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Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Cologne's Carnival is an institution which displays German thoroughness, Roman grandeur, French fantasy, Dutch coarseness, Greek wantonness, and English propriety.

Yet it would be overweening to call this ancient and peculiar festival "international". Because of all its alien strains, the Karneval of Köln is eminently indigenous. And while the Mardi Gras of New Orleans, the Carnával of Viareggio, or the Fasching of Munich might equal it in drawing power or splendor, there is no pre-Lenten revelry which can hold a birthday-sized candle to that of Cologne.

Though not cosmopolitan, Cologne is nevertheless a city of marvelous yet strangely unified variety. This is due perhaps to its power of accretion. For Cologne did more than survive the incursions of Frankish, Saxon, Archiepiscopal, French, and Prussian rulers. It absorbed them. More than that, Cologne imposed its indelible mark upon the intruders, simultaneous with their assimilation into its pattern. One sees this especially in Karneval.

Chief among its means of coloring the alien is Cologne's curious dialect, Kölsch. Broadly speaking, it is a form of low German Platt, the cousin of the dialects spoken all the way from Ostend to Rostock. Yet Kölsch is distinctive in that it contains countless words of foreign origin: Baselemanes (from the Spanish, "kiss the hand") meaning to bow and scrape; Delelendames (from the Latin "Te Deum laudamus") meaning monotonous gossip; Miréwar (from the French "miroir") - mirror.

This dialect, along with its juicy glottal inflections, has an infectious staying power. Chancellor Adenauer still speaks it on unofficial occasions, and even his public speeches are tinted by it. The city's priests speak it, The market's vegetable women and Cologne's captains of industry are united by it. A little more than a century ago, a traveler named Albert Klebe wrote of Kölsch: "This litany-like singing tongue, this disgusting Cologne slang of the common people is less comprehensible than any other German dialect." Perhaps Klebe feared he was becoming infected.

Another potent coloring agent is Cologne's impression of perpetuity. This is not the static eternalness of Rome or Athens where the classic forum or temple rests amid contemporary buildings. It is more a flowing sense: here a Roman mosaic, there a Gothic church; here a Romanesque window, there a Renaissance gable; Baroque, Rococo - all in one.

And this despite the awesome flattening of the inner city by World War II bombs. The immediacy of Cologne's past is everywhere evident; in its architecture, in its language, and most of all in Karneval.

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Historians trace the custom of carnival back to ancient pre-vernal festivals celebrating Isis in Italy and Nerthus in Germany - both goddesses of fertility. According to the record, one of the rites included towing a ship-wagon over land and water. Men and women in loose garments danced about it. The Latin name for the amphibious vehicle was "carrus navalis" - from which philologists derive the word carnival. The festival supposedly represented the re-opening of shipping and the disappearance of winter.

Is it too much to presume that the elaborate floats of today's Karneval parades are descendants of the carri navalis? Whatever the case, pre-spring festivals were customary affairs among Greeks, Romans, and Germanic tribes.

Christianity came to Cologne early in the Dark Ages, and with it the ecclesiastical year. The imposition of the Lenten period prior to Easter probably did not conflict with the older custom of carnival. Perhaps the 40 days of penitence served more to encourage the festival.

Little is known of those unrecorded times except that it was a common Rhenish usage to gather on the night before Ash Wednesday for a festival meal. Both clerics and laymen partook of the special viands,

The oath-book of Cologne's Councilmen relates that in 1341 the city fathers were obliged to give a special dinner for the commonfolk on Fastelovend, the evening before Lent began. The day before Ash Wednesday came to be called Fastnacht, and the whole pre-Lenten festival was Fasteleer in the Cologne dialect. Philologists insist that these words derive not from "fasting", but from the Old German word "fasón", which means to whoop it up.

In 1441 there is the report of punishments laid down upon a certain Johann van Ghynt, his four friends, and a "wench". This merry group of jesters had celebrated Fastelovend by parading about Cologne with a mocking "float." It was an imitation of a shrine containing holy relics, topped with a pillow on which sat a scarecrow waving an aspergillum. Apparently neither church nor city authorities were amused.

A hundred years later there are more reports of rich Cologne burghers throwing big dinners on Fastelovend; of freeloading, dancing, kissing, petting; of banquets lasting until 4 a.m. on Ash Wednesday; of sinful costumes, mummary and torch parades. "I'd like to fast like this all the time," wrote a chronicler.

This was the Reformation period, and in other parts of Germany Protestants clamped down hard on the carnival spirit. Puritan strictness caused the utter disappearance of Fastnacht customs in most Lutheran districts. However, the Reformation passed over Cologne lightly.

Historians note that Cologne had already been shunted aside by the new trade routes of the post-Renaissance age. The city was left to stagnate economically. Moreover, Cologne, the city which had housed Thomas Aquinas, Albertus Magnus, and a host of great archbishops, remained loyal to Rome as no other German city. Jacob Kemp writes that the only evidence of Reformation spirit he could find in the history of Cologne was an increase in sacreligious Karneval escapades, such as that of Johann van Ghynt.

