

Author's Note I first encountered the delightful fable of "The Littlest Christmas Tree" when I was growing up in the back-piney-woods of Mississippi. When I returned to my birthplace - Dallas, Texas - I heard a new version of this Christmas tale. Of course, some details were changed, but the true beautiful message at the heart of this story remained. I thought that this was this one of those special universal stories that speak to the very condition of humanity that one finds repeated in unique local variations all over the world. Therefore when I moved to Switzerland three years ago, I began to seek out the Swiss version of this mysterious and lovely fable. Seeking high and low, I listened to many lovely Christmas Märli's on alpine peaks and in alpine valleys. Finally, I did piece together this version of the dear old story, though I also had to contribute many details from my own memories to the tale – in order to fill in the gaps. I offer this story to you for Christmas, it's told with great loving respect for my adopted land with a necessary touch of humor.

de'chliinschte Wiihnachtsbaum The Littlest Christmas Tree

**a new Swiss Christmas Märli
as told by
J. Stephen Holyer
(with thanks to 'Scoot in the Morning')**

I.

Darkness fell over the the little lot of Christmas trees that had been set up on a side street in Zurich just steps off of the *Bahnhofstrasse*, the street, which ran downtown through the city from the magnificent Main Train Station to the glassy Lake of Zurich, the *Zürisee*. The street was quiet, for the last of the Christmas shoppers had already rushed home with their last-minute treasures. All of the fancy designer boutiques were closed and locked, and even the Swiss bankers had left their locked vaults buried beneath that *Bahnhofstrasse* to hurry home to their warm family fests.

Zurich's special strings of Christmas lights came on, with long rows of elegant clear bulbs hanging from neat wires stretched across the street. One only had to look up to see thousands upon thousands of beautiful, and somehow dainty, white-clear lights hanging down over the street as far as the eye could see. But few were around to see the pretty sight, and the Littlest Christmas Tree, *de'chliinste Wiihnachtsbaum*, felt like this shower of lit electric snow was meant 'specially for him. Some said, that it was a terrible waste for the city of Zurich to spend so much money on electricity to light all these Christmas lights when children in other far less tidy countries might be going to bed with an empty stomach on this holy night. But the Littlest Christmas Tree, *de'chliinschte Wiihnachtsbaum*, also knew that sometimes it was good to spend money to brighten up a night after a gray and overcast winter day. Besides the Littlest Christmas Tree, that *chliinste Wiihnachtsbaum*, also knew that the Swiss people gave generously from their hearts at Christmastime - and the whole year 'round - to help the hungry children in these other lands.

When the Littlest Christmas Tree peered up from his corner in the Christmas tree lot, he

could see the tower of the Saint Peter's Church down by the river. The largest tower clock in Europe told him that it was 4:30 in the afternoon. *De'chliinschte Wiihnachtsbaum's* evergreen heart sank, and he felt his short needles droop lower than usual. It had been a busy day as many Swiss people came to buy the tree that they would decorate that night as part of their Christmas celebration, but at 4:30 on Christmas Eve, that little tree knew that he would never live to realize his only dream.

All through the short but glorious summers, in the few years since he had been a little sprout at the edge of an alpine meadow, the Littlest Christmas Tree had only one dream. And that was to be the best little Christmas tree that some happy and cheerful family had ever had. All through those long days during the short Alpine summers, *de'Chliini Wiihnachtsbaum* would practice holding his little branches out straight and strong so that when the time came he could bear the weight of the real lit candles that would be placed upon his little branches. During the short days of the long alpine winters, that little tree practiced holding his faithful evergreen needles straight and sharp even though they were often covered by icy cold snow. But unfortunately, that little tree had sprouted near a ridge. Shadowed from the sun, the little tree hadn't grown as strong, straight, or sharp as the other trees. To tell the truth that little tree was the scrawniest little runt of the orchard, but still he practiced holding his branches strong, his back straight, and his needles green and sharp. And, most importantly, he held on to his dream to be the best little Christmas tree that a little Christmas tree could be.

Now, just off the *Bahnhofstrasse*, Herr Bachmann, who ran the Christmas tree lot, had counted all the Swiss Francs from the till and tucked the little locked box under his arm. As the Littlest Christmas Tree watched, Herr Bachmann prepared to walk home to the rest of the cheerful Bachmann's. The little tree felt his little evergreen heart sink even lower; for Herr Bachmann wasn't even going to bother to chain up the few remaining trees. Who would want a Christmas tree now? That Littlest Christmas Tree, *de'chliinschte Wiihnachtsbaum*, knew now that his only dream to be the best little Christmas tree a little Christmas tree could be was forever out of reach.

