

Portrait : "Oyez oyez, the bell has struck ten..."

Autor(en): **Wey, Alain**

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“Oyez oyez, the bell has struck ten...” The night watchman of Lausanne Cathedral is one of the last seven representatives of this historic guild in Europe. For more than 600 years he has been tolling the hours. A custom that is now more akin to folk tradition was for centuries a vital service for Vaud’s capital city. An encounter with the ‘Guet’ Renato Häusler. By Alain Wey.

Lausanne: Ten times the bell rings out in the night air. The cathedral watchman’s lodge vibrates with the ringing of the Marie-Madeleine bell. With felt hat firmly in place, Renato Häusler paces the balcony of the cathedral’s North Tower, the “Beffroi” (belfry), at a dizzying height. “C’est le guet! Il a sonné dix... Il a sonné dix!”, he calls to all corners of the earth. After his tour he disappears back into the tower. This ritual is repeated four times every night: a journey back in time to the Middle Ages. But the night watchman of Lausanne Cathedral is a 21st century man and a creature of his time. We meet him in his lodge, at the top of a flight of 153 steps and thirty metres above the ground.

We are at the top of the belfry above the cathedral’s main portal. “It’s a unique feeling being here alone in the still of the night. I’m in the city and surrounded by its inhabitants, but like a lighthouse keeper, I’m isolated in a small, confined space,” enthuses Renato Häusler. In former times every large marketplace had a night watchman whose task was to alert the residents to fires. “Fire, disease and war were the bogeymen of the Middle Ages. Five or six fires were recorded in Lausanne between the building of the cathedral in 1275 and the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, claiming hundreds of victims and destroying entire districts of the city. The duties of the night watchman of Lausanne were laid down in a decree dated 4 November 1405. The night watchman performed his duties throughout the Middle Ages and right up to 1880, regularly making his rounds and sounding the alarm at the slight-

est hint of danger. He also sounded the death knell. And in addition to standing watch, he tolled the hours.”



RENATO HÄUSLER

- Personal details Renato Häusler, 47 years old, married, father of two daughters, met his wife during a humanitarian trip to Sri Lanka.
- Profession Part-time (50%) night watchman, 5 to 7 days; PE teacher (swimming) in a facility for the visually impaired (blind or visually impaired with mental disabilities). Renato Häusler has been a night watchman since 2002, but started deputising for the previous night watchman in 1987 and can himself call on seven deputies as required.
- Cycling. “I’ve never had a car. I always cycle.”
- Speaks five languages: French, Swiss-German, English, Italian and Spanish.
- Humanitarian involvement. In 1999 he and a paediatrician founded the ARES (Actions Recherche Enfant Sida) Association to promote AIDS research for children. Project: Sponsored endurance cycling to collect donations. In 1999 he cycled the “24 hours of Léman” i.e. 3.5 times around Lake Geneva. The following year he cycled four times round the lake, a distance of 720 kilometres. The Association has 220 members and supports 500 children in Rwanda. www.deepblueart.ch/ares



In 1880, thanks to progress, disastrous fires were consigned to history and watchmen were no longer needed. But in Lausanne the office of night watchman was literally saved by the tower clock, which had to be wound regularly in order to keep the bell ringing. So the city decided to continue the tradition of hourly calls by the night watchman. From 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. he cried out the hour. The clock was electrified in the 1950s, and from 1960 the time was only called from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. Nowadays there are only seven historic night watchmen left in all of Europe. The oldest is in England; his post dates back to the 9th century. Sweden and Poland still have one night watchman, Germany three and Lausanne one.

“Over the years you get used to the special atmosphere, different moods and noises like creaks and groans,” explains the night watchman, who knows the cathedral like the back of his hand. “When I’m here I gain distance from everyday concerns and simply go with the flow. Here I gather the strength to go on. This place is a source of energy: beams and joists that have not moved for centuries, and the sense of permanence conveyed by the 700-year-old cathedral: all this gives me stability and a fixed point of reference.” How does Renato Häusler fill in the hours between his rounds? He devotes himself to his humanitarian organisation ARES (administration and charity appeals) and to meditation. “In good weather I go outside, sit on a balustrade and contemplate the absurdity of the world...”. Our night watchman is a philanthropist and more – in his opinion “everything living or inanimate is an expression of the Creator.”

A night watchman in the 21st century? “For me, the centuries-old continuity of the night watchman tradition is like an unbroken chain. Right now I am the last link. But I sincerely hope that someone will follow me so that the night watchman remains an undying tradition for his descendants and for forthcoming generations.”