

With Bells Against the Evil Spirits?

The Saint Nicholas Parade in Beckenried as a mystical experience

December 6th is a very important day in Central Switzerland. The local residents celebrate the feast of St. Nicholas, who visits children; rewarding their good behaviour with gifts and reminding them to be good. As St. Nicholas travels through the town of Beckenried, he is accompanied by hundreds of "Trichler" (men ringing bells) and "Geislechlepfer" (men cracking whips) who try to scare away demons and ghosts by swinging heavy cowbells and cracking whips. The celebration of the feast of St. Nicholas in Beckenried is an example of Christian traditions and heathen practices being combined harmoniously. The town is completely dark. The street lights are turned off; no lights are visible in any windows. Most of the 3000 people of Beckenried and many visitors are lined up in anticipation along the main street. Some bangs and dull rumbling noises can be heard in the distance. Slowly these noises are coming closer.

Whips and Lanterns

The "Geislechlepfer" who crack their whips in groups of four to produce an interesting rhythm lead the procession into town. A red light is fastened to the end of their whips, which makes their loud activities visible and even more fascinating.

The "Geislechlepfer" are followed by the town's older schoolchildren who carry "Iffeln" on their heads. "Iffeln" are high cardboard hats that symbolize a miter (a bishop's hat). The students have done arduous work cutting intricate pictures of saints or of sacred places into the cardboard, covering them with many colours of transparent tissue paper. Lit candles inside the "Iffeln" illuminate these pictures beautifully. The lights and pictures show up magnificently in the darkness and add a solemn touch to the procession.

400 Bells in Unison

Next is "Samichlaus" (St. Nicholas) riding in a horsedrawn carriage into the town, greeting the many women, men and especially the children who are lined up on the side of the street. He is accompanied by a group of "Schmutzlis" (Schmutzlis are all black: dressed in black, with black hair and black beard, and a face darkened with lard and soot.) On the day after the parade St. Nicholas will be visiting all the households in Beckenried handing out nuts, tangerines and gingerbread. Behind St. Nicholas there is an army of "Trichler", that is making this droning noise: The men of Beckenried walk in rows of seven, carrying large cowbells that ring with the steady rhythm of each step. The regular beat and the constant noise level create an almost hypnotic effect. The men in their "Burdihämml" (white farmer's shirts) move through town as if in a trance like state. The unison sound of 400 bells is so overwhelming and penetrating that the spectators can feel it resonate in their ears and vibrate in their stomachs. As the "Trichler" pass, one can sense the archaic power that lies hidden within this old custom. It is a mythical experience, that lets one feel an emotional connection to the supernatural through the centuries. The St. Nicholas parade of Beckenried has a long tradition. Its origin is probably rooted in the 16th century and since the middle of the last century it has received renewed attention and popularity. The number of "Trichler" has increased from about 30 to over 400. The parade is an interesting combination of heathen and Christian traditions. The character of St. Nicholas is based on the bishop of Myra, who lived in Asia Minor during the early Christian times. The "Trichler" are of heathen origin: The old Teutons believed that evil spirits and ghosts travelled through the land during the long nights at the end of the year. They could be scared off with a noisy parade.

Grand Finale on the Town's Square

After the long march through main street, the large group of paraders finally assembles in the town square. St. Nicholas places himself in the middle of the square and the "Trichler" keep marching in circles around him. The sound of the bells echoes off the walls of the surrounding houses. After a few minutes of this intense bell ringing the "Uistrichle", the climax of the event, begins. The sound changes from a monotonous rocking rhythm to a wild crescendo; a powerful sound that sets your teeth on edge.

No evil spirit can possibly withstand such a strong finale – after the procession the people of Beckenried are obviously pleased with their performance; for a whole year they should be safe from demons and are now able to enjoy the Samichlaus – Sausage that is free for all who took part in the parade. For the audience the night continues in the restaurants of the town.

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