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CHRISTMAS IS FOR THE KIDS ...



December 24th, Christmas Eve and all is ready. The family, especially the younger members, gather expectantly round the Christmas tree. All photographs on this page and on page 25 are by courtesy of SNT0.



In Küssnacht near the Rigi, St. Nicholas is escorted through the town by acolytes wearing illuminated mitre head-dresses.

Swiss children do not have to watch the calendar to anticipate the coming of Christmas. They have their first taste of the celebrations to come as early as 6th December, on St. Nicholas' Day, a special day for children. Father Christmas, resplendent in crimson robe and flowing white beard, strides through the streets accompanied by "Schmutzli", his faithful servant, whose coal-black face, sometimes frowning, is more often laughing and smiling as he hands out to the children his "Grättimaa". Also called "Grittibänz" and other names, it is a comical, decorated bread figure which is always associated with him.

Then, gathered in town and village parlours the children listen to St. Nicholas reading from a big book, reproaching some for their misdemeanours and commending others. But good or bad, each one gets a present; nuts, mandarins, gingerbread and other sweet dainties — as a reward for singing shyly a Christmas song or reciting a St. Nicholas rhyme.

The customs that go with the tradition of Father Christmas have remained very much alive and are still widely practised. But today they have little in common with the ghosts and evil

spirits that were their precursors in heathen times. At most the lighted mitre-headress to be seen early in December in processions in Central Switzerland, are reminiscent of phantoms and spooks on cold winter nights of long ago.

In the towns the coming Christmas is heralded especially by a blaze of decorative lights. Streets, house fronts with fir branches and illuminated Christmas trees begin to sparkle as the evenings draw in, and the brightly lit and decorated shop windows draw the crowds.



On 6th December, St. Nicholas meets people in the streets and hands out goodies to young and old.

BUT ADULTS LOVE IT TOO!



On 6th December St. Nicholas and his servant Schmutzli visit the smaller children. A few are gently admonished, most are praised. All receive something nice.

One Zürich Christmas tradition holds the children spellbound – the “Märlitram”, an old-time electric tram, brightly lit, decorated and sparkling like Cinderella’s magic coach. It passes slowly through the streets – and is driven by St. Nicholas himself, while the children listen to fairy stories told by an angel.

Meanwhile the grown-ups warm their hands on hot roast chestnuts before setting forth again to make their last-minute Christmas purchases.

For those who like to make their own Christmas decorations there is plenty of encouragement in the shops and markets: toys of wood and clay, Punch and Judy figures, fabrics, felt, and paper of every colour. You can even make your own candles. Pretty or comical, whatever comes out of the bubbling beeswax brings satisfaction, and the amateur craftsman is happy and relaxed.

The scene of the Nativity is set out in churches and in many homes, the wooden figures telling the story of Holy Night. Christmas or Advent calendars hang in many children’s bedrooms. Twenty-four little doors hide a symbol and on each day before Christmas one door is opened.

Although Christmas-time belongs to the children no grown-up would dream of missing its joys. It is worthwhile making the Christmas vision as colourful and lovely as possible – for it lasts but a short time.

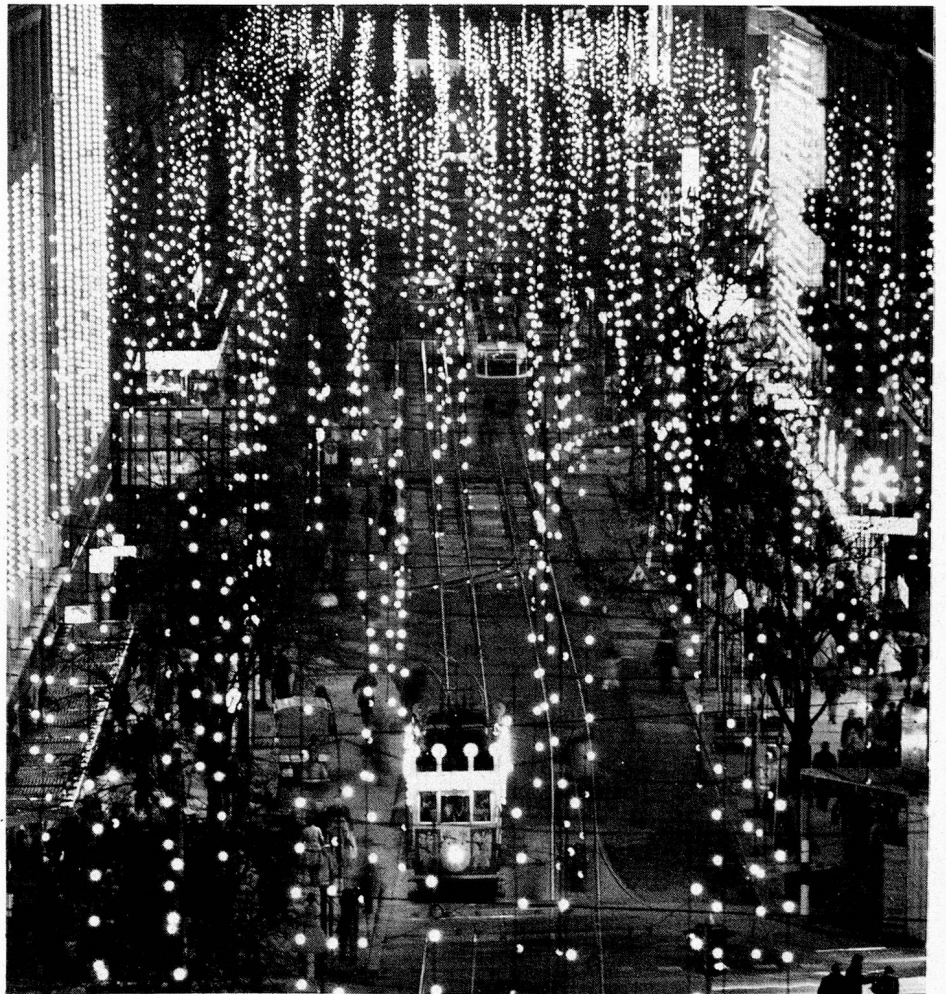
Soon the tradition of “singing to the stars” (Sternsinger) begins with processions through the streets. Although a custom associated with the Three Kings of the Orient, the event is celebrated in many places during Advent.

Children and grown-ups carrying lighted stars march in a solemn procession in which the Holy Family and the Three Kings are represented. The best-known Sternsingers are in Lucerne, Rapperswil and Wettingen. Soon everything is ready. Only three more days, two more, one more. . . .

The fourth candle on the Christmas holly wreath burns, its light reflected a hundred times from hanging glass balls; the rich smell of baking wafts from the kitchen – honey biscuits and aniseed ones moulded with pictures and made according to a traditional recipe, crunchies, cinnamon stars and chocolate hearts – everything good for body and soul.

Then at last the whole family gathers around the glittering Christmas tree. Outside in the stillness there may be gently falling snow, but inside, to the accompaniment of the flute, recorder and guitar Christmas carols are sung, poems are recited and, when the candles burn their brightest, the presents are opened: from each to every one a small memento.

Excited shining eyes of the children meet the knowing smiles of mother and father. Christmases past are recalled. There is always another to look forward to.



From 1st to 23rd December the Zürich children’s fairyland special, the Märlitram, is driven along the Bahnhofstrasse under a sparkling canopy of lights. And who’s driving? You’ve guessed it – none other than St. Nicholas himself, in crimson robe and white beard.