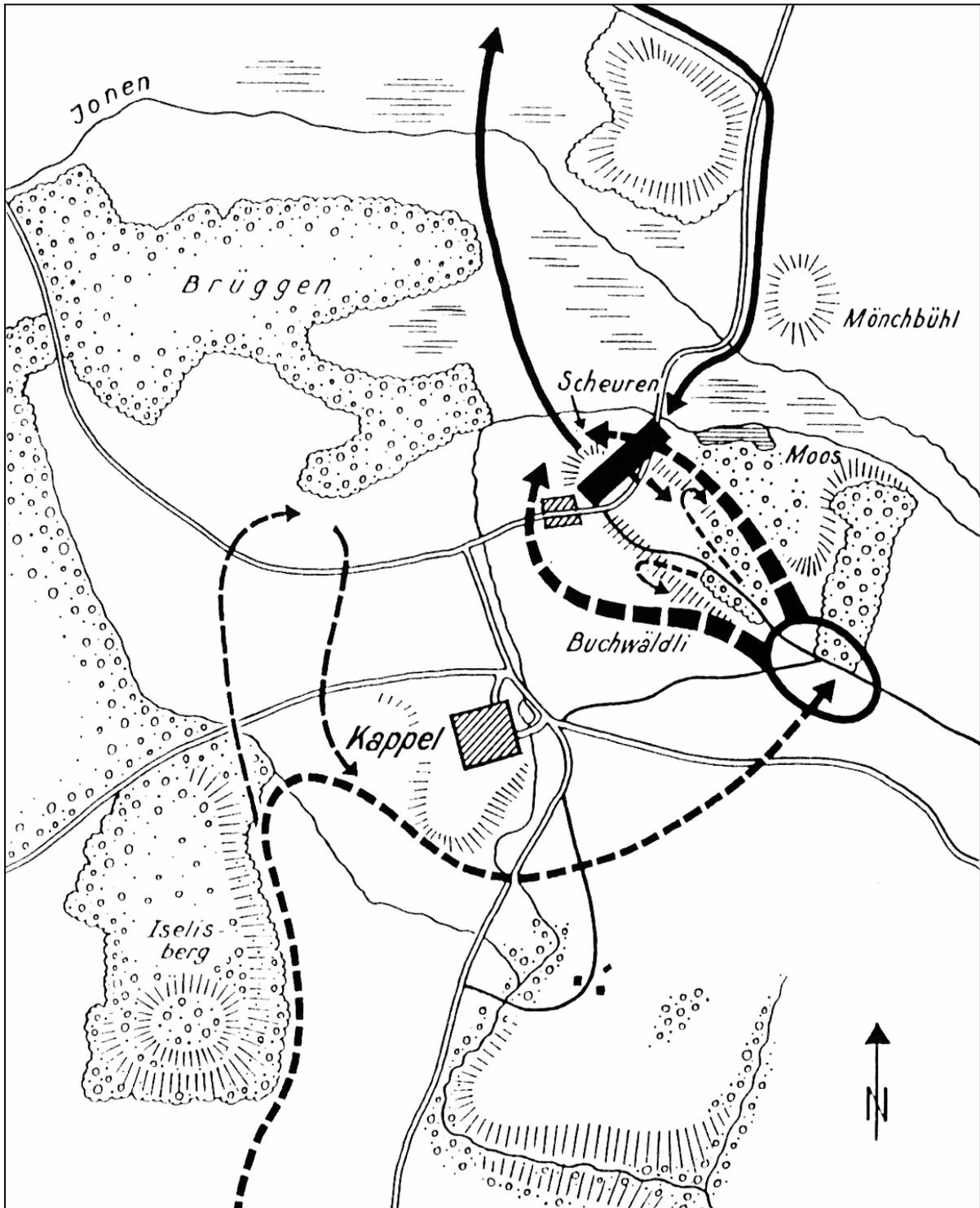
On a very broad front and with a great uproar, the Catholic troops advanced against the Reformers, who were partly dismantled and incompetent to counter-attack. Jauch then pressed on at the flank. This double attack by the volunteers of Jauch and the major Catholic forces, superior in numbers, immobilized part of the Reformers in their forced march.

Exhausted, the Zürich forces were struck at the most unfavorable time, lacking adequate command and sufficient defense. In this savage turmoil, all resistance of the Reformers broke down. Their columns disintegrated and, after hardly a quarter of hour of combat, they started to flee. It was at this time that they underwent their greatest losses. During their escape through an impracticable marsh close to the mill, their losses piled up when the weapons of their pursuers cut them down. The flag of Zürich was saved only with great sufferings.

The pursuit continued to the Albis until the night brought an end to the battle. The Catholics lost less than 100 men, while the Reformers left more than 500 dead. Among those, Zwingli was killed after being seriously wounded in the engagement. The death blow was made by a soldier from the Unterwald Canton, who had not recognized him as the religious leader. Many friends and collaborators of the Reformers also remained on the battle field, including Junghans Gutt the son of our ancestor Hans who participated at the battle of Marignan. And victors seized almost all the artillery of the enemy.

This astonishing and quick success of the Catholic cantons resulted in avoiding the intervention of foreign forces in this internal conflict of Switzerland. Consequently, the Reformers who had not taken part in the engagements was too weak and could not reverse the outcome of the conflict any more. After the failure of Zürich at Kappel, the Reformers were unable to organize any further decisive action.

This defeat of Kappel was impressively reaffirmed 14 days later at the battle of Gubel. Where 4,000 Zürich troops were beaten pitifully in their escape again by 600 Catholics in a surprise attack at night. The tactics of Zürich had really lost its plume of fame.

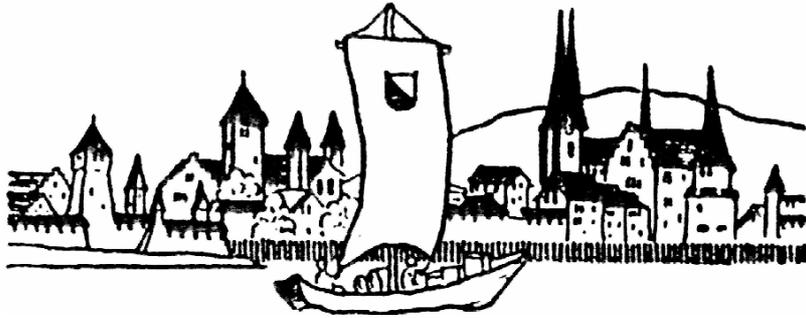


Motions of the Zürich troops and of the Catholic army around Kappel,
On October 10 and 11, 1531.

After the battles of Kappel and Gubel in a religious war lasting one month, the second peace of Kappel followed on November 15, 1531.

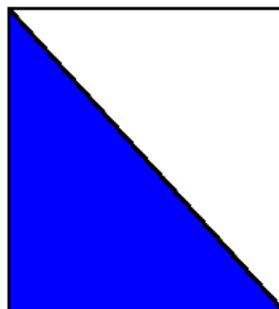
The Catholics then gained a very clear political supremacy in the Confederation for nearly 200 years.

In aftermath, rumors accused Georg Göldli of treason because of being a declared adversary of the Reform movement and for having a brother Caspar Göldli as a commander in the Catholic army. Though he was unprofessional and negligent in his decisions as commander of the Reformed troops, no treason was ever proven.



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Zürich