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St. Nicholas Festivities in Wil

In the Swiss town of Wil, the *Jungwacht* youth organization for boys has been in charge of upholding the St. Nicholas tradition since at least 1925. The highlight every year is the parade on the Saturday closest to December 6. At exactly 3 PM, all nine bells of the church in Wil will announce the arrival of all the St. Nicholas and their Knecht Ruprechts. After the parade, the kids can meet St. Nicholas close up, tell them a story and get a gingerbread.

Background information: St. Nicholas was a Saint with roots in Myra. He passed away on December 6 around the year 343. There are lots of accounts about this extraordinary bishop who was well known for his generosity. The modern day St. Nicholas in Wil would tell one of the stories which is age appropriate for the kids attending. "It seems clear that younger kids believe in Samichlaus, but we never claim to be St. Nicholas himself."

The group leaders continue to be the sole members of the St. Nicholas Group, whereas newcomers have to first serve as Knecht Ruprecht. They are only promoted to St. Nicholas once a vacancy becomes available (which can take up to ten years). In order to ensure skilled successors, St. Nicholas and Knecht Ruprecht will switch roles once in a while.

A typical visit consists of:

- Telling one of the stories/legends of the holy St. Nicholas
- Having discussions with each child on their accomplishments and behaviors which need improvement
- Listening to poems or music and wishing everybody a joyful holiday season



At the end, Knecht Ruprecht will give out the goodies: Mainly nuts, oranges, sweets, gingerbreads or small gifts. Some families with Italian roots celebrate a slightly different tradition and Knecht Ruprecht will have to carry lots of toys and gifts.

In the old days, St. Nicholas and his helper were a feared couple. There are still stories that they would rattle chains during visits, beat kids for misbehaving, or even put them into their sack only to be released in a nearby forest! This has changed over the years.

Today, St. Nicholas and Knecht Ruprecht will congratulate kids on their good behavior and try to induce improvements in other areas. According to Stefan Giezendanner, a 22 year veteran of the St. Nikolaus Gruppe Wil, cleaning up and better listening to parents are topics during most visits. "Some grandparents are still threatening

the kids with the St. Nicholas and we can sense this fear as soon as we enter the living room," he describes.

"We have seen a positive trend during the last few years where families celebrate traditions in more meaningful ways. This shows in the way our visits are prepared, and a special atmosphere is created when we enter the living room. I can remember that during my first years, we were trained how to turn off the TV" Mr. Giezendanner said

Currently, the events are organized by 14 couples and 3 members who take care of the expensive clothes and the administration. They truly love this tradition and look forward to the "three greatest days of the year." During three days, they will visit about 200 families and 70 schools or other organizations!

"The long experience and training allow us to deal with almost every situation. But there are always surprises", Giezendanner confesses. "One time, I wanted to wake up what appeared to be a sleeping cat and was told by the elderly couple that it had been deceased for a few hours!" Regardless of the challenges, everyone involved agrees that the light in kids' eyes is a great reward for this volunteer work.

There are many associations that ensure the tradition of St. Nicholas in Switzerland continues to be celebrated. In regions with less of catholic history, the men are dressed as Samichlaus and Schmutzli. But all have the same goal in mind: Keep the tradition alive, be a part of the advent season, and support the parents.

