

# "Sechseläuten" : Zurich's spring festival

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*Concerning an Historical Commemoration :*

## « SECHSELÄUTEN », ZURICH'S SPRING FESTIVAL



By the side of the Limmat : on the left the Cathedral and a guildhall.

Photo Lindroos

This spring the town of Zurich celebrated the 600th anniversary of its incorporation in the Confederation of primitive cantons from which present-day Switzerland has evolved. The alliance of the inhabitants of Zurich with the Confederates of Uri, Schwytz, Unterwald and Lucerne was concluded in 1351, under the aegis of the Burgomaster of Zurich, Rodolphe Brun. The Confederates

were threatened at this time by Austria, that is to say by the dynasty of the House of Hapsburg which had its cradle in a castle that still stands to-day in Switzerland, in the canton of Aargau. This family later succeeded in acquiring for itself the hereditary right to the crown of the German Empire. Brun was in fact a friend of the Hapsburgs, but circumstances obliged him to throw in



The historical procession  
through the business quarter in the centre of Zurich.

Photo Lindroos

his lot with the Swiss. As he governed in a somewhat dictatorial manner and was, at the same time, the creator of the constitution instituting the government by the guilds, he had every interest in ensuring for himself a certain support for his regime, which he thought he would find with the Confederates. The creation of the Zurich Constitution of the Guilds in 1336, was the outcome of a revolution in which the nobles having joined forces with the artisans who enjoyed no political rights of any kind, the two classes evicted the class of rich merchant families from their position of power. After these events the town was governed by a council composed half of knights and half of representatives of the artisans, that is, the presidents of the guilds. Later, after the fall of the Brun family, the representation of the nobles was reduced to the advantage of the artisans and guilds who were struggling to attain social recognition. The nobles were organised into a society of their own, the « Constaffel », while the artisans were divided into twelve guilds, most of which still exist to-day. The groups were as follows: the merchants (« Saffron »); the vinegrowers, innkeepers and saddlers (« Tit »); the blacksmiths; the millers and bakers (« Crescent »); the tanners; the butchers (« Ram »); the shoemakers; the carpenters and masons; the tailors and furriers; the tradesmen and haberdashers (« Camel »); the boatmen, fishermen and rope makers; the weavers and hatmakers,

this last group being formed originally of two distinct associations, the weavers of linen and the weavers of wool.

The government of the guilds lasted, with some modifications, until 1798 when France, which had invaded Switzerland to spread the principles of the Revolution, put an end to it. The guilds were dissolved in part and lost in the process a good deal of their silver. A few years later however, they were formed again. At first the guilds had entirely governed industry and trade, and sometimes in a somewhat mean manner towards the end, but when an end had been put to the monopoly exercised by the city over the economic life to the benefit of the countryside, the guilds served, temporarily at least, as electoral constituencies. To-day they are nothing more than societies cultivating social relations and a spirit of comradeship, but in which the families which were once dominant are still represented to a certain extent to-day and which have as their main task the upholding of ancient traditions. Their principal object is the celebration of the « Sechseläuten », which has with the passing of time become the principal festival of the guilds. The « Sechseläuten » (« Six o'clock bells ») owes its name to the fact that on the day on which it is celebrated — a Monday in April — the bells of the churches in Zurich are rung at six o'clock in the evening, in order to mark the beginning of Spring. On the stroke of six, in the centre of the town a bonfire is made of « Old Man Winter », a large effigy filled with fire-crackers. Around the stake of this figure called « Böögg » gallop horsemen of the different guilds, to the accompaniment of the fire-crackers and the cheers of the crowd. During the afternoon, before this ceremony, the guilds parade through the town in their old artisanal costumes and bearing their emblems. In the evening they visit each other, walking through the town with their picturesque painted lanterns; and there is no lack of humour in the toasts that are exchanged on this occasion.

On special occasions, the guilds of Zurich, between which contact is maintained by a central committee, organise great processions. Nothing seemed more natural this year therefore than to commemorate Zurich's entry into the Swiss Confederation by a procession of the guilds. After all, had not Rodolphe Brun, promoter of the alliance of 1351, been the founder of the political power of the guilds of Zurich? The administration of the canton of Zurich accepted the proposals made to it and granted the guilds a free hand. These then, with untiring efforts, organised a pageant which left nothing to be desired, from the artistic point of view as well as every other.

Thus on April 22nd, 1951, in real holiday weather which could not have been bettered, a very colourful procession passed through the streets of Zurich, admired and cheered by a large and enthusiastic crowd. Fine horses, performers fully conscious of their role, authentic costumes, a veritable symphony of artistically matched colours, all contributed to making a real success of this demonstration of true patriotic feeling. The pageant depicted the history of Zurich, particularly the important events in which Zurich had had dealings — either for good or evil — with its Confederates. We saw for example the signing of the Treaty of Alliance, with its protagonists, among them the heads of the original cantons of Switzerland, the Burgomaster Brun, the canon of Grossmünster, the princess-abbess of Fraumünster, the prince-abbot of Einsiedeln. Bearded mountaineers and other virile figures paraded past; the yellow jerkins of the inhabitants of Uri and the red ones of those of Schwytz and Unterwald blazed in the sun. Then came the army of Zurich which, led by Hans Waldmann, had come to the help of the Swiss and arrived just in time to

carry the day during the battle of Morat\*. In contrast to this there were also reminders of the invasion of 1798, in which the Swiss, politically divided and badly equipped, suffered humiliating setbacks. A nation must not lose sight of the dark hours of its history, from which many lessons are to be learnt.

The Reformation was also depicted. The great reformer Ulrich Zwingli was represented in a particularly life-like and natural manner. The whole was interspersed with brighter themes such as, for example, the Zurich archery contest of 1504 with its original lottery, as well as the famous episode of the millet broth recalling the tradition according to which the people of Zurich brought to Strasburg by waterway a dish of this cereal which was still warm on its arrival. Certainly one of the most colourful episodes was the portrayal of the conclusion of a treaty of alliance with the King of France, Louis XIV, who was seen riding by in a state coach, surrounded by his suite, and his Swiss troops, in particular the famous bodyguard of the « Hundred Swiss ». The historical details serving as a basis for this reconstruction were taken from the magnificent Gobelin tapestry representing the signing of the treaty of alliance and which is preserved in the Swiss National Museum in Zurich. Unfortunately the actual carriage which it was hoped it would have been possible to bring to Zurich from Paris for the occasion was found to be too old to be used.

The fortifications of Zurich were also shown, followed by scenes of patriarchal life of the XVIIIth century in town and country. Honourable counsellors with starched ruffs, graceful bailiffs' wives clad in silk, poor peasants bringing payment in kind to the town, swaggering dragoons, merry vinegrowers, joyful marriage processions and public bootblacks with all their romantic equipment enlivened these portrayals of life in the « good old days » which seem to us to-day in our XXth century, to be almost unreal, living as we do in a state of constant hurry and haunted by the perpetual fear of war. The end of the procession showed the incorporation of Zurich into the new federative republic.

\* Battle of Morat won in 1476 by the Swiss over Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy.



In the « Good Old Days ».

This pageant of the guilds of Zurich opened the jubilee festivals which had another great success during the official celebration at the beginning of June, which was unfortunately somewhat spoilt by rain. The inhabitants of Zurich were once again able to admire a procession which was however not quite up to that of the guilds, either from the artistic point of view, the point of view of unity in plan or neatness of execution.

Dr. Emile USTERI.

Old Man Winter or « Böögg » is delivered up to the flames.

Photo Lindroos