Just then the little tree heard footsteps out on the street. And then he heard the deep, throaty, rumbling of Swiss German voices. Herr Bachmann and the newcomer *Grüetzi* d each other warmly – for it turns out they had been in the same classroom together throughout their school years. And the newcomer, who was Fritz Muehler, said he was hoping to buy a Christmas tree to take home to his family who were living over on the edge of *Kreis drei* – the third and now predominantly foreign circle of Zurich.

Knowing that it was his very last chance to realize his only dream, The Littlest Christmas Tree held his back as straight as he could, and he held his branches as strong as he could, and he thrust his needles out as proud and sharp as he could. Herr Muehler, walked around the lot looking at the few remaining trees, and he approached the back corner where the littlest tree was standing half hidden, but straighter and stronger - prouder and sharper - than he had ever stood before. And as Muehler approached, the Littlest Christmas Tree closed his eyes – for he couldn't even bear to look – and he cried and prayed in his silent tree voice -"Pick Me! Pick Me! Pick Me".

When he heard Herr Muehler ask in his quiet, throaty, rumbling Swiss German way "How much does this little tree cost", the little tree was almost afraid to open his little

tree eyes.

"OH, TANNENBAUM", the Littlest Christmas Tree cried with joy, his evergreen heart leaping. For when he did open just one little tree eye he saw Herr Muehler was pointing at him!

Herr Bachmann answered, "Why that tree there costs only ten Swiss Francs." And, the little tree's heart sang with joy, for ten Francs really wasn't very much on the *Bahnhofstrasse*.

But Herr Muehler answered, "Oh no. I used to work for Swissair, but I lost my job during the grounding and now the *arbeitslosengeld* has run out. I only have five Francs left to my name. I was so hoping that I could bring a tree home to my waiting family this year." And, that little tree's heart sank even deeper towards his roots then he would have thought possible.

Now, just maybe, Herr Bachmann's heart grew three times that night, or maybe it was only that he was tired of standing in the cold and he knew that his *Frau* had a hot *glühwein* waiting at home for him. But no matter what was behind the Christmas miracle that night, Herr Bachmann answered, "Sure Fritz, take this tree for only five Francs, it's Christmas time after all".

And the Littlest Christmas Tree's evergreen heart sang like it never had sung before as he felt Herr Muehler hoist him up onto his shoulder. Fritz Muehler carried him home under the low looming sky that had threatened snow all day, and the little tree lie there on Herr Muehler's shoulder with his back totally straight, his branches totally strong, and his little green needles totally sharp and proud. And the entire short walk home, the Littlest Christmas Tree, *de'chliinschte Wiihnachtsbaum*, repeated one thing over and over: This is what he said: "I *will* be the best little Christmas tree that they've ever had". For unlike any other Christmas tree in Zurich that night, that little tree knew that Herr Muehler had paid not a small sum of pocket change ... but that Herr Muehler had given every *rappen* he had for this one little tree. Yes, the Littlest Christmas Tree made a solemn vow. He vowed he *would* be the best little Christmas tree that the Family Muehler had ever had.

II.

All the Muehler children came running around them when they came together through the door. The little tree held his back as straight, his branches as strong, and his needles sharp and proud as could. And he repeated, "I will be the best little Christmas tree that they've ever had". The children - Vreni, Hans Peter, the twins Urs and Ursula, and even little Beat who was only two – all cried "*Papi, Papi. e Wiihnachtsbaum. e chliini Wiihnachtsbaum*". That little Christmas tree, *de'chliini Wiihnachtsbaum*, looked up and saw Frau Muehler coming out of the kitchen. She said to her man, "Oh *schäätzli*, you found a *Wiihnachtsbaum*. Maybe the Family Muehler will have a good Christmas after all." And the Littlest Christmas Tree pretended not to notice the little tear of joy falling down her cheek.

Herr Muehler sat the Littlest Christmas Tree down by the window and the family danced gaily around. The little tree saw out the window that the clean white snow, that had been threatening all day, had begun to fall out over the hill of *Uetliberg*. The Littlest Christmas Tree prepared to stand there through that long still, holy night as straight, strong, proud, and sharp as that little tree could stand. He felt himself dosing off into dreams of sugarplums and *Sprungli's* chocolate Christmas truffles, repeating his promise over and over again: "I *WILL* be the the best little Christmas tree they've ever had... I *WILL* be the the best little Christmas tree they've ever had..."

III.

And do you know what? After that Christmas (and for many Christmases to come) all the Muehler's - Frau Mueller, Fritz Mueller, Grossi Muehler – the children Vreni, Hans Peter, the twins Urs and Ursi, and even little Beat who had only been two – all agreed that that Littlest Christmas Tree, *de'chliinschte Wiihnachtsbaum*, really was the the best little Christmas tree that they had ever ate.



This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.daneprairie.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.