Isidor

A Donkey Story

as related by

Jolanda Bassi
December 6th, don't miss it

December 6th is the day when Santa Claus visits Swiss children. He is regally dressed, slim, and wears a high-pointed, gold-trimmed hat! He - and his helper Schmutzli all dressed in black, toting a big sack - visit each house after dark. Samichlaus (Santa in Swiss-German) review how the children behaved last year and remind each one to be caring and helpful, so that on the eve of December 24th, everyone can receive the "surprise" gift of lights, peace and joy with the celebration of the birth of a special child. Soon Santa empties the big bag, cheerfully rolling out tangerines, nuts and chocolates for the children all over the floor. Later, they stomp noisily away to the next house.

The Story

On December 6th, 1999 I drove from Lenzerheide in Kanton Graubünden, in der Schweiz (as Switzerland is called there), to the city of Zürich, to fly back home to New York. On the way I heard this story of a donkey named Isidor, the best story of public servants, bureaucrats, politicians and the voting public. I adapted Isidor's story while flying over Switzerland's blue lakes, snow-capped mountains, green valleys and picturesque towns. The story builds on fun vacation memories depicting Swiss idiosyncrasies, its politics, and its many fountains for horses and tourists alike. No bottled water needed there: mountain water is always cool, fresh, and full of minerals.

When I spoke to the story-teller she told me that this story is true indeed. Isidor the donkey belongs to her sister! Many thanks for allowing me to share Isidor's story with everyone.

Isidor's Face

The donkey drawings are by my brother Ferdinand Bassi, who had humor and attitude beyond the ordinary. When he heard the story of Isidor for the first time, he called from Switzerland across the ocean to New York and roared out loud in laughter "Hee-Haw." While he did so he made these donkey drawings with lively personalities all their own - he gave Isidor a face to remember. The smiles of the reader will be a long-lasting tribute to his joie de vivre!

Yyaa-Yyaa... yes in Swiss EEH-HAA... hi in donkey voice Hee-Haw... hallo in donkey English!
Hotel Danis, Lenzerheide
Yes, yes, yes

Isidor is a New Winter Holiday Story!

It's a joy for children to read,
a chuckle for adults as they say out loud “Hee-Haw.”

Sure to teach geography with this true story
as it happened in Switzerland.

In timeless history, to repeat during holiday time,
at home or on vacation.

During this tale of love and politics,
best of all there is no violence here.

Or enjoy dialect and language differences
for a holiday play “Hee-Haw.”

Read this story over and over to a child
for the love of a favorite donkey!

Please say hallo to Isidor…“Hee-Haw.”
Haus Tano, where I was born
Isidor  part one

Once upon a time...

Just before the year Y2K-[2000]

Strange  things were happening the world over...

And - so it was December 6th, 1999 when I heard this -
the best story of a donkey.

The story tells how this donkey became the proudest public servant
in the town of Messerlin, Solothurn, near Basel Land in Switzerland
and it tells you how he fell in love with his ladylove.

Would you know one donkey from another?

In Switzerland some people think that donkeys are stubborn,
yet that is not true.

Donkeys have a great sense of timing
and a great deal of self determination.

All they ask of their keeper is that he or she
gently tells them what is expected of them.
View of Obervaz with its famous blue air
Donkeys like to do the same thing over and over, and do it with great strength.

If the owner of a donkey is kind and patient, then the donkey will do everything possible to please his keeper.

But, you know, so many people just don't know that, and so donkeys are looked down upon as beasts to carry big burdens, good for little else.

Do you think that to be fair?

Would you know how to train a donkey?

Some people think of public servants as sort of mindless bureaucrats who do the same thing over and over.

Yet they (the bureaucrats) also have great determination, and try to be kind and patient, doing everything possible to please their "keepers" - the politicians.

However, this sometimes upsets the public because the bureaucrats can be very stubborn, doing only as they are told and nothing else.

Sort of, stubborn like a donkey, don't you think?
Farmhouses with their characteristic roofs
Now, in Switzerland there is a state called Solothurn. It is not common to see a donkey there, and never a donkey like Isidor.

There in Solothurn is Messerlin, a small community with public servants and bureaucrats like every other place in the world, and they also have farmyards where horses are kept.

