Jeu de mail in Switzerland

The game of mail found its followers in Switzerland as well.

In the centre of Genève (Geneva), one of the main avenues, which runs alongside the Place de Plainpalais, is called Avenue du Mail and is almost 700 metres long. It was constructed in 1637 together with the plain of Plainpalais as a field for the amusement of the inhabitants of Genève and paid for by the French Duke of Rohan. The Duke, as a youngster, was a favourite of King Henri IV of France who as we know was an active mail player.

In the 18th century the plain was used for public executions too.

The main building of the famous university of Genève still refers to the jeu de mail: Uni Mail.

In 1706, a jeu de mail was constructed in Neuchatel. According to the curator of the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire de Neuchâtel, it was in that year that the local authorities furnished a budget for such a mail alley in a valley in the Maladière Forest. At some distance from the town, this terrain attracted the inhabitants. Today the name of the game is still reflected in the name of a district where once jeu de mail was played.

In the German (Schwyzerdütsch) speaking part of Switzerland, several documents refer to the game of mail, although not on 'glorious umbrageous' alleys but played in the streets, on tracks and in the countryside. This kind of mail (or 'mailspiel', 'mylenschlan', 'kugelschlagen', 'mailleschlagen') was played in the regions of Bern, Zürich and French-speaking Fribourg.

The mail court in Genève was constructed in 1637 outside the city walls together with the Plainpalais for the amusement of the people of the town. The mail alley was approximately 700 metres long had a small bend half way the court. The alley is now called the 'Avenue du Jeu de Mail' and lies in the heart of the city. – Anonymous

The game was also played from tavern to tavern (Staatsarchiv des Kantons Bern, 1633, 29th July).

The game was often banned by religious and public authorities because of the danger of hurting passers-by or of playing on Sundays.
According to the Berner Rathsmanualen (council reports [1465-1565]), the game of mail was played in Bern already in 1550, so far the oldest reference to the game outside Italy.
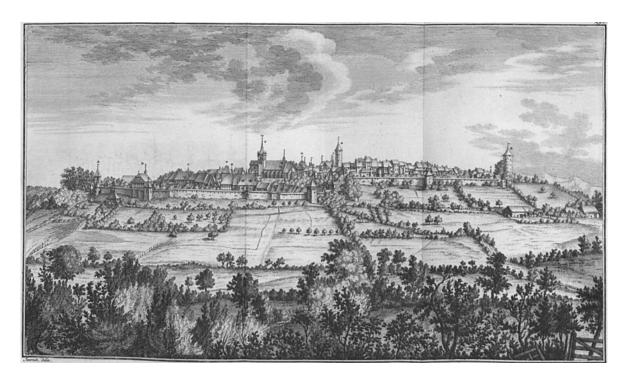
In 1735, the 'Bernische Avisblatt' (evening paper) wrote about the 'Languedocer Maille' played with balls that could be bought at Bern at a reasonable price (quotation from the 'Zürcher Wochen-Chronik' [weekly], 1912).

The game was played with hardwood balls, usually with a diameter of 8 centimetres and a mail club with a cylinder of 6 centimetres diameter and 14 centimetres long. The shaft was fairly whippy and approximately 1 metre long (from a manuscript about 'Bewegungsspiele' [movement games], Canonici Stalder, 1791).

The mail clubs were often made by the players themselves. As the measurements show, we are talking about real mail clubs and not 'hornussen' sticks (a very popular longest drive-like game).

The game was often played between teams of different villages and sometimes the players of each team hit the ball in turn towards a predetermined target. The team which reached the target in the fewest number of strokes was the winner. From there the next target was decided upon and so on.
According to the 'Schweizer-deutsches Wörterbuch' (Swiss-German dictionary) from Huber Frauenfeld, 1881, a challenge match was held over wasteland from Romont (Romund in German) to Fribourg (Freiburg in German), a distance of approximately 23 kilometres. The players hit their balls in turn. The end target was reached in 400 strokes. It was mentioned that in earlier challenge matches almost 600 strokes were needed. The result was considered as an exceptional performance of swing quality and endurance.

The town of Romont is situated on a hill on the Swiss Plateau. From here the mail players started the traditional match to Fribourg over a distance of 23 kilometres. The players needed between 400 and 600 strokes, quite an accomplishment, in this kind of environment. – Engraving, Jenrich in David Herrliberger's 'Neue und vollstaendige Topographie der Eydgnossschaft' 1754-1758

(All information about the German speaking part of Switzerland derived from 'Schweizerbuch der alten Bewegungsspiele', J.B. Masüger, 1955)