

Sechselaeuten in Zurich

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SECHSELAEUTEN IN ZURICH

(Photo by courtesy of Swiss National Tourist Office.)

On 21st and 22nd April the traditional festival of the "Ringing of the Bells at Six" took place in Zurich. It originates from the old heathen custom of celebrating the end of the evil winter and the return of spring. Old chronicles remind us of the Roman custom according to which a man, dressed up in furs and representing winter, was chased through the town on the eve of the spring full moon and finally beaten with long rods.

The name of the Zurich festival dates back to the high days of the burghers and their guilds. On the first Monday following the vernal equinox the bells of the Grossmünster were rung, announcing the beginning of festival time for masters and journeymen. In the afternoon the guilds assembled in their halls and when the bells began to ring at six o'clock it was the signal for the guild masters to address messages of good will and well-wishing to government, town and country. The townfolk gathered outside and dummies were ready to be set alight on piles of timber. These straw figures represented winter, and their burning was accompanied with much merrymaking and feasting.

At the end of the eighteenth century the "Sechseläuten" lost some of its significance, but after an interval of some twenty years the custom was revived and the guilds started the tradition of appearing in costume. Later still pageants were introduced, and today a spectacular procession wends its way through the town. But the festival, which has been celebrated in this form ever since 1837, begins on the previous day, Sunday, when the children of Zurich have their own procession. On Monday the "Sechseläuten" March resounds all day from every corner, and the town is gaily decorated. There is the

traditional banquet at midday, and afterwards the guilds set out for their tour. Towards the evening the whole town converges onto the "Alte Tonhalleplatz", where a huge bonfire is ready with the white effigy of winter, the "Bögg" waiting to be set ablaze at the ringing of the bells at six. Members of the guilds on horseback race around the fire until the dummy is burnt. Thus they form a magic circle which, according to pagan belief, is necessary to prevent the winter from escaping out of the fire.

This year the spring festival was held in good weather. Many were the visitors from other parts of Switzerland and even from abroad. On Sunday, 21st April, at 11 a.m., the flags from the spire of St. Peter's Church announced that the festival would be held. In twelve picturesque groups the children of Zurich paraded the streets. Their attractive procession took no less than 45 minutes to pass. Two groups had been taken over from last year's festival, whilst a new theme was presented with the legend of the foundation of the "Fraumünsterkirche".

On Monday the procession of the guilds, this year led by the "Kaembelzunft" (decreed by the luck of the draw), took an hour and a quarter and extended over some five kilometres. The rich costumes of the 3,000 participants, the multitude of flowers which belong to a real spring festival, and the many beautiful horses gave the spectacle a brilliance all its own.

The real experts appreciated the satisfactory behaviour of the "Bögg", which already nine minutes after the lighting of the huge bonfire gave up its battle — still standing upright — and thus the bitter winter made a dignified exit. (Partly based on reports from A.T.S.)