In Messerlin, some years ago, Mrs. Brändlimeier brought home a donkey and she called him Isidor.

Mrs. Brändlimeier found out, while Isidor was still very young, that he liked children, really liked children, and that he was most happy when children were near. Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw...

For years, his keeper Mrs. Brändlimeier was pleased that her donkey, remember, his name is Isidor, was so happy to be with children, that she took him wherever children go.
Is this the Brändlimeier farm?
She took him with a Lampion to the August 1st parades for the national festivities, when the Swiss build bonfires high on mountain tops, as they have celebrated their Independence Day ever since the year 1293.

_A lampion is a paper lantern with a lit candle inside, hanging from a stick, and is carried by small children._

For these festivities, and during voting time, some Swiss wear traditional clothing with fancy embroidery, while the men in Appenzell wear swords and daggers to protect the public from harm and encourage them to respect the voting law.

Mrs. Brändlimeier took Isidor to harvest festivals for children to go on hay rides, and she invited them to come near to pet Isidor.

She answered every last question about Isidor and other donkeys just like him. When she did not know the answer to a question, all you had to do was ask Isidor and he answered all the questions in donkey speech: "Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw!"

Can YOU sound like a donkey? Practice a little while until you can make donkey sounds just like Isidor.

It goes like this: "Hee-Haw!"
Or it goes like this: "Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw!"
Or even like this: "Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw!"
Swiss people love to beautify their houses with flowers
Soon, Isidor became so popular that he was invited to school to visit the children every year to explain the letters of his name. Esel is high German for donkey, but "Isidor" is his name. (Esel is pronounced ayzel.)

Sometimes Swiss people use 'dumma Esel' for when they meet someone who will not listen to reason.

The Swiss also add 'li' to everything they hold dear, as in Eseli or Isidorli. What would your name sound like with 'li' (pronounced lee) added on?

*The Swiss use hundreds of dialects.*
*In every valley, they speak a little differently.*
*In Kanton Valais they speak so differently that other Swiss can hardly understand them.*

When a donkey pushes against his front legs and doesn't budge they call him or her a 'stöerrischa Esel,' (stubborn mule).

Sometimes, people also stubbornly 'dig in' instead 'giving in' when that would be the better way!

But, no matter the many nicknames the Swiss use, Isidor definitely knew that it is not nice to call people bad names, and so he never did.

As the years went by Isidor became the favorite donkey of all the children in Messerlin.
An ancient Swiss hero stands guard in Churwalden.
More and more horses came to live in Messerlin, and you know whenever something good happens any place in the world, the politicians think of ways for the public to pay taxes.

Later they tell the public servants, to collect the tax, no matter what anyone thinks of it.

Well, the town politicians decided on a new tax in Messerlin, Solothurn, near Basel Land, in der Schweiz.

They sent out a horse tax bill for 43 Swiss francs and 50 cents to the home of Isidor - the donkey.

*Helvetians were the earliest inhabitants of Switzerland.*  
*CH stands for Confederation Helvetica.*

Just what would you expect of bureaucrats? They did not care about the difference between a donkey and a horse!

Now, YOU know a donkey makes sounds by breathing air in on the “Hee” and breathing air out on the “Haw.”

AND, you know a donkey speaks like a donkey: “Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw...”
A display of puppets outside a historical building: is this a comment about politicians?
Did you ever hear a horse sound like a donkey?
Can you sound like a horse? “Neeeighhhh! Neeeighhhh!”
And now bray like a donkey: “Hee-Haw… Hee-Haw…”

Tell me, do they sound alike? Not in any way, not even close!
“Hee-Haw… Hee-Haw… Hee-Haw…”

But the bureaucrats, who can be as stubborn as a donkey,
will carry on and on about rules and regulations.
They will tell you over and over
the way things are in their opinion.
And opinions they have!
Ask anybody; just ask anybody!

All they wanted,
was to collect the horse tax
for Isidor!

In America taxes have to be paid by April 15th.
I am always glad when I pay mine just in time.

Well! The moment Mrs. Brändlimeier, the owner of Isidor,
opened the bill for the horse tax, she called the village officials.

