

NACHWEIHNACHTSZEIT / POST-CHRISTMAS SEASON

zwölf Heilige Abende / 12 Holy Nights

The Warm Glow of Austria's Glöcklerlauf

For at least the past century and a half, the people of Ebensee have been celebrating one of Austria's quaintest customs: the *Glöcklerlauf* (literally: the race of the bell-bearers).

This eight thousand seven hundred-strong community in the heart of the Salzkammergut province, one hundred kilometers east of Salzburg, is a world of its own – it still speaks its own language and has traditions unheard of in the rest of the country.

The *Ebenseer* have, furthermore, always been known for their insubordination and unshakeable independence. For centuries they came into conflict with the authorities who wanted to produce salt (the only resource of this working-class town) at a lesser cost and haughtily ignored the instructions they received from above.

It is in the Salzkammergut that the tradition of the *Raubnächte* (“Wild Nights”), so dear to the heart of the alpine people, came to light. From December 25th to January 6th, four of these nights whose origins are lost in the Germanic mythology, marked the return of the souls and the apparition of the spirits which were welcomed with fine foods, if they were benevolent, and warded off with the sign of the cross, noise, and smoke—if they were not.

During the fourth and last “Wild Night,” the figurines of the shepherds receded to the back of the crib to make way for the three Wise Men and their retinue. The “Magi’s song” was then sung. In Ebensee, where the *Glöcklerlauf* is believed to have originated, and in all the places where it was celebrated, the singing of this carol coincided with the resounding of the bells carried by the *Glöckler* who were filing into the town. The combination of these two emblematic events was, for the Ebenseer,

highly emotional.

The origin of the *Glöcklerlauf* remains mysterious and imprecise. The first written reference to it dates back to the 1850s and it is to condemn it, both by the State and the Church, which looked askance at this paganish fête.

However, the Ebenseer, as always, were in no way impressed by the prohibition and went on celebrating it—with a greater determination than before. They played hide-and-seek with the authorities, who endeavored to enforce a ban. When the need arose, when the local constabulary could not cope, reinforcements were called from outside—but to no avail.

The *Glöckler* had their spies who warned of the impending coming of the “enemy,” the candles of the *Kappen* (the huge paper head-dresses they wore) were put out, the bells were stuffed with straw, and the members of the group, who carried long sticks to clear the hedges, made their way to another meeting point. And it all started again.

Peeved by their repeated failings, the authorities stepped up their repression to try to enforce the law. The ensuing clashes resulted in casualties but the Ebenseer never gave in.

Without doubt, the full support of the people of this engaging tradition born from the alpine myths and tales, the price the *Glöckler* had to pay in order to preserve it, the fact that the race coincided with the fourth “Wild Night” and the winter solstice, the magic and symbolism of this celebration, with the flickering lights of the *Kappen* standing out against the pitch-black night, the whiteness of the *Glöckler* disappearing into a generally snow-covered landscape, and the dissonant tones of the bells which accompanied them, explain why it survived until today with such eagerness and found itself embedded in the people’s collective memory. The *Glöcklerlauf* is so treasured