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The colourful traditions of a Swiss Christmas

ON December 6 each year 80 mysterious shapes sweep through the streets of Wollishofen, a suburb of Zurich, creating a musical din with their handbells.

They are the local school's older boys and girls, each swathed in a long, white, choir-boy robe and crowned with a huge, luminous headpiece, often precariously balanced. A troop of gleefully shouting children brings up the rear.

These St. Nicholases of Wollishofen have only the name in common with their illustrious

forbear, the legendary saint. They are part of a custom begun by Emil Stauber, a teacher and folklorist, in 1921.

Until the early '50s the illuminated procession wound its way through the old part of Zurich up to the Lindenhof. But chaotic traffic and garish neon lights were not an ideal setting for the magic of the twinkling St.

Nicks so the celebration has since been held in the suburb.

The artistic headpiece always excites admiration, and making it consumes many hours of the student's leisure time.

Cardboard has to be formed in the shape of a bishop's mitre and holes have to be cut for figures and ornamental designs. Then silk paper or material must be

glued to the inner side so that the light of a mounted candle can shine through.

After the procession, the local civic club bestows gifts of apples, nuts, tangerines and Swiss gingerbread on the students.

Headdresses of light

"INFULN" or "Yffel" is what the inhabitants of Küssnacht call the enormous mitres lit and carried through the streets on a special day early in December.

Their making involves much imagination, free time – and quite a bit of pocket money.

A good 600 working hours are necessary to complete one "Yffel", and the six foot high and 40 lb headdress (sometimes made to order) may cost between 1,000 and 2,000 Swiss francs.

The basic shape is made from two firm cartons, pointed at the top. With compass and pencil the Yffel-builder traces complicated ornaments onto the cartons – traditional or modern designs.

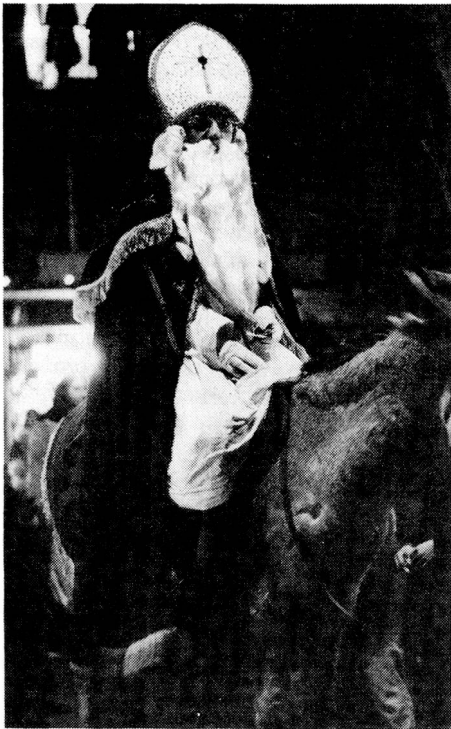
There is only one rigid rule to follow: the figure of St. Nicholas must adorn the front part of the mitre.

Punch and hammer transform the cardboards into works of art. The stamped-out surfaces are carefully covered with coloured paper until they look like small Gothic church windows. The cardboard halves are next mounted and nailed to an oval base of wood with two candles.

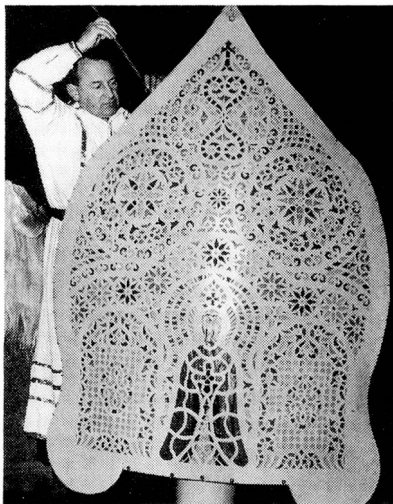
Inside the mitre a light metal construction holds up to 12 candles; electric light bulbs would be frowned on. A genuine "Yffel" has to hold the living fire.

On December 5 at 8.15pm arises a heathenish din. "Geisslechlöpfer" and "Treichler" – men cracking whips and shaking bells – lead the procession out of the dark into the streets. Behind them 200 mitre carriers follow the solemn and stately figure of St. Nicholas. "Yffel" by "Yffel", a bewildering profusion of ornaments glows in the night

Left: St. Nicolas day in Fri-bourg. Nicolas is said to be the legendary miracle-working Bishop of Myra.



Right: The magic of Kuessnacht's "Yffeln" – the lighting of the candles in the "Infuln".



Right: Candlemaking in Zurich – an old Swiss craft reborn.

Below: The shining St. Nicholases of Wollishofen.



and moves to the ceremonious steps of their carriers.

Luckily, this custom is not destined to disappear. The Nicholas Society, fathers and school teachers all teach the children at an early age how to make at least a small and light copy of an "Yffel".

Greeting St. Nicholas

AT five o'clock in the evening on the first Saturday in December it may be bitterly cold and may even snow. But in Fribourg's upper town the streets are alive with gaily chatting crowds and people sit in windows by the flickering light of many candles.

Early in the morning of that same day a motley market on the Place Notre-Dame and the Place Ormeaux in the historic centre of the medieval city had already set the tone for this particular day.

A dazzling variety of toys, balloons and knick-knacks was displayed on stands all round, and the air was full of the delicious and inimitable smells of gingerbread, sweets and roasted chestnuts.

The people of Fribourg, town and country folk alike, have gathered to greet Nicolas, their favoured saint. Finally, festive music announces his arrival.

The radiant figure with flowing beard and glittering mitre appears amid the dancing blaze of numberless torches. Wielding birches and long staffs in mock threat his grumpy helpers push their way through the crowd to make room for Santa's donkey.

Saint Nicolas and his entourage slowly advance towards the cathedral. He is its patron saint, and from the gallery in front of the giant rose window he will speak to the people and give them leave to carry the spirit of Christmas into the market place, the houses and small inns all across town.

Small wonder that more often than not, Sunday dawns before the last of the Fribourgeois goes to bed.



A skill seven centuries old

ADVENT in Zurich – and the Music Pavilion invites candle-makers young and old to exercise their craft.

Candlemaking is a skill which dates all the way back to the 13th century. Along with the liturgical use of candles, their everyday use in households became ever more important. Practically from the very beginning, pure beeswax was the most prized material.

Interestingly enough, even highly sophisticated modern lighting has not been able to replace the candle. Hand-drawn beeswax candles, giving off their cosy warmth, have instead become increasingly popular.

Hence the throng in the Music Pavilion where the pleasant scent of beeswax blends with the festive Christmas decorations.

It's easy to spot the beginners. Their eyes are fixed on the instructions displayed on the walls or they are busy picking up useful tips from the instructor. The "old hands" drop by for a

few moments each day to help their candles grow a little more.

Yet drawing candles is not a feat of magic. First the wick is cut to the desired length, then a happy rhythm follows: dipping, drawing, dripping, cooling – and dipping again. Each time the pattern is repeated, the diameter of the candle grows to the extent of the new coat of wax.

Payment is according to finished weight. But everyone knows the money doesn't go to the organisers, the Zurich Forum. It is used to bring cheer to the needy.