



## BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE FOR WESTERN AFFAIRS

### ■ An unknown carnival in Rhineland

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At the close of the Carnival, Polish television audiences viewed familiar scenes from the streets of Rio de Janeiro yet again. In Poland and perhaps beyond its borders as well, the end of this period of public festivities and revelry is associated with this Brazilian city. Also shown quite commonly is the flight of an angel (on the Saturday preceding Fat Thursday) descending from a bell tower to St. Mark's Square in Venice to kick off the fun season. During that time, throngs of tourists from all over the world spend huge amounts of money on traditional masks, which are indispensable during the celebrations.

Incomparably lesser known but not a bit less mirthful is the carnival behind Poland's western border. In some, primarily northern federal states, the days leading up to Ash Wednesday are as quiet as they are in Poland. Meanwhile, other states enjoy them much more boisterously in a style reminiscent of the dance-enwrapped streets of Rio. Without a doubt, the way the carnival is celebrated in the west and the south of Germany is unique Europe-wide. Particularly distinctive for decades if not for centuries have been the over the Rhine areas stretching from Mainz in the south all the way to Düsseldorf in the north.

In the town of Cologne, all begins slightly earlier at the time when the prospect of the carnival appears to be very remote in other cities. Every year on St. Martin's day on November 11 at 11:11 am sharp, a party begins in the square in front of the town hall in the town's historic district. This several-hour-long event is a harbinger of sorts of the fun that is to follow and exhilarate the city about three months later. Just as Shrovetide in Poland, the celebrations proper do not kick off until Fat Thursday. In the Cologne tradition, the day is also known as Ladies' Thursday or *Weiberdonnerstag*. And not without a reason. It is the only day in the year when the overwhelming majority of restaurant, bar and pub guests are not men but rather the female

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No. 222/2016

19.02.16

ISSN 2450-5080

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residents of the Rhineland city. Outsiders, and especially first-time foreign visitors, will find it hard to believe they are in one of the largest cities of a well-functioning and a reasonably sensible country, which the Federal Republic of Germany has been thought to be for years now. They will gaze in astonishment at the strangely clad sales personnel or at bank employees sporting paper red noses. A foreign tourist will quickly realize there is no point taking offense at a frolicsome local who has cut off a part of his tie with scissors. One simply needs to accept that Cologne is starting its most important period of the year scheduled to last nearly a week. A part and parcel of the celebrations is the traditional Kölsch in which the city's residents have long taken pride. Kölsch is a distinctive brand of top-fermenting lager which today is made by some thirty Cologne breweries. Most of them have their own old-fashioned-looking restaurants offering traditional German cuisine. During the carnival, the restaurants are so jam-packed with guests that the waiters trying to make their way through the crowd with trays in their hands filled with over a dozen mugs of beer sunk into round openings, resort to using a special whistle. Day one of the Rhineland Shrovetide ends in a sitting (*die Sitzung*), something between a concert and a dinner. Sittings are held in a number of cities. These events are a far cry from a sumptuous ball. One attends them to simply dance. The dress code is casual. Nearly all the participants of the carnival night come in disguise. The place crawls with Indians, pharos, Roman gladiators and kings. Many partygoers choose to come dressed up as priests or bishops; many ladies arrive wearing a nun's habit. The key events sell out months ahead. The central event which kicks off the weekly Cologne revelry is traditionally transmitted on one of Germany's state television channels. The viewers get to hear Cologne musical hits performed by the highly popular bands which have entertained the Cologne event's crowds for decades. The evening would not be complete without stand up comedy acts by celebrated artists whose wisecracks poke fun at German and foreign politicians alike, often very pungently. Such sharp criticism does not spare high-ranking clergy. Foreigners, even those boasting an advanced command of German, will find many of the puns hard to follow. After all, the "official language" of the carnival has always been the Kölsch.

