



Carnival in Luzern

Luzern's Carnival is unique in terms of its historical development, wild variety of expression, and loud cacophony of rhythms. The exuberant young people dancing for hours on the square by the Town Hall are proof of the enthusiasm that is catching. It's easy to understand why more visitors come every year from home and abroad to watch and participate.

The three „craziest“ days in Luzern

Luzern's Carnival dates orient themselves around the century- old Catholic Mardi-Gras. This was set by the Nizäa Easter council for the first Sunday after Spring's full moon. The following Sunday being Palm Sunday, Ash Wednesday is calculated 40 days preceding this (40 days of Lent). The time just before Ash Wednesday is celebrated as Carnival. According to Cantonal law these are Dirty Thursday, Fat Monday and Tuesday.

Significance of Carnival names

Dirty Thursday derives its name from grease. „Dirt“ also means grease in the dialect and therefore „fat“ Thursday. Most farms slaughtered and butchered their own meat before winter. Besides the greasy sausages, there were different fried desserts similar to doughnuts, and carnival cakes; thin fried sweet pastry shell layers (Fasnachtskuechli). These were a traditional food, high in calories to build up some fat reserves before fasting began at Lent. Gudisdienstag -Fat Tuesday - comes from the word „Gudel“ which meant stomach

and belly. This was a day to fill up your belly before the end of Carnival.

Fritschi parade

The Fritschi parade custom dates back to the 15th century. As recounted by the Diebold Schilling chronicles, the „Fritschi“ figure was carried as a life-size straw doll through the city escorted by different guilds and clubs from Luzern. Drummers and pipers led the way with the Fritschi society banner. These were followed by sturdy soldiers in suits of armor and helmets, bearded, and carrying swords. In the midst of the cheerful crowd, Brother Fritschi came to town in his blue and white coat from St.Leodegar's cathedral.

Renward Cysat (1545-1614), city scribe and author of the famous Luzern Easter pageants, reported in his chronicles that Fritschi and his wife, „Fritschene“, rode through the town on horses. They were accompanied by a merry troop of soldiers who carried their weapons on this day to commemorate their victory at Ragaz in 1446. The Central Swiss beat the ruling Austrians there during the old Zurich War. The Fritschi Carnival parade was on one hand, a military display where weapons and equipment were polished and shown to the public and on the other hand, a happy, colorful part of the traditional, original Carnival happenings in Luzern. Over the years there were repeated times when Carnival was not observed and there were no parades because Luzern's Council didn't permit masquerades or the prolonged merry-making and feasting in the guildhouses.

In 1713 the City Council and representatives voted to end the military display of armor and establish the Fritschi parade more in the form it is today. Safran Guild, the Mask-lovers Society (since 1819), the Fidelitas Society (since 1892) and other smaller groups and clubs.

These serious processions with mythical and historical presentations were probably meant to teach the simple folk and give them a little bit of „higher“ culture. This may have also been a way to demonstrate history through live presentations as a form of entertainment. The parade organizers at this time restricted themselves to international themes in order not to provoke any satire or criticism over local problems or to favor the conservative or liberal factions.

During World Wars 1 & 2 there were no parades but the Safran Guild's Fritschi wagon still drove through the town.

Fritschi wagon

Around the middle of the 18th century the Fritschi couple were joined by a nanny, a jester, Bajazo, and the peasants. A few musicians also joined the group so that the Fritschi couple could dance. At the beginning of the 19th century all these figures were placed on a wagon decorated with red and yellow paper flowers. Ever since then they drive through the city on Dirty Thursday and throw oranges to the crowd.

Today's

Carnival parades in Luzern

The long „instructive“ parades lasted up until before the World Wars. In 1927 some ambitious Carnival fans decided to form a new guild - the Wey Guild- and create a new parade on Fat Monday, poking fun at local politics and portraying funny events from the year before in Luzern.

After years of competing with each other on Dirty Thursday and Fat Monday four societies joined together in 1951 to found Luzern's Carnival Committee, to coordinate and run the two parades. They are practically the same on both days now except that on Dirty Thursday, the Fritschi Fasnacht, the Fritschi wagon ends the parade and on Fat Monday, the Wey Guild day, the Wey frog float ends the parade.

