

# Carnival in Switzerland

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## CARNIVAL IN SWITZERLAND

The Oxford dictionary gives the following definition of the word carnival: "Half-week or week before Lent; festivities usual during this in R.C. countries; riotous revelry; reckless indulgence in something. Original name for Shrove Tuesday only". It goes on to say that the word originates from the Latin *carnem levare* — put away meat. The German Brockhaus dictionary gives this as *carne vale* — meat, farewell! Having recently been to Switzerland and attended some of the carnival festivities, I have been wondering just how much the original meaning still applies. In some Cantons, carnival takes place a week after Ash Wednesday. One characteristic which has remained is the right of the masked men and women to tease, to tell off and to censure civilians and authorities. And nobody can do this better than the people of Basle. I say this with admiration and conviction although I originate from Liestal and am supposed to be utterly different from and not likely to comprehend anything or anybody hailing from the old town on the Rhine.

Some of the carnivals are characterised by colossal noise. So, for instance, the Solothurn masquerades which began with a "Monumental-Symphony-Chessleten" on Thursday morning, 25th February, when "Chessler" of every age, dressed in white night shirts, night caps and red neckerchiefs, walked in procession through the town creating an almighty racket with any suitable noise instrument. Flour soup and "Mütschli" were their traditional reward in the inns of the town.

The "Katzenmusik" of Altdorf is also well-known, when everything from a cowbell to an oil barrel, from a hunting horn to a kettle-drum is used in a monumental cacophony — noise is needed to drive away the bad spirits of winter and to open the doors to the good spirits of fertility.

The American Ambassador to Switzerland, together with his family and members of the Embassy, attended the carnival in Bellinzona. There, a humoristic procession was a great success, one of the subjects representing "Quo vadis, Helvetia?" with an effigy of Federal Councillor Chaudet riding a "Mirage". In many parts of the Ticino, the "Risottata" still takes place at the carnival when thousands of portions of rice are distributed. In some small Communes, cod and polenta are distributed on the first day of Lent to indicate that the forty lean days have begun. The Ticino carnival is under the patronage of "Kings", "Rabadan" in Bellinzona, "Relipak" in Locarno and "Sbroja" in Lugano. In the district of Biasca, Brissago and Tesserete, the Church calendar of Milan has been kept on, and the "Ambrosian" carnival was followed by the "Roman" revelry and its highlight on 6th March.

In the Bernese Jura, "Prince Carnival" made his entrance on 28th February. Processions, confetti fights and fireworks as well as masked balls were held in several places.

In Lucerne on 25th February ("Schmutziger Donnerstag"), the old "Fritschi" couple was fetched at the Noelliturm and taken to the house of the master of the Safran Guild with great jubilation and noise. The children were given oranges, and bands of all kinds passed, paying due reverence to the master. Various events in the past year, such as the "Mirage" affair, the EXPO deficit and the failure of the gymnasts at the Olympic Games, were made fun of. The "Guedismontag" traditionally belonged to the Wey Guild whose master was woken up early in the

morning with a more or less harmonious concert by various "Guggenmusiken". The "Nuesslergruppe" of the Schwyzer Verein in Lucerne performed the old pagan dance of the "Nuessler". The Muehlenplatz was the scene of the final ear-splitting mammoth concert — and the "Uslumpete" in the inns of the old town lasted into the early hours of Ash Wednesday.

As I said at the beginning, the Basle Carnival is unique. I don't know how long Zurich has celebrated its own "Fasnacht", but it seems a poor imitation of the real thing. In this statement I am joined not only by convinced Baslers, but Zürchers, other Swiss nationals, Englishmen, foreigners, in short by anybody who has ever witnessed the Basle carnival. The Zurich papers announced the route of the procession with sixty-five groups, bands and individual masks, an appeal to the public to buy the metal badge (Plakette), the concert on the Münsterhof and masked balls. Three thousand people attended the "Künstlermaskenball" at the Congress House where Chris Barber and his band was one of several playing for dancing. "A magnificent tohuwabohu" one of the papers called this dance, and another Zurich daily concluded from the vast crowds watching the procession on Sunday (150,000) that the Limmat Town showed plenty of talents for masquerading.

It is difficult to define the difference between the Basle carnival and that in any other part of the country. Somebody said that in the rest of Switzerland people tried to be somebody else during carnival time, whereas in Basle, the citizen was his true self really only during carnival week. Exaggerated, no doubt, but there is a grain of truth in it. Basle men, women and children become whoever or whatever they personify and thrive in the witty merry-making. There is no noise as such, either, at the Basle carnival, though drums, fifes and "Guggenmusik" bands play an important part in the boisterous festivities, but however loud and penetrating carnival "music" in Basle may be — it is always rhythmical and controlled. The wit and ingenuity used in working out the costumes, the famous painted lanterns and the "Schnitzelbängg" are unsurpassed.

The Basle citizen apparently dislikes getting up early. But not so on Fastnachtstag. Though just to be sure, 4,550 families used the automatic telephone alarm to wake them up at 3 a.m. The "Morgestraich" opened the carnival in earnest when, at 4 a.m. sharp, all the lights went out in the inner town (no cars are allowed during carnival, and all public transport, too, stopped on the outskirts), and the lighted lanterns, large ones carried by four men, small ones on sticks, accompanied by drums and fifes appeared from the side streets. The crowds were immense, for the weather was kind this year, and the railways ran several special trains into Basle. The Soviet Ambassador, the Danish Ambassador and the American Consul watched the spectacle and were afterwards invited by the Basle government to partake of the traditional meal of onion flan and flour soup.

I could easily write a whole book on my experiences at this year's carnival in Basle. And I find it extremely difficult to summarize. Soon after lunch on Monday, the "Cliques" and groups began to parade the streets of Gross- und Kleinbasel. There were 232 units which had applied to the carnival committee (207 last year). There were the old traditional "Cliques", the old and young "Guards", "Buebeziigli" and groups, with fifes and drums, and superb drum majors, twenty-three "Guggemusige" and eighty carts, lorries and landaus with beguiling masks making their cracks, throwing fruit, mimosa, con-