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Meet the Böögg at the Sechseläuten

The Sechseläuten (six o'clock ringing of bells) is a festival of joy. The City of Zürich says goodbye to the long, cold winter nights and looks forward to the warmer seasons. The city on the Limmat River has celebrated this Spring Festival since the 14th century, usually during the third week of April, with the ceremonial burning of a snowman: The Böögg. This year's festivities will take place on 28 April 2014.

The Sechseläuten goes back to three different roots: First, to the Zürich Guilds. These have guided and determined the fate of the city through its political, military, social and commercial institutions for over 450 years. They are the main organisers of the event. The Guilds originally determined the working hours of craftsmen through their trade regulations. This brings us to the second root of the Sechseläuten: The start of the summer semester, during which the end of a working day was announced with the "six-o'clock ringing of bells". During winter, a work day in all workshops lasted only as long as there was daylight.

The third root derives from a pagan custom: The burning of winter as a symbol of the beginning of the warmer seasons. Popular tradition has it that the time between the lighting of the pyre and the explosion of the Böögg's head is indicative of the coming summer: A quick explosion promises a warm, sunny summer, a drawn-out burning a cold and rainy one.

The shortest time on record is 5:07 minutes in 1974 and the longest is 40 minutes in 1970 and 1988.

The "Parade to the Fire" is a remarkable and major event which tens of thousands of spectators in the city of Zürich and hundreds of thousands of television viewers follow each year. Around 3,500 Guild members in their colourful costumes, traditional costumes and uniforms, more than 350 riders, 50 horse-drawn carriages and almost 30 marching bands march on Sechseläuten Monday through the Bahnhofstrasse and the Limmatquai to the Sechseläuten square, where the burning of the Böögg takes place.

The Children's Parade is an integral part of the Sechseläuten weekend and is open to all children aged 5 to 15 years. The parade always takes place on Sunday afternoon. Each year, between 2,000 and 3,000 children participate, accompanied by 800 musicians from the Youth Music Corps of the Zurich region. All children wear a traditional or historical costume at the parade. The parade sequence corresponds to the historical classification of the costumes.

Every year since 1991, on the occasion of the 700th anniversary of the Swiss Confederation, the central Committee of the Zürich Guilds has invited a Swiss Canton to participate in the Sechseläuten in Zurich. Each "guest Canton" presents itself at the Lindenhof with an exhibition, colourful entertainment and culinary specialties.

It provides a special delegation to take part in the Parade to the Fire and the Children's Parade, choosing traditional subjects of the canton.

After the withdrawal of the Guilds and the completion of the official burning of the Böögg, young and old meet on the Sechseläuten square for a barbecue. People buy sausages and barbecue them on a stick over the embers of the fire, and celebrations continue deep into the night. This event is not part of the Sechseläuten and therefore not the responsibility of the Central Committee of the guilds of Zürich.

Do you wonder who has been preparing the Böögg for almost 50 years? Google the keywords 'Heinz Wahrenberger Böögg' to find out more.

While I did my research for this article, I came across this website: www.pocket-böögg.ch Here you can order your own little Böögg and set it on fire in your backyard – but please note warnings!

NB: You might be interested to hear that for the first time in history, the invited guest canton of Luzern, having previously accepted the offer in 2012, has announced that they have to retract their acceptance for 2015 due to financial considerations!

By Alexandra Beskid-Jung

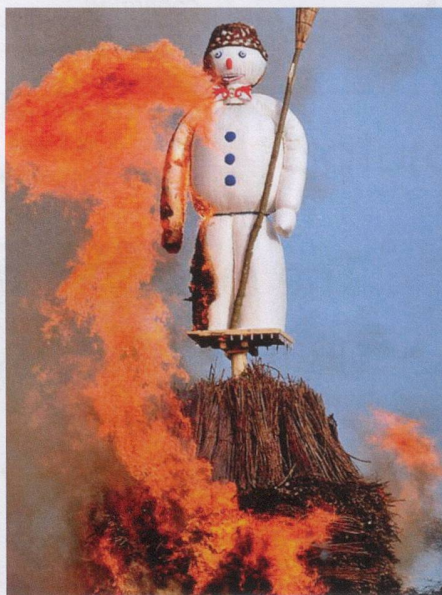
Sources: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/B%C3%B6%C3%B6gg>
<http://www.sechselaeuten.ch/sechselaeuten/festablauf.asp>
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The Böögg and his henchmen

Photo by Roland zh/CC BY

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The Böögg on fire

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Adorable Lea Baechtold at the children's parade