Brother Fritschi

In a document written in 1443, during the time of the old Zurich War, the name „Brother Fritschi“ is first mentioned. Besides other groups that had to send troops the „unusual society“ after the Battle of Ragaz (1446) was called „Brother Fritschi“. This was most probably the Merchants's Society, which was founded in Luzern in ca.1400. By the middle of the 15th century, right after the old Zurich War, the so-called „Fritschi's hall“, belonging to the Merchant's Society, became the meeting place for Luzern soldiers who were known as adventurous daredevils and warmongers. They joined in various Swiss battles and conquests as mercenaries during the second half of the 15th century. We can assume that the parade banner was hanging in the Fritschi hall just like in other guildhouses at that time. The bearded face of holy Fridolin (Canton Glarus patron saint) was on the flag. The victory over the Austrians at Ragaz took place on March 6, Fridolin's Saint day. Since the names Fridolin, Fridlin, and Fritschi, seem to be related to each other, it is safe to guess that the unusual Luzern society had painted this saint on their banner and adopted this bearded figure as their symbol and name for their troop. After the Burgundy War Fritschi became an over-sized straw doll that wore an impressive bearded mask. Diebold Schilling recorded this in his chronicles in 1513. The oldest description of the Fritschi mask is also recorded in the portrayal of the Fritschi robbery by the Baslers.

The Fritschi Robbery by the Baslers in 1507

Even before the year 1507 Brother Fritschi was stolen many times by the people of Uri, Schwyz and Unterwalden to give the Luzerners a chance to steal back their famous Carnival mascot.

The Baslers had only recently joined the Confederation and they wanted to invite the Luzern and Central Swiss population to visit their Carnival in Basel.

The Fritschi robbery was conceived for this reason.

They sent one of their most distinguished citizens from Basel, Guild President Jakob zum Hasen, and he was supposed to get Fritschi, a man-sized straw doll, and steal him for Basel. It is not clear why the Luzerners didn't attend the Basel Carnival just after this event but waited until September 1508. The mayor, accompanied by 18 city councilmen and 150 other men, rode by boat to the entrance of the city on the Rhine. There the Luzerners were royally welcomed, accommodated, and entertained for 5 days. During these party days 7700 liters of wine were consumed and an enormous quantity of meat including 1764 chickens. Brother Fritschi leaned out of the window of the courthouse at the Basel Kornmarkt square.

After the peaceful „capture“ back of their Fritschi, the Luzern delegation hiked back over the Hauenstein pass to Luzern. The famous „straw man“ was returned to the Fritschi hall at the Safran guildhouse.

Fritschi father and Safran Guild President

The Safran guild, formerly the Merchant's Society, and also called the Fritschi Society, kept up the Fritschi customs starting in the 15th century. They were appointed by the City Council, together with other societies, to organize the Carnival parades. In the 19th century the managers of the Carnival parades were called Fritschi fathers. Long parades often required up to 3 Fritschi fathers who held this position for one year. Besides this function, there were also Guild Presidents from every guild. In 1908 the Safran guild changed its by-laws to incorporate the jobs of Guild President and Fritschi father in one function. Since then the Guild President and Fritschi father serves for just one year and is nominated every year at the Guild's General Assembly. The guildmember who is elected is the „honorary“ Safran Guild President for the whole year. He is considered the highest Luzerner by the people of Luzern and makes many public

appearances throughout the year, including charitable visits to hospitals and institutions.

Carnival today on the streets of Luzern

When the Fritschi father and his escorts open the window of the Town Hall on Dirty Thursday morning at 5 a.m. and wave to the crowd assembled outside, a loud boom signals the beginning of Carnival. The peaceful „city of lights“ on the Reuss suddenly becomes a wild, spooky stage for imaginary masked figures to roam. Hundreds of Carnival musicians and bands play their instruments or beat their drums as they stroll through the city. Colorful costumes cross the bridges from all directions and on the Kornmarkt square old and young alike jump around, clap and dance to the different rhythms of the bands. There will be no peace again until Ash Wednesday and the end of Carnival!

Some of the „Guggenmusigen“ Carnival bands march in the afternoon parades. The majority of the bands wind their ways through the old part of town and narrow streets and alleys to stop here and there for an impromptu concert, a glass of wine or a coffee with schnaps. There are also groups who circulate in the spirit of „Commedia dell'Arte“, performing pantomimes, dances and sketches to the amusement of bystanders. Single masked figures slowly make their way along the river Reuss bank enjoying all the freedom of their masquerade. It's amazing to see how much time and creativity has gone into the different masks and costumes.

„Monsterkorso“ The grand finale of the big bands at night

The crowning finish to Luzern's Carnival takes place on Fat Tuesday evening with a tremendous parade of big bands, lights and lanterns. After the parade all the bands wander through the city playing their hearts out and shaking the old buildings down to their foundations. When dawn arrives life slowly

goes back to normal with tired Carnival-goers heading home for a well-deserved rest. Here and there you hear one last drumbeat and then Fasnacht-Carnival is over for another year. The ghosts of Winter have been chased away. Spring may now come to Luzern.