She told them, “Isidor is no horse!
He does not look like a horse, or sound like a horse.
Furthermore did you ever see a horse go to school
and help with the lessons of his name?”
This steep hayfield is one of the few places in Switzerland where electric wires are not underground.
But, in typical bureaucratic fashion, the hard working and dependable public servants said: "Isidor has four legs and so he is a horse, almost, and you have to pay the horse tax as if he was a horse!!!!!!!"

With this, Mrs. Brändlimeier became extremely upset. She thought: “A donkey is a donkey, and a horse tax is supposed to be for horses!”

Furthermore, she took care of him: she fed her donkey Isidor every day, and she gave him a warm place in winter, and cool, wonderful, fresh mountain water in summer.

She also thought that, since she took Isidor every place children are so they could enjoy him, she was doing enough for her community. Indeed, she should not have to pay this horse tax for her donkey!

It would have been different if it was a donkey tax, but by now, you know about the stubborn bureaucrats, right?

They would not listen, and they said, "The tax has to be paid, and soon!"

In America the donkey is the icon for the Democratic Party.
Lenzerhorn (9,534 feet high) showing the tree line underneath ancient erosion
This was just not right in the eyes of Mrs. Brändl imeier. She shook her head and went out into the yard to tell Isidor all that just happened.

He answered with “Hee-Haw” as he does every day when she goes to say hallo.

Except, on that day he seemed to make even more donkey sounds than ever!

Clearly Isidor did not sound like a horse, and he said so proudly with his head up high: “Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw..!”

As soon as Mrs. Brändl imeier heard that wonderful donkey voice, she knew what she had to do.

No matter what work she had to put aside, she would take Isidor’s scrap book and his photo album, along with a big pad of paper, and go to every place in town where people go! Yes indeed!

*In America the elephant is the icon for the Republican Party.*
The townspeople of Gruyere, a typical small Swiss town
First, she went to the children outside of school where she asked them, "Do you think a donkey is a horse?"

Naturally, all the children said: "NO!"

“Well then,” she said, "do you think it is proper for me to pay a horse tax for Isidor?"

And again the children said: "NO!"

Soon, the children made comparison sounds between what they knew was a horse voice and what they knew was donkey voice. Soon, they imitated the walk of a horse and the walk of a donkey.

They made comparisons in Basel dialect, and in proper Hochdeutsch, while some children even spoke French.

Imagine: Children who speak Romansh at home learn Swiss-German dialect from their friends in kindergarten, and Hochdeutsch when they start school. In seventh grade they study French and later, they learn Italian and English.

It was then that Mrs. Brändlimeier asked the children to sign her petition against her having to pay a horse tax for Isidor!

Soon the adults saw what was going on, and they signed the petition, too!
The atelier of Swiss artist Friedrich Traffelet in Berne
All in all, more than 3,000 people
in the little town of Messerlin signed the petition.

Along with them, some very upstanding bureaucrats,
properly well meaning public servants and some steadfast
politicians signed the petition too!

But, just like everywhere else,
the public knew that bureaucrats say:
"The politicians tell us what to do
and we have to do it,
even if we don't like it."

And so it was with this horse tax for a donkey!

Some people call that loyalty
while others just shake their head.

Now, you know there are also burros, mules and ponies,
but they are something else again.

And here we are not talking about moose or reindeer,
broncos, or spitting camels, either.

Swiss women could not vote
until the men in Kanton Appenzell
voted to grant them the right to vote in 1972.
The next year the Swiss elected
their first woman president.
A typical Gemeindehaus (Town Hall)
When bureaucrats behave stubbornly as can be, going along with the rules and ways the politicians tell them to go, some people call them stubborn.

Just as a stubborn donkey behaves... the bureaucrats said, when they saw the petition: "We have nothing to do with this rule. You have to go and see the politicians about this or pay this horse tax and do it now!"

And so, go to see the town fathers and town mothers Mrs. Brändlmeier did!

The Swiss government uses four official languages: in the north, German; in the west, French; in the south, Italian; and in the east, Romansch.

Now, when the politicians heard what was going on with this donkey Isidor and saw how so many people signed the petition outside of their Gemeindehaus (Town Hall), they started to wonder about it themselves.

