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Lausanne Nightwatchman

After 600 years, night watchman still keeps vigil over Lausanne



Every evening, the night watchman clammers to the top of the Lausanne cathedral bell tower and gets to work: he shouts out the time each hour, keeping a six-century-old tradition alive.

The night watchman, one of the last in Europe, no longer alerts this Swiss city to fires, but he does help residents to keep track of the time. "This is the watchman! The bell has tolled 10. The bell has tolled 10."

On a cold night in December, Marco Carrara, who takes on the job on the permanent watchman's days off, repeats the message hourly, only changing the number of chimes that have rung. Cupping his hands around his mouth, he allows his voice to carry across the rooftops, just as his predecessors have done every evening since 1405. "The evenings can be quiet and quite lonely although occasionally they are more animated such as when Lausanne residents, people from the region, and even tourists have the possibility to visit the watchman. Between 600 and 700 people visit the tower during the evening watch each year." We are both at the heart of the city and outside of it", he said, adding that he had been drawn to the "nobility of this task", which runs "counter to utilitarianism".

All year round, from 10:00 pm to 2:00 am, the night watchman, wearing a big black hat and carrying a lantern, steps out to the bell tower railing to serve as a living clock for the people of this picturesque city on the shores of Lake Geneva.

In the Middle Ages, Lausanne was a small town of 8,000 people and back then fire constituted a permanent threat to medieval towns and cities built in wood and the night watchman was an

essential part of a network of watchmen, most of whom patrolled the streets. From his perch, the cathedral watchman was tasked with sounding the alarm at the first whiff of smoke. Between the building of the cathedral in 1275 and the 17th century, six major fires destroyed large parts of the city, killing hundreds of people.

In 1880 the decision was taken to end fire surveillance, but someone was still needed to wind up the ancient 15th-century cathedral clock. Across Europe, there were "thousands, if not tens of thousands" of watchmen protecting urban spaces from fire but as technology advanced, the once ubiquitous position became largely obsolete and the watchmen all but disappeared across the continent.

Haeusler, the permanent Night Watchman, acknowledged that his position no longer served a true practical purpose "but the city is very attached to maintaining this tradition," stressed the 60-year-old, who served as relieving watchman for 14 years before taking on the permanent position in 2002.

In Lausanne, the watchman used to be entrusted with manually ringing the bell on the hour, but in 1950, the task fell to automation. In the early 1960s, the announcement that the night watchman's hours (9.00pm to dawn) would be reduced was interpreted by many as a precursor to scrapping the post altogether and the city was flooded with letters demanding that it maintain the job.

Today, Lausanne is one of just seven European towns or cities to have maintained the tradition of a year-round watchman, alongside Annaberg, Celle and Nördlingen in Germany, Ripon in Britain, Krakow in Poland and Ystad in Sweden.

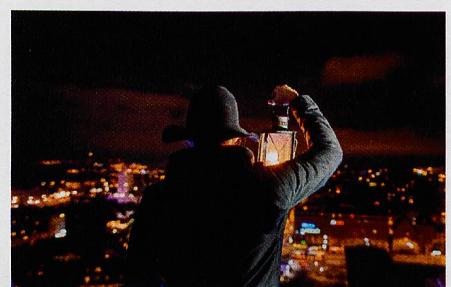


Haeusler likes the "out-of-sync" nature of his work -- a profession serving little purpose at a time when today's reality demands that everything be "profitable and efficient."

He climbs the 153 worn stone steps to the top of the bell tower to announce the time about four evenings a week, for a salary he says is "well below" the going rate for nighttime work. Some nights when it's too cold to cycle home, Häusler sleeps in his heated lodge with minimal creature comforts. He sleeps on a thin mattress, his knees bent to squeeze into his five-foot long bed, his head only inches from the five-and-a-half-ton Marie-Madeleine bell that rings the hour. There is no toilet, no computer, few lights, fewer conversations.