Favorite Fastnacht costumes in the Reformation were priest and monk garments. Again, records of much boozing, parading with drums and trumpets, and dances. For a time, 17th century Cologne enjoyed the Karneval spectacle of five blindfolded men trying to club a pig to death.

The 18th century brought Enlightenment to parts of Germany and ever more ribaldry to Cologne's Karneval. In 1707 the city authorities issued a decree banning the most disgusting masks. One finds in this era the first Blüttenredner (tub speakers) who harangued the crowd with droll comments on city affairs while waving a threshing flail about. These self-appointed jesters to the bourgeois were later to assume central roles in the festival.

French troops occupied Cologne in 1794. A new figure popped up in that year's Karneval. He was Bellejeck, a combination of French and German meaning pretty fool. He opened the first of the carnival ceremonies on Wieverfastelovend - the evening when wives had the run of the town.

A year later, the French commandant forbade Karneval and "de courir les rues soit individuellement, soit collectivement, étant masques ou déguisés de maniere quelconque." Only masquerade balls were permitted. In 1801, the commandant relented and issued licenses for masks at 30 centimes per person. Forbidden were costumes parodying the church or the military. The most popular masks of the period were "Herr Status Quo", beggars and lawyers.

Always it was the children of Cologne who opened the fun on the Sunday before Ash Wednesday with their own masquerade. This was followed by the Rosenmontag (Mad Monday) parade of the grownups who coursed the streets in zany costumes, on foot, horseback, and in wagons, singing and tippling.

The modern Karneval dates back to 1823. By this time the French were gone and the city was being administered by the Prussians under terms of the Congress of Vienna.

It was the highpoint of Germany's romantic period, and the people of Cologne joined their countrymen in the new-found enthusiasm for folklore and ancient customs. Karneval was a natural.

A group of aristocratic laymen and clerics joined to organize the city's thitherto loose and disparate carnival customs. They formed a society and elected a Karneval Held (hero). He was to be attended by court jesters, holy virgins, the Geckebohnenchen (city fool), and a guard of honor. The latter was supplied by the city's nearly defunct guardsmen, the Kölsche Funke rut-wiess (Cologne Red-white Sparklers).

The Prussian city commandant demanded that order and discipline be observed. So the parade was held in prescribed march tempo. It finished with the Karneval Held being crowned on a high throne in the New Market. According to observers, the Cologne Funke supplied a rich parody on Prussian-style marching.

The enthusiasm for this first organized Karneval was enormous. Paraders turned out in large numbers - appearing as chimneysweeps, cossacks, and clowns, as Bacchus, as "Rochus Pumpernickel", and as Rousseau's back-to-nature man (a fellow clad only in moss). Cologne's Cathedral Canon, Scholz, was one of the moving spirits of the festival. Even the aging Goethe wrote some lines in tribute to the festival: "The sage also does well to accomodate himself comfortably to foolishness, and thus it becomes him when he allies himself with you."

A generation later, Heinrich Heine wrote of Karneval with sidelong glance at the stumbling Frankfurt Parliament:

"You Germans, keep your senses;
If you really want a Kaiser,
Then let him be a Karneval Kaiser from Cologne
And let him be called Köbes (Jakob) the First.

The clowns of Cologne's reveling groups
With their tingling bell-caps,
Should be his ministers."

The romantic folklore approach to Karneval was being cultivated all the more earnestly in these years. Old Fastnacht songs were collected and published for the first time; and historians began to seek out the roots of Karneval traditions. By this time, Cologne's festival had assumed considerable proportions. A number of associations were found to help promote the Fastnacht entertainments. And the official "Society of 1823" secured its position as general administrator of Karneval. In the succeeding years new "traditions" were introduced. But in the main they devolved on older usages.

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With this highminded introduction under our belts, it is now safe to plunge into the eight spinning days and reeling nights which composed the main part of the 1958 Karneval.

It was Wednesday, the 12th of February when I arrived in Cologne. Already Karneval was in full swing and the city was pulsing. It had begun, in fact: 96 days before, on the 11th of November; that is on the eleventh minute of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month.

"Eleven", we are told, is important, because it is a fool's number. It reads the same backwards and forwards. This startling discovery is credited to one Adolf, Count of Cleve, who founded a fool's academy in the year 1381 for the purpose of spreading such knowledge. True Kölner are much attached to the number, which turns up in much of the city's lore, i.e. Eleven thousand virgins were martyred here with the holy St. Ursula according to legend and Cologne's best known bathwater has the number in its tradename.

This, of course, makes it quite understandable that the city's Karneval societies be run by groups known as "The Council of Eleven". There are 39 such registered societies, and it is their business to stir up Karneval frolicking from November 11 up through Ash Wednesday.

To do this, they hold Sitzungen or "sessions", which comprise one of the three main forms of Karneval activity.