Is a donkey a horse? Or is a donkey very different from a horse?
Swiss humor - talking heads at the “Rat” (Council) House
Did you ever see a horse stand like a donkey when it did not want to go forward?

Did you ever see a donkey as big as a horse?
And the voice, is it even close?

Or did you ever see a donkey’s loooong ears?
Would a rabbit be a donkey just because a rabbit has long ears?

Soon, they laughed and thought:
“Who else but politicians could not see the difference!”

So the Swiss politicians huddled together and talked and talked as they do endlessly.
But in the end, they still said:
“Isidor has four legs, and so we say he is a horse, and Mrs. Brändlimeier has to pay the horse tax!”

Can you understand why the Swiss use the word “Esel” for those who irritate them?

The National Council of Switzerland
German: Schweizer National Rat
French: Conseil National
Italian: Consiglio Nazionale
Romansh: Cussegl Naziunal
Wouldn't you like to visit beautiful Lake Valbella?
But you know, politicians never want to make anyone upset, because they want to be liked by everyone, in the same way everybody liked Isidor the donkey!

Is it possible they became a little jealous when they saw how many people signed the petition and how many children wrote things like: "Isidor has taught me so much about being a donkey, and surely I know how to spell Esel."

How do you spell it?

*In Italian, it’s asino!*
*In German it’s Esel (as you know),*
*In French, the word for “donkey” is âne.*
*and in Rumansch it’s asen.*

BUT, as Mrs. Brändlimeier arrived at the Town Hall, she did not even have to make a long speech (although she had one prepared YOU can be sure).

She was going to say how for years she gave up staying home (where it was warm and cozy), to visit the children everywhere in town.

She was going to tell them how the children liked Isidor, the Esel, AND how she was sorry it had come to this.
In Switzerland, you can find flowers everywhere, even right next to a glacier.
She might have explained that a donkey sometimes is called *Mul-Esel* (big mouth) or jack, but never a HORSE!

Can you think of things YOU could have said to them?

She was also going to point out how every person in town (who voted and elected the politicians) had agreed with her that her donkey *Isidor* was a great asset to her town, to all the children, and even to the politicians, because *Isidor* often showed up at their political rallies.

AND, she was going to tell them, the children and their parents surely would remember how they (the politicians) treated *Isidor* when it was time to vote.

They would remember this horse tax, no matter how old they would get, and surely they did not want *Isidor* the donkey to have to pay a horse tax!

She was going to argue that instead of making *Isidor* (*Hee-Haw*) into a horse (*Neeeighhhh*) the politicians should come up with a better plan.

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Do you know that Hannibal’s elephants traveled over the Swiss Alps to help in ancient warfare?
The Parliament House of Switzerland houses the Federal Assembly and Council.
But it was a good day in Government that day. The Messerlin Town President told his committee to vote on some new idea about this donkey, **Isidor**.

AND, he said, they did not want any problems with the voting public because of a *Gump-Esel*, (meaning “jumping-donkey,” which is a name the Swiss use for people who jump from one thing to another).

Now remember, the Messerlin politicians were wondering how this situation would end.

Most of the townspeople had signed the petition against the tax for **Isidor**, and the same people also voted for the town politicians. The politicians did not want any problems with the Swiss citizens, because when it comes to voting the Swiss are very serious!

They have been voting in every town, sometimes every two weeks in their Direct Democracy for over 700 years. The people vote politicians in and they vote politicians out!

*In the millennium year of Y2K [2000] the American presidential votes cast in Florida were so hard to read that eventually, the Supreme Court in Washington chose the new president.*
Exploring “Swissminiatur” in Melide
The Swiss politicians knew that in a democracy, people mostly follow the will of the majority even if this is not always the way all people like it.

Every once in a while no matter what, no matter how anyone likes it, some people fight for the rights of just a few people and win the support they deserve. Then their voices and ideas get agreed to.

Sometimes the people are bigger than their government.

Did you ever win by voting for something in your family or in your country?

And now these politicians had to vote on the matter of Isidor.

In this case, the majority of the politicians in the town government wanted a horse tax, and so they voted that Isidor had to pay the tax, no matter what!!!