The evening features the first introduction of the so-called Three Stars (*Dreigestirn*): a virgin, a prince and a peasant, each of them traditionally played by men. In the days that follow, the threesome make their rounds visiting the sittings, which are held daily until the final day of the carnival. The threesome are certainly far from capable of attending each of the countless events held during this time. No wonder as the growing metropolis with a population of ca. one million, is home to more than 100 carnival societies. Some pride themselves on having over a century-long tradition. Each organizes various entertainment events starting in early January. Needless to say, the peak comes in the final days of the carnival. Between the Friday and Sunday leading up to Ash Wednesday, the sounds of people having fun radiates from nearly every decent-sized room and restaurant. It is common to rent all sorts of facilities ranging from school gyms to plush hotel banquet rooms, the choice of the venue depending on how deep the pockets of the potential guests are expected to be.

Yet, outsiders observing the Rhineland lunacy would be wrong to conclude they have already seen the high point. The true culmination of the events comes,

without a doubt, on Rose Monday (*Rosenmontag*). On that day, thousands gather to march joyously through the city center. The parade tradition goes back close to two centuries. The original procession crossed the city as early as 1823. The parade, which may last as long as seven hours, is joined by all able-bodied souls who consider themselves true Colognians, all of them wearing more or less elaborate costumes. These are judged by a special jury which awards valuable prizes to the winners. Another attraction, anxiously awaited particularly by children, is candy and even entire chocolate bars tossed generously from enormous floats which pass by regularly. Huge plastic or cardboard caricatures of political figures, famous athletes and other celebrities receive no less interest.

This year's procession, which is the most important event in the carnival, faced a major dilemma. A heated debate over its possible cancellation has been sparked not as much, as one might expect, by concerns over the security of the participants (especially the female ones) in the wake of the appalling New Year's Eve developments on the square in front of the Cologne train station. This time around, the German services were alarmed by a storm warning. An incredibly strong hurricane gracefully named Ruzica was said to be approaching from the west. Apprehensive about the threat, certain cities chose to cancel their parades. One of the towns to have called off its event was Düsseldorf, which competes with Cologne as carnival organizer. The biggest fears concerned some of the structures or caricatures mounted on the high floats which a strong gust of wind might have toppled onto the nearby merry-makers. Nevertheless, the mayor of Cologne refrained from calling off the event and was proven right as the wind turned out to have been far from as dreadful as the weather forecasters had predicted. To the glee of the residents and countless visitors, the city could again enjoy the passage of gigantic floats. This year's satire focused almost exclusively on the issue that had for months dominated the life of German society, i.e. the refugee crisis. One of the floats bore an effigy of the Chancellor attempting to crack a nut that symbolized the migrants. Two of her teeth had already been broken from trying. The city authorities and the police agreed that this year's carnival procession was a resounding success. 1800 police officers watched over the security of the participants. In anticipation of trouble from the foreigners, the police were instructed to cancel their holiday leaves. Some 300 tons of sweets were thrown out to the crowd. As every year, the event was attended by prominent guests. This year's lineup included Lukas Podolski and the celebrity model Heidi Klum. Needless to say, a seven-hour-long event attended by more than a million cannot be incident free. Nevertheless, said the police, this year's event was calmer than in years past. The partygoers left behind roughly 300 tons of trash which the cleaning services, beefed up especially for the occasion, were able to clear within a dozen plus hours.

The final attraction of the Rhineland Shrovetide was the Tuesday party which lasted late into the night. As in the case of other events held at the time in the over the Rhine metropolis, an outside observer would inevitably be astounded at the far-reaching egalitarianism. The partying and beer drinking brought together people from all walks of life, regardless of their profession, social status or wealth. Dr. Bruno Wasser, Head of the Carnival Board and a renowned Cologne architect, noted that the Board was made up of two engineers, one mailman, a corporate executive, a professional driver and an accountant.



The statements expressed herein reflect solely the opinions of its author.

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