

A personal account of the famous Basler Fasnacht "Morgenstreich"

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communication took place by way of the Danube valley. The Celts of Switzerland, with gold washed from the Kleine and the Grosse Emme, had imitated the coins of Philip of Macedonia; in the absence of a native alphabet, Greek characters were borrowed to write Celtic words, and presumably the muster lists which, on Caesar's testimony, the Helvetii carried in 58 B.C. were drawn up in Greek letters in the Celtic tongue. We must not set the cultural level of the Swiss Celts in pre-Roman times too high: the imitations of Greek coins, originally excellent, soon degenerated, and literacy on any extensive scale awaited the introduction of Latin speech and script. But clearly the Helvetii had an appetite, an eager receptivity, for the new refinements and amenities which Rome could offer, and something indigenous to contribute, which would amalgamate with the importations from the Mediterranean to form a new regional civilisation.

A PERSONAL ACCOUNT OF THE FAMOUS BASLER FASNACHT "MORGENSTREICH"

(By Ernst Studer)

Morgenstreich, that is a magic word for every citizen from Basle anywhere in the world, and every year it is hailed again, as the most beautiful moment of the year in all the newspapers from Basle. It is the beginning of the Basler Fasnacht (Carnival) and dates back to the 18th century. But the expression Morgenstreich is mentioned for the first time in 1808 and means official publication, proclaimed in the morning. At first it was only permitted at 6 o'clock, afterwards at 5, and then 135 years ago at the 4th stroke of the clock in the morning, which still stands. And the saying is, that if a Fasnachtler (Carnival fan) misses the Morgenstreich, he is furious about the Carnival and the world in general, so the first role is not to miss it and get up early enough in the morning.

I had heard so much about the Morgenstreich and the Fasnacht in Basle, that being at the right time in Switzerland and having the luck to have a real Fasnachtfan from Basle in our village, I had to go and see for myself. So at 1 o'clock in the morning we packed our bags to leave for the promised fields. The temperature was 15°C below zero and a biting wind blowing, so that the defroster in the car had trouble to get rid of the ice on the windscreen. Two hours later we arrived at the outskirts of the city. Here the cars were already lining up. After an encounter with a traffic officer (they were very tolerant this morning), we found a parking place and were all set for the big adventure.

Large crowds were already gathering on the most favoured spots, like Marketplace and Barfusserplace. While waiting for

the 4 o'clock strike, we detected so many different languages among the crowds, like Baseldiitsch, German, French, English, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Japanese, etc., which gave the whole adventure a truly international atmosphere.

The weather was still cold with stars shining. All of a sudden stillness in the crowd, everything was plunged in pitch-black darkness, then the clock began to strike; with the fourth stroke things really began to happen. From everywhere in those narrow alleys and streets, big lanterns with original designs appeared like magic, all beautifully illuminated, and an eerie sound vibrated through the air, increasing to a terrific crescendo when those big cliques beating their drums and playing their fifes marched by, each group playing a different tune while crossing and passing each other. No wonder that those who ever experienced this sensation have to come back and back again — it is something that gets under your skin, and now I think I understand why every "Basler" gets the longing to experience this moment each year over again.

The crowd started to move now, and what a crowd. In the Marketplace we literally got swept off our feet and never in my life did I have such a feeling of helplessness like here — not even during those big Rugby Test matches in New Zealand — you just didn't have a will and power of your own any more; no wonder most of the big shops had their shop windows protected with strong railings — I believe some of them had been broken in other years by the crowd through sheer pressure.

We started to get cold feet, so we thought it to be a good idea to sample the hot flour-soup with plenty of cheese in it, which is apparently a must if you go to the Morgenstreich, but we weren't the only ones with that thought. Every cafe and restaurant was packed with people, and each door was guarded by a burly securitas man who let only as many persons in as were leaving. Our turn came eventually, and what delicacy it was after the cold outside to enjoy the hot soup. We sampled the Zibelewaie (onion cake) and Chäswaie (cheese cake) as well, because these, too, are part of the rite.

With fresh enthusiasm and strength we plunged back into our adventure. The streets weren't so crowded any more and it was much easier to follow the happenings. And what a sight, everywhere! Cliques with their impressive lanterns were moving about playing their instruments continuously, with many followers trailing behind. But the most amazing sight, I thought, were those many lonely fifers and drummers walking through the narrow streets — each completely absorbed with himself and his melody, happy with the world and everything. I think that's the real and true character of the Basler Fasnacht, which differs from anything I have seen so far — complete dedication to the Clique and the Fasnacht as a whole, because each individual spends so

much time and finance on it, just for the pleasure to be a small cog in the big wheel, which, in my opinion, is the secret that makes this undertaking always so successful.

We walked through the real old part of Basle, like Sattelgasse, Glockengasse, Schnabelgasse and not to forget the very narrow Imbergasse, where you can reach just about both sides of the alley with your outstretched arms, and everywhere the same picture: big lanterns followed by masked drummer and fifers playing their well-drilled and catchy melodies, the masks in a clique all the time in accordance with the subject on the lantern.

Well after dawn we went to snatch a few hours' sleep (apparently we weren't tough enough, like the true Basler Fasnachtler, who never goes to bed during the three days) before the big parade in the afternoon. This time all the lanterns and floats with the so-called "Waggis" went by in a big procession — and what a procession! Subject after subject, about all the most important events and personalities in the news during the past year in Switzerland, abroad and especially in Basle — all in witty and biting language. When I asked an official about the possible consequences that strong language could have, he only smiled and told me that things which happen at the Fasnacht were all tabu. The parade dured 3½ hours with 274 Cliques participating. The biggest were the Gundeli Clique with 78 fifers and 31 drummers, and the Alte Richtig with 63 drummers and 45 fifers — a really imposing sight and sound when marching by.

After a look at all the lanterns at the exhibition in the big hall of the "Muba" we drove back home to our village again. During the return trip we encountered the worst snowstorm I have ever experienced. Sometimes we had to drop our speed down to 20 km (12 miles) and we passed many cars stranded by the roadside in the snow. Instead of the usual two hours to do the trip, this time it took us four hours..

Thinking back, in spite of all the hardship, cold and trouble, it was a never to be forgotten experience and I give everybody the tip: don't miss it if you ever happen to be here at this time in Switzerland.

Laugh a little . . .

A lady asks her husband: "If you could choose between the most beautiful woman in the world and myself, whom would you choose?"

"I beg you", answers the husband, "don't encourage me to have false hopes".

* * * *

A lady has deserted her husband with his best friend. "Oh dear me", complains the lonely husband, "who knows when I shall find such a good friend again!"

—Nebelspalter