But, they were also tricky, (oops! I meant to say, smart politicians, sort of 'smart as a fox') and they came up with a solution.

What is it with donkeys, elephants and politics? Do you think there should be an American political party with a giraffe as an icon?
Of course, gondolas are found on many mountain peaks, and they have the best views!
Because all of them wanted to be reelected, they could not offend the voting citizens and besides, they wanted Isidor at all their parades!

To solve the problem, the politicians voted on the suggestion that instead of making changes in the tax laws, they would in turn HIRE Isidor as a public servant, and pay him exactly the same amount as the horse tax!

Do you remember that it was exactly 43.50 Swiss Francs?

And when Mrs. Brändlimeier showed up at the Town Hall they told her of the new decision, and then they took a photograph.

When Mrs. Brändlimeier heard this, she was most happy, since after all, Isidor had been serving his community for years in ways hardly any politician ever had.

AND when she told Isidor about it, he agreed by voting with a loud donkey “Hee-Haw” so that everyone would know that he became Messerlin’s proudest taxpaying public service employee!

*Will they have an elephant tax next?
Just wait, they will think of it as soon as we talk about it.*
At the top of the mountain, underneath the gondolas, is a friendly playground.
After the news was told in the local paper, what was even better was that the children, the parents, the school teachers, the bureaucrats and the politicians all were proud to have such a loyal Goodwill Ambassador in their community.

Everybody was most happy with this turn of events, even though, *Isidor* sometimes was just a little too loud with his *Hee-Haws*.

Soon, people made jokes about this.

Did you ever see donkey jokes in your newspapers? Look for them -- some are really funny.

*The End of part one but NOT the end of Isidor*
Deep in the valleys of Ticino
Dedications

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To all who learned to read and vote for the right things in life

* 

My father's beautiful paintings inspire me every day to reach out and create things once thought impossible

* 

My Mom taught me how to sew and persevere by her determination each day to hug life itself and reach out for all it offers

* 

And now I will teach you how to sew a donkey on

www.isidorpublishing.com
Swiss kids start playing folk music at a young age
During the winter holidays...

Just before the new year...

The parents and children were planning a holiday pageant where the people would attend, sing songs, and share in the holiday celebrations together.

The pageant needed a donkey for the holiday play and Isidor was elected to be that donkey.

But then, one mother said, "I am sorry, but I don't think Isidor can be quiet long enough. You know, he likes to greet children with his loud Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw every time he sees them. Isidor just likes children too much!"

Everybody agreed saying "Yyaa-Yyaa" sounding nearly like a donkey saying yes-yes.
Such a cute donkey and his little cart! Did you ever see one?
The lady who spoke up had a solution. She offered to make a stuffed donkey to look just like Isidor.

Everybody agreed with this, and so she set out to make one.

At first when the children saw the gray fabric cutout, they said, "This donkey looks more like an elephant." Later, when the donkey was stuffed, painted and had a tail, it looked as good as Isidor.

The stuffed donkey was just a little smaller to better fit into the festival play in which some of the children and adults were going to perform.

When it was time to bring the stuffed donkey to the play, the children put it on a cart, and all walked towards the school.

The children gathered around the stuffed donkey, as they led the wagon through their town's wintery streets.

Excitedly, they were all talking at once about this stuffed donkey. They admired the job so well done, wondering how it was possible to make this stuffed donkey look so good - almost like Isidor!
Can you imagine the two donkey carts meeting on a street corner?
As it so happened, at the same time, Mrs. Brändlmeier also walked **Isidor** to the pageant so the children could ride in his sled.

She had a camera to take pictures so she could later show them to **Isidor's** employers.
She also wanted to send some photos to the newspaper so all could enjoy.

As **Isidor** came near the corner of the street, he heard the children and, anticipating seeing them, he made as much noise as he usually did:
“**Hee-Haw...Hee-Haw...Hee-Haw**”

When the children heard him, they mimicked him:
“**Hee-Haw...Hee-Haw**”
Some sounded good, some sounded almost better than **Isidor**.

Now, **YOU** should have been there when **Isidor** turned the corner and saw the children with the stuffed donkey!

