

The Circle's New Year's Eve

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The Circle's New Year's Eve

In Zurich on New Year's Eve, 1958, the English editor of *Der Kreis* and I ate dinner in a clean little restaurant two floors below the ballroom where the Kreis dance was to be held. Over an excellent lasagna and a cool green salad, I said, a little nervously,

«But tell me, Rudolf, do people know what kind of club—of dance— this is?»

Rudolf laughed. «Of course,» he said. «We even have a uniformed guard to watch out for gate-crashers. Nobody cares.» He thought a moment. «Well, maybe they care,» he amended, «but they let you lead your own life.»

We finished, and started upstairs. It was an old building, inside modernized, steel and concrete, with grey terrazzo floors, and that ultra-clean look that most Swiss buildings have—lots of space and a dynamic handling of stairwells and open areas. It was early—not yet eight o'clock—but Rudolf had to sell tickets that evening, and be ready for the first arrivals.

I must confess that the magnitude of the Kreis project had already impressed me. Back home in America, where I had regularly received *Der Kreis* for ten years, I thought of it as just a magazine—the oldest of the homosexual publications and one of the most serious and intelligent—but I was hardly prepared for anything more, and certainly not for the fact that the social side of «The Circle» was as large and important as it seemed to be.

We passed the second floor, and Rudolf showed me two large rooms with chairs and tables. «Our regular Wednesday night meetings and dances are held here. But for the really big parties—like the Carnival before Lent, and the Autumn Festival—we take the two floors, here and the ballroom above. Sometimes there are six hundred guests. We're the best tenants our landlord has.»

Rudolf stationed himself strategically at the second floor landing, and soon the guard arrived—a big burly red-faced man who looked as if he could cope with any trouble that any four gate-crashers might start.

«What do I do now?» I said, still ill at ease.

«Go upstairs, check your coat, pick out a table and order a bottle of whatever you want. Wait,» he said, «I'll come with you.»

I was glad he did, for I felt very much a stranger. We went into the ballroom, an immense tall-ceilinged room looking as long as a football field, with a raised terrace at the far end, and a stage for the orchestra at the front. Tables, long ones seating eight or ten, were ranged along each side. We picked out one near the orchestra, and Rudolf waited until he saw me safely nursing a bottle before he left.

Gradually the place filled. The orchestra arrived—four pieces: accordion, bass, clarinet, and saxophone. Their first number was not too impressive to my American ears—a kind of tootling music, an unfamiliar tune, and a rhythm that made you want to jump straight up, hop, take small steps. Still, that did not bother me, for I was not having any dancing anyway. Fresh from a recent reading of the cynical, painful (and oh, so true!) remarks of «Hadrian» in *Der Kreis*, I knew that the «age of observation» was upon me, and I'd be double-damned if I'd make a fool out of myself over some of those handsome Swiss lads. Besides, had I not written something myself not long ago on «detachment»?

The boys were on the whole good-looking. The Swiss have a sturdiness to the frame that makes even the effeminate ones look like men. There were lots of blond and stalwart Germans, some small French, and a good many darkly romantic Italians with white skins and black curly hair, and no other Americans that I could see at the moment. You heard mostly German (the curious, and to my ear rather ugly Swiss German), with French the second language. There were many older men there—not all were beauties and youngsters, of course.

The dance floor grew crowded; the room grew warm. I hate homosexuals en masse, but somehow this was so interesting that I stayed long past the hour I intended to leave. It was a party you might call rowdily decorous, or decorously rowdy, I don't know which. As they all drank more and more wine, they grew a little louder. But there were no orgies in the corners, and during the whole evening I heard only three shrieks, all uttered by one small dark boy who lost his balance on the floor. And I—I lost my heart to one, a tall fellow with broad shoulders and the low curly brow of a Cretan bull, the distilled quintessence of all the butch fraternity boys back home.

Mind you, I was being entirely the «foreign observer». I was polite, I smiled and answered as best I could when some of my tablemates spoke to me. You couldn't help feeling the friendliness everywhere, and when one brave young boy from Stuttgart asked me to dance (whether out of affection, pity, or curiosity about the «American gangster»), I danced. Then another asked me, and still a third. I couldn't resist, alas, and was stiff for days.

But most of the time I sat and just looked, fascinated with the whole spectacle. About eleven, Rolf (the patron of *Der Kreis*) came in, seized the microphone, and warmly hollered welcome to everyone. By midnight there were at least 300 in the hall, all having the time of their lives, doing what dancing they could on the crowded floor. One couple in particular had an excellent jitterbug routine that drew the eye and applause of everyone; the taller boy looked like a Bavarian shepherd in Ivy League clothes, and he picked up and threw about his smaller partner in as carefree an exhibition as you have ever seen.

At midnight they dimmed the lights, sang an old song, drank champagne, and kissed each other. «Prosit Neujahr!» and «Viel Glück!» they shouted.

Then it went on, and finally plates of food appeared. I ate one that Rudolf brought me, pondering the difference between Europe and America, considering the barely tolerated homosexual gatherings at home, where only on the pretext of a Halloween ball, and with female masquerade, can homosexuals get together in such a large gathering. The police «protection» in such a case—a line of jeering, sneering cops with wisecracks and hoots—was far removed from the kind there was in Zurich.

And so I left at two a.m., to walk home through the narrow winding streets of Zurich's Niederdorf, their «club» district, feeling warm and friendly and full of sweet thoughts.

Footsteps were behind me, rapid. They caught up. A voice said, in hesitant English: «Excuse me.»

You're right—it was the Cretan bull. He grabbed my hand in his massive paw. «Someone told me, you ask who I am. You come wiz me, please, to my place for coffee?»

Oh, Zurich—such a *friendly* town!

—Steward

