

Fastnachtzeit oder Fastenzeit: Carnival Season

Fasching und Karneval: Beschreibung (description)

(The following excerpts are taken from *These Strange German Ways*, Hamburg-Wellingsbuettel, 1963, by permission of Atlantik-Bruecke, the publisher. Notes in parentheses are by the editor.)

An American flying directly from New York to Munich or Cologne on Shrove Tuesday might easily believe that all Germans had suddenly gone crazy. In the streets he would see crowds of laughing, singing people often dancing or swaying arm in arm in crazy costumes and masks. Those days before Ash Wednesday, before the beginning of Lent, are the climax of the carnival season. Karnival (Fasching) is most enthusiastically celebrated in those parts of Germany where a Catholic majority lives, in the south and along the Rhine. Carnival is . . . a last outburst of gaiety and enjoyment of life before Lent begins.

Carnival starts punctually 11 minutes after 11 on the 11th day of the 11th month of the preceding year. (No one seems to know where the idea came from, but 11 is known as the "fools number". This is also reflected in the Elverat — the Council of Eleven — which presides over the Sitzungen, described below.) . . . Cologne, Mainz and Munich are regarded as the three major "carnival cities" of Germany, and each of the three claims its own style of playing the fool under the scepter of Prince Carnival.

Cologne, (Köln) prides itself on the fact that its best carnival talent comes from the narrow streets and alleys of the oldest parts of the city. In January and February, the many carnival societies (Karnivalsgesellschaften) hold dozens of Sitzungen (meetings) with plenty of drinking, singing, Schunkein (swaying arm in arm) and laughing. Odd folk characters appear, tell their funny stories in broad dialect and sing their songs. In the middle of January, "Prince Carnival" is proclaimed in a merry ceremony in which the mayor invests the elected "Prince" with sovereignty over the city. The Thursday of the week before Ash Wednesday is reserved for Weiberfastnacht (Women's Carnival). Then the women reign over the city.

This is the beginning of carnival proper. On Friday and Saturday the big masquerades and fancy-dress balls take place. On Sunday afternoon the various quarters of the city and the schools have their special carnival street parades, which sometimes are even more original than the "official" parade on Rose Monday (Rosenmontag), which is considered the ultimate climax of the drei tolle Tage (three crazy days). This parade is usually four to five miles long. In slow procession, it winds through the city, with huge floats, horses, bands, funny groups of fools wearing grotesque or comical masks, and "regiments" of the fool guilds in their traditional picturesque uniforms. Dense crowds line the streets, and everybody laughs, drinks, . . . sings, gapes, screams, tries to catch the sweets that rain down from the floats . . . Rich and poor, high and low, learned and simple — they are just one big, crazy family. The city is turned upside down, and normal business is practically as a standstill.

(Mainz) . . . The Mainz variety, called Fassenacht, is considered by many to be the most distinguished in Germany. Especially renowned is the quality of the carnival Sitzungen . . . All in all, their carnival seems to be more gemuetlich than in other cities; there is an atmosphere of genuine, friendly merriness (sic) all over the place.

(Munich) . . . Munich, where carnival is called Fasching boasts an old traditional spirit born of more southerly, more light-hearted regions . . . Of course, carnival is not limited to the big cities along; throughout Bavaria and the Rhineland, even the smallest villages compete with each other in arranging carnival processions and setting up princes of their own. Each region has its own carnival "war cries". In the Rhineland it is Helau or Alaaf, while Munich responds with Eins, zwei, g'suffa, which is a frank avowal of the role that drinking plays in the merrymaking of Fasching. (Eins, zwei, g'suffa means "one, two, down the hatch")!

(Swabia) . . . Something rather special is carnival in Swabia, where it is called Fasnet. . . Members of the Fool Guilds, masked grotesquely, sway and weave through the streets in the traditional Narrensprung. Most striking are the Gschell-Narren who carry 40 pound sets of bells around their necks. Their masks show huge, gaping mouths with teeth, and the bells make a deafening noise . . . best preserved in Rottweil.

But wherever it may be, in the Rhineland, Bavaria, or Swabia, at midnight Tuesday, when Lent begins, everything is over and the days of exuberant joyfulness find a sudden, almost dramatic end.

Karnival

Millions of people in Germany "go wild" in the period preceding the 40 days of Lent and Easter. They celebrate Carnival — with noise, costumes, masks, music, and dancing. This exuberant, public merry-making originated in heathen and Christian ceremonies. The Romans on the Rhine and Danube greeted the return of spring by having a "carrus navalis", a boat on wheels, dragged through the town. Under Christianity there was the added incentive of having a final fling before the stringencies of Lent. The highpoint of Carnival in both town and country is reached in the loud and colourful processions. Precious carved and painted masks are worn in Swabia. In the Rhineland people, dressed up in costumes, romp and surge through the streets during the final days of Carnival. The processions on the last Monday before Lent attract many hundreds of thousands of people — even from neighbouring countries — to the main Carnival centres. Everyone is free to play the fool.

Carnival Season



Carnival in Germany Today

As in the past, Carnival today is a time for fun, merriment and carousing, for a boisterous escape from humdrum everyday life. If you visit Germany during the Carnival period — in 2010 this will be from February 11 — 16 you can experience a wonderful mixture of colourful traditional customs and exuberant partying. In all the areas where Carnival is celebrated the streets are full of merry revellers dressed up in creative costumes. You can watch the enactment of ancient customs, enjoy parades, listen to the rousing music at concerts and galas and join in the fun yourself at the many public parties.