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The Good Friday procession in Mendrisio is an impressive religious ritual.

Bastion of processions

BY LAURENCE BOLOMEY

WHEN A FRENCH-SPEAKING SWISS first sets foot on Ticino soil, he takes a deep breath and says to himself, "I'm already in Italy". Yet one only has to look at all the balconies on August 1st, decked out in red flags with a white cross, to be reminded that one is still on Swiss soil.

The Ticinese are members of the Confederation and proud of it – especially when fireworks light the night sky above Lugano's lakeside promenade on Swiss National Day. But celebrations are not limited to this particular date: from the colourful, noisy carnival festivities to the measured paces of silent processions, from "Castagnata" (in honour of the chestnut tree one sees everywhere in the Ticino) to risotto: almost every one of the 245 boroughs of the Ticino has its own festival.

At the heart of religious festivals

With Catholics making up more than 80 percent of Ticino's population, many events

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are of a religious nature. The historical link with Italy is difficult to ignore. Processions featuring revered Madonnas are legion, and often the entire population of the locality take part in such festivals.

Mendrisio is a good case in point. Every year at Easter two processions make their way through the narrow streets of this idyllic town, which is lit up for the occasion by enormous lanterns called "trasparenti". These are truly biblical works of art which lend the town a warm glow.

The Good Friday procession is silent and solemn: a religious march involving around 600 people including many children. By contrast, the Maundy Thursday procession is a historical picture-book parade featuring a cast of 200 and around 40 horses. The festival begins in the changing room, where the actors proudly slip into their costumes. The theme is Jesus and the stations of the cross.

Tradition has it that the name of the actor playing Christ is kept secret, and the face of the man bent under the weight of the cross is only revealed at the end of the procession. Around 15000 spectators watch the procession, and the festival celebrations continue afterwards in the courtyards and squares of the town.

A completely different type of procession, held in the uplands of the Blenio valley, is also worth a detour. In the cold Russian winter of 1812 many Swiss soldiers and officers, including Ticinese, lost their lives on the banks of the Beresina while fighting for Napoleon. Several of them pledged to dedicate a festival to the Madonna del Rosario should they return alive.

There were few survivors, but this gesture of thanksgiving is still performed, despite the fact that many participants nowadays have forgotten the historical origins and focus on the folklore aspects of the feast and its Napoleonic militia theme: uniforms, arms, drums, and a commanding officer barking orders to his 40-strong troop of men.

Early in the morning the militiamen gather, make preparations, parade for inspection and set off on their march to the accompaniment of drums. The most impressive moment of the procession is when it enters the church of Aquila, where a mass is celebrated in their honour. The drums resonate deafeningly yet stirringly throughout the building. The procession continues in the afternoon, bearing the statue of the Madonna and a religious reliquary.

Carnival capers

Without a doubt the most boisterous festival is the Shrovetide carnival held in many places throughout the Ticino. The most sumptuous is in Bellinzona, where for just under a week the city no longer belongs to the mayor but to the king and his jesters. King Rabadan is given a gigantic symbolic key to the city. He kisses his Dulzinea, confetti swirls through the air, and the revels commence.

Bellinzona's business and club community are responsible for decorating the premises and locations which are transformed for the week into pubs, wine-bars and dance-halls. Bands of musicians wander the streets playing on brass instruments and drums. Children's processions are held by day, a market for adults in the evenings, and there is a procession of floats decorated with artistic or satirical motifs. Finally people dare to poke fun at politicians and local bigwigs. And as with every carnival, the laws of decorum are temporarily suspended.