

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK
Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom
Band: - (1984)
Heft: 1811

Artikel: A child's view of Zurich's Sechseläuten
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-687110>

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The Tailor's Guild 'cut up' in the Festival parade.

A child's view of Zurich's Sechseläuten

FOR this ancient rite of spring, signalling spring's victory over winter, Zurich's blue and white trams and buses, and many buildings, were covered with flags.

To us children, that was the first exciting sign of the coming festival of spring. The little flags on the moving motor vehicles fluttered wildly against the wind, fastened securely to the flat roofs of the cars.

At last the great day had arrived, when the light hearted procession and the burning of the white Böögg, a huge artificial snowman, would take place.

"Sechseläuten" is an ancient "tribal" festival which takes place on a Monday, in the second half of April, a spring celebration, reaching back to pagan times.

My parents, brothers, sisters, and I, gathered at least an hour earlier in Bahnhofstrasse, that famous street with its elegant shops, in order to find a place at the front of the throng.

Our old grandmother sat on a little folding stool, so that the long wait would not hurt her arthritic leg. We excited kids sat down on the hard kerb.

Some spectators stood on ladders or chairs, some children were carried on their fathers' shoulders. The streets of Zurich were closed to traffic.

The route and traditional programme were as follows:

- 15.30 Procession via Bahnhofstrasse, Rudolf Brun Bridge, Central and Limmat Quay, to Sechseläutenplatz near Bellevue.
- 18.00 Burning of the "Böögg" on a great bonfire on Sechseläutenplatz. The snowman is symbolic of Winter. It is filled with explosive material.
- 21.00 Simultaneous visits by the various guilds in the superbly well-kept guild halls, closing with a musical procession through the inner city streets.

During the procession, the well-groomed horses sometimes came very close to our folded legs. The history and present times of Zurich and Switzerland was played before our astonished eyes.

Brass bands in smart uniforms marched rhythmically by. Groups of riders, richly coloured wagons with people of the 25 different guilds and coaches rolled through the streets, pulled by big dray horses.

Various flowers, daffodils, roses, carnations and others were thrown onto the passing floats.

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The children's procession (above) with members of the Guild cantering round the burning effigy of winter (below)

Flowers play a big part in the festival.

Passing tailors opened and shut their huge scissors and took hats from the heads of laughing spectators. Bakers threw fresh rolls into the apparently hungry crowd. Children tried to catch them, and sometimes we did.

Many prominent people, politicians, etc. marched in rows, as did countrymen, knights, hussars, millers, butchers, smiths, dragoons, mounted bedouins with white, flowing robes, vintners pouring wine, women and children wearing traditional conical and historical costumes, clowns, clergymen, William Tell and his son, Gessler on his high horse, fairy-tale characters like Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, and a camel from the zoo.

We walked behind the procession for a short while, in time to the music. Then we hurried to Bellevue to witness the burning of the wicked "Böögg". On the way, our father bought us a bread roll and a crispy fried sausage, which always seemed to get bigger every year.

At the lake, we fed the many swans for a while, and watched the little boats bobbing up and down on the waves. In the background was a chain of high mountains.

The snowman was burned in a big field, at six o'clock (hence the name of the festival, "six o'clock chimes"). The flames licked upwards in tongues, the fire crackled, bits flew into the air, his hat burned as well, the fire blazed.

It seemed to me that the "Böögg" was still grinning at the moment of his departure. The various guildsmen cantered around the burning snowman. The great mass of people cheered. Winter had been vanquished.

One year was different. It was a brilliantly sunny holiday, and the sun warmed the cold earth. We four children played ballgames in the spring garden. My older sister accidentally pushed me, and I fell backwards down some stone steps.

I can still hear, after many years, my shocked family screaming to my mother. The doctor came to our house and stitched the bleeding wound in my head.

I had to stay in bed with a thick white turban on my head, and I could only dream of the afternoon's festivities.

That year was a lost year for me, but, by the end of the afternoon, I was already looking forward to next year's "Sechseläuten".

Ursula Langley

