

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1984)

Heft: 1812

Artikel: Children join in the festival spirit

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-688076>

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Children join in the festival spirit

CHILDREN'S and young peoples' festivals are traditional Swiss festivities. To mention only a few, the St. Gall children's festival, the Children's parade at the Sechseläuten in Zurich, the Solennität in Burgdorf, the Fête des Promotions (graduation festivities) in Geneva and the Rutenzug in Brugg.

No matter how different the various festivities appear to be, they all have some features in common. Of great importance are the traditions on which the parades are based.

Games of all sorts, particularly sporting competitions, followed by the distribution of prizes and of goodies to the children are integral parts of the festivities.

The outward appearance of the festivals dates back to the second half of the 19th century. Some festivals are even based on much older traditions.

However, it was during the second half of the 19th century that the tradition of celebrating children's and young peoples' festivals became firmly established both in the cities and throughout the countryside.

The foundation of the Swiss Confederation gave rise to strong patriotism. Awakening political awareness, pride in history and in cultural heritage were the basis for new commemorative parades on important remembrance days.

In such a context, certain traditional but less important celebrations received new significance and it was soon realised that it was a cultural duty to perpetuate them.

Large children's festivals were organised in many cities during the last century, thus contributing to the making of certain traditions.

The school reform in St. Gall in 1823 was of paramount importance to the form of the children's parade there.

Nevertheless, many things have changed since. Today, it is the lace dresses of the girls which are especially admired, while in older days it was mainly the uniform of the cadets.

In 1862 a children's parade was held for the first time in Zurich in connection with the Sechseläuten, although young people had

participated before in festivities organised by local guilds.

School and examination festivities have been celebrated for centuries. Saint Gregory was traditionally honoured as the patron saint of teachers and students. St Gregory's Day on March 12 was in turn the day on which students used to be allowed to celebrate.

In St. Gall school festivities are traditionally held in July since the sixteenth century, probably because of the warmer weather at that time of the year. This celebration became popularly known as Gories or Samegorius.

Only few large festivities still take place on St. Gregory's day, such as in Wil (St. Gall) and in Beromünster (Lucerne) with the burning of Gregori fires.

The end of the school year and the examinations that go with it are another occasion for children's celebrations.

In the city of Basle, the end of the school year was marked with festivities known as Olympic Games. Both the best scholars and the winners of sporting events received prizes, generally in the form of a devotional book.

Les Fêtes des Promotions of Geneva and other cities throughout western Switzerland are also linked with festivities marking the end of the school year.

In Geneva children bearing small flags and floral decorations parade through the city to one of the big parks, where they can play at will.

Their parade is headed by the city's public officials. In La Chaux-de-Fonds, the school festivities are called Les Promotions (gradu-

ation) or Les Promos, for short, or also Fête de la Jeunesse (Young peoples' festival). The first name continues to be the preferred one, although it no longer coincides with the time of graduation.

Smaller festivities marking the end of the school year take place in junior high schools or in professional schools.

A case in point is the graduates' parade in Basle. Not only is the clothing worn on such occasions based on traditions, but traditionally there are also pranks.

In the Canton of Zurich Sylvester (New Year's Eve) is celebrated by school children very early on the morning of the last school day of the year that is before Christmas.

Young people and students parade through the streets of towns and villages playing tricks.

Still another tradition links many children and young peoples' festivals to shooting, a deeply ingrained Swiss custom. Since compulsory military training used to start at either 14 or 16 years of age, pre-military training was given between the ages of six and 16 years.

In Zurich boys aged eight to 10 had to go through a complete drill with firearms and participate in troop reviews. In some towns those reviews played an important part in the development of local festivities, such as for instance the Carnival in Basle.

The final tests which concluded those military manoeuvres were at the origin of the Zurich "Knabenschiesen" (shooting for boys) a tradition which originated in the 17 century.

This annual competition on the

Albisgütli range for the title of King of the Shoot continues to be one of the most popular festivities of Zurich.

The pre-military exercises were revived in the 19th century by cadet corps. The oldest one of these corps was established in Aarau as early as 1789.

The Swiss author Gottfried Keller gives in his book "Der Grüne Heinrich" a detailed description of the manoeuvres and subsequent festivities of the cadet corps of two neighbouring cities. In many areas cadet corps festivities continue to be major annual events, such as in Lenzburg or in Zofingen.

In addition to these traditional and elaborately organised children's and young peoples' festivals, the many lesser known festivities which take place on certain days of the civil and church calendar, in which not only adults but children and young people as well participate, should also be mentioned.

Cases in point are the Sternsingen, the Funkenschlagen, the Chalanda Marz in the Engadine, the Parade of the May Bear in Bad Ragaz, the Feuillu in the Geneva region and the lantern processions on August 1 (Swiss Independence Day).

All predictions that such manifestations were doomed in our highly technical times, have turned out to be wrong. In fact, never before have so many efforts been made in Switzerland to organise the celebration of traditional festivities.

By courtesy of "Fragments – Swiss Volksbank".