From his viewpoint more than 40 metres (131 feet) above the city, the watchman can observe it change with the seasons. "In the summer, it is magnificent. Swifts nest in the upper walkway. They are there in the evening, flying around." He said he felt privileged to be "the last link in a chain of men dating back to the 15th century. "The watchman's permanent presence provides a kind of landmark for the residents of the city, he said. "In a completely chaotic world, I think that it is reassuring to have activities continue for a very long time, becoming traditions, and allowing us to rediscover a few of our roots."

lenews@thelocal.ch 18 January 2019



Bells ring during Coronavirus Pandemic

The bells of the Landeskirche Thurgau rings every Thursday evening at 8 p.m. throughout the canton of Thurgau. It is a sign of solidarity for all who are suffering from the consequences of the coronavirus pandemic these days. In the concert of the bell orchestra, one can hear the fine voice of the Bischofszeller fire bell!

The fire bell was destroyed in the 3rd city fire in 1743. The fragments were brought to the foundry in Lindau, where a new bell was cast, which still hangs in the arch tower today. Their sound can only be heard on very special occasions: end of World War I, end of World War II, when the Russians occupied Hungary in 1956 etc. On the bell there is a very old coat of arms of Bischofszell. The bishop's staff, the three flames symbolizing the three city fires and the three stars for the respective reconstruction.

The night watchmen of Bischofszell still take the original route through the dark alleys of the town before the new moon rises. They wear their same outfits as always, fire horns and lanterns, and call out every hour.

Post Coronavirus: Some things for your next trip to Switzerland:

Night watchman walk in Lucerne

Discover Lucerne's Old Town and its history on a mythical evening stroll. Listen to the "Night Watchman's" enthralling stories about the past and learn about the medieval life of this charming town which come alive with the help of captivating images projected on house or church walls.

The tour starts next to the famous Chapel Bridge with the sound of a fire horn followed by the night watchman's call. On a 400-year-old city map, called the Martiniplan, he points out the route of the nightly walk. In heart of the old town, your night watchman explains the medieval law and order such as prosecution, interrogation methods, corporal punishment and death penalties. You pass Lucerne's oldest bridge, the "Reussbrücke" which dates back to the 12th Century and listen to anecdotes about the house of the Lux Ritter and the "Giant of Reiden" or the unlucky stonemason Hans von Trient also known as Giovanni Lynzo. Passing by the baroque church of the Jesuits, you reach again Switzerland's most photographed attraction, the beautiful wooden Chapel Bridge with its Water Tower and the fa-



mous paintings. Learn about the inside of the Water Tower, the torture chamber, the dungeon and the secret room before it is time to say goodbye!

Walking Tour with the Night Watchman Zürich.

After dusk falls, the Middle Ages come back to life in the narrow, winding alleys around St. Peter's Church. Nowadays, participants who accompany the night watchman on his rounds through the city will embark on a journey back through time and experience what life was like after dark in the Middle Ages around St. Peter's Church. The night watchman tells participants gruesome stories of harsh sentences, executions, hangmen and witches, and of plagues and devastating fires but he also relates some amusing anecdotes.

Who is the Bischofszell night watchman and doorkeeper guild?

In 1940 the night watchman was on his tour for the last time in the Bischofszeller alleys. After that, his job was divided between the fire brigade and the city police. The fire brigade and the police have since taken over the contemporary surveillance of the baroque city in Oberthurgau.

A personality has thus disappeared from the nightly Bischofszell; a personality who kept a watchful eye over the city for centuries, radiated a sense of security and was part of the daily life of the city.

High up in the arch tower were the guards or watchmen. The towers, also known as city trumpeters, because they had to play their instruments on city occasions, had been wearing the colours of the city for centuries, i.e. yellow / red.

Foundation of the only night watchman guild in Switzerland

On June 29, 2004, the night watchman and doorkeeper guild was founded on the occasion of the Bischofszell Rose and Culture Week. 20 night watchmen and watchmen from all over Europe attended this unique event. The founding act was closely followed by around 1,000 spectators in front of the baroque town hall. The Bischofszell guards and door guards are the first and so far only ones of this kind in Switzerland. It includes 5 night watchmen and 2 watchmen, with the additional tasks as: guild master, sack master, guild clerk and 1st night watchman.

Guild room in the Arch Tower

For centuries, the night watchmen and watchmen lived in the Arch Tower, the only remaining city gate. A specially designed guild room serves as space for their guild meetings, with loopholes as the only opening to the outside. An oval table and eight old guild chairs are part of the guild room. The guild room is not officially open to the public, with the exception of the friends of "Bischofszeller Nachtwächter- und Türmer". You will first be invited to a tour of the guild room with a glass of night watchman wine.