**Isidor** STOPPED in his tracks the way only a donkey does.

He shook himself and **sloooowly** opened his eyes ever **sooo** large.
He looked **soooo** surprised as if he had been shot by the arrow of Cupid.

Was HE seeing the BEST thing EVER in his L**IFE**?!
Jungfraujoch railway station is the highest in Europe.
Isidor was instantly "verknallt" as the Swiss would say. He had instantly fallen in love with the stuffed donkey! AND with that he “Hee-Hawed” over and over, and over again!

Isidor only stopped long enough to listen for a return “Hee-Haw...Hee-Haw” from his lady love. He waited for her to say, “Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw... Hallo!”

When the children saw that Isidor had fallen in love, they made donkey calls themselves: “Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw,” so it sounded like the stuffed donkey answered.

By now, Isidor really wanted to meet this donkey on the cart going to the play, and he pulled Mrs. Brändlimeier along with him, trotting ever-so-fast over to his new-found love on a donkey cart.

YOU should have been there!

You should have been there to see the ruckus the children made, the noises and the “Hee-Haw...Hee-Hawing,” the pointing towards Isidor and towards the slightly smaller version of himself, so wonderfully crafted for the holiday play.
The Swiss find the uniquely American teepee a practical temporary shelter for local food stalls.
All along the way, people stopped and stared to look at the wonder of Isidor, and the happiness of the children, because who in the world does not like to see someone in love?

And then again, who would have expected that Isidor would fall in love with a stuffed donkey! All felt much Joy.

Could it have been because Isidor was proud to be a loyal public servant?

Or that he was the donkey ever-so-happy when children were near?

Or was he ever so happy because he was dear to the hearts of all his public and the children in the town of Messerlin, Solothurn, near Basel Land, Switzerland, in the center of Europe?

As far as Isidor was concerned, this was the middle of HIS universe.

The End of part two but NOT the end of Isidor
Have you ever been to Switzerland?
If ever you want to go to Switzerland you can see Isidor and other donkeys just like him contentedly eating fresh green grass and occasionally calling out a greeting to all who are near. Would you like to go to a farm or stand on a mountaintop and give Isidor a big “Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw?” Try it, you will find it makes you happy every time you stretch your chin really high and say out loud “Hee-Haw... Hee-Haw.” Can you hear Isidor answer you like an echo?

But for tomorrow, maybe YOU write the next story? And when you are finished please send it by email to info@isidorpublishing.com and see what happens.

And someday, before you go on a vacation to Switzerland, make your vacation perfect and send us an email first.

For the stuff left on the editors’ floor, and for pictures, Swiss music and more about Isidor, and to see how to sew a donkey, an elephant, or a giraffe, click on the interactive, kid-friendly website www.IsidorPublishing.com.

And so now, enjoy your future life with a story about voting for donkeys you will never forget no matter where you live. Here at the birth of the third Millennium (some called it Y2K, when strange things were happening all over the world) Isidor invites YOU to make him your new friend and wishes everyone:

A Happy New Year!... Or as the Swiss would say:

A Guet’s Neü’s und rutsch guet übera!

Das Ende ... The End
The photos

Jolanda asked me, the photographer, whether I would contribute a short afterword to this book. Intrigued by the harmless story, totally clear of violence and mischief, just a plain ridiculous event, entertaining more smiling faces as the story is getting on, I could not resist. Why?

I have children of my own, grown up by now, married and involved in raising their own four cute, lively little boys. The same procedure follows day by day, a good-night story sailing them away to the next morning. But, too often the illustrations are for the children only, tiring the reader, almost sending them to sleep instead. That's where Jolanda's idea comes to grip.

The accompanying photos could equally well entertain the reader, and might even lead to more realism in a world of orderliness and agreeable surroundings, good examples with a mix of modest sophistication. Sooner or later children might get more and more interested in the pictures too, thus keeping the story alive beyond the early childhood.

This may explain, why a photographer and not a draftsman had been asked to support the story teller. Therefore, why not change to more plain healthy realism with a book for children that might show its quality by intriguing in their own way the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles and others interested in childcare.

Hans Enzman - (Grandpa Hans)
Bolligen, near Bern, Switzerland