There are Sitzungen for men only, for women only, for both sexes, for "outsiders", and finally there are so-called "pomp-sessions". Despite the variations they are something of a cross between a Moose Club banquet and graduation day at a baton twirler's school.

On that Wednesday, there were seven such sessions being held in Cologne's various meeting halls. I chose the "Session With Women" of the Karneval Society Alt-Köllen, which was celebrating its 75th birthday. It was 10 p.m. when I arrived at the ancient Gürzenich, near the Old Market, built in 1441 as a dance hall. Already the session had been going on for two hours.

Singing and stomping was echoing down the marble stairway as I planked down the two bucks for admission. Above, in the palatial hall, the atmosphere seemed less extravagant than one might have expected. The guests sat at tables - ten long rows of them - the men in dark suits, some with orchid boutonnieres, the women in party dresses. They were sipping wine and champagne.

Up on the stage was the Elferrat, the Council of Eleven, with gleaming red jackets, and ornamented jester's caps. To the left was a 12-piece band; to the right a platform-topped with a wooden tub. Presiding over the whole shebang was a lugubrious gentlemen named Heinz Müllenholz.

He introduced a group of teen-aged entertainers called the Shoemakers. They were 18 boys clad in blue jeans and leather aprons, red scarves, and strawberry blond wigs. One huge lad was dressed as a girl. The band struck up a march and they danced an elephant-footed Polonaise. The crowd cheered. The second number was a parody of rock 'n roll, which brought down the house.

Exercizing his presidential prerogative, Müllenholz demanded and received a "Bützchen" (buss) from the "dainty maiden", after which he cried: "Ever higher, the waves of joy are beating in our glorious father-city!"

Then Müllenholz expressed thanks to "Mrs. Schlösser, who has contributed 200 marks to our society," and to the Düren stables for lending 20 horses to the Alt-Köllen for the Rosenmontag parade. During the course of the evening he thanked half a dozen other persons for "contributions". Müllenholz also thanked "my mother for coming here - I'm glad you're healthy."

The next number was a Büttenreder, a tub speaker. There was a trumpet fanfare, and a page in medieval costume led Matthias Brück to the tub. He was dressed for Ascot; his theme was the "man from the riding club". For the next quarter hour he entertained us with equine jokes such as: "One of my duties, you know is to sell the horsemanure. The other day a woman came to me and said 'your dung is too hot for my delicate little flowers.' 'Well, madame,' I replied, 'I'll put my horse on ice.'" After every such gag, the trumpets blew a flourish.

President Müllenholz awarded Herr Brück with a medal, as is customary.

Then came a minstrel, Herbert Bertrand. His trembling baritone animated by the microphone, he sang his lay:

"Since the world knows only speeding,
Everything rushes, everything runs.
And one hears from far and near
The Atom Age is here.
No, one finds no more time
Today for comfort.
Still I know one place.
Therefore listen to my rhyme:"

At Herbert's insistence, we all joined in on the chorus:

"Ja, in the tavern is a place,
There is of trouble ne'er a trace.
If we see everything twice,
Then the world is twice as nice! Ja, ja, ja)"

And since the waves of joy were pounding ever higher, we sang it again. This time, all of us locked elbows with our neighbors and swayed back and forth in time to the music. This is called Schunkeln, an inexpendable necessity for all Karneval songs.

Heinz Müllenholz congratulated the troupedour and hung a medal on him. Another fanfare and the next group came on; the "Honor Guard of the City Cologne". Swords drawn, banners waving, they marched down between the tables to the stage. They wore black boots, white pants, green coats with yellow facings, periwigs, and tricorns. Prancing along amid the marchers was a snappy drum majorette. The band pumped away a Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever." We all stood up to watch.

Once on stage, the "regimental commander" ordered his company to present arms. They did, saluting with the left hand to the right temple. Then, on command, the "dance major" and the drum majorette performed a capering caracole, while the company acted as a sort of chorus line.

There were no bumps or grinds. But the saucy girl was a real hit. She could dance. "No wonder," said a neighbor, "Uli runs a dance school. That Mariechen is 32 years old." Nearly all of the several dozen marching-dancing societies like the "Honor Guard" have Mariechen (little Maries). They recall the 18th century vendors who once attended the city's soldiers. Until 20 years ago, the role of Mariechen was played by men.

President Müllenholz echoed the crowd's pleasure with the "Honor Guard" by giving the Mariechen, Uli, a double kiss. He then presented her with flowers and a medal while we stood up and yelled Kölle Alaaf (roughly, "Cologne Aloft").

There followed a host of other entertainers: tub speakers with dozens of mother-in-law jokes ("My mother-in-law, she's a regular satellite; she keeps circling around me all the time."), a group of dancers called the Mülheimer Sailors who did their number to the tune of "Come on Mr. Touchdown", a bugle corps, more singers.

At midnight, Müllenholz rose from his chair and cried: "We wanted to finish at 12 o'clock, but it's getting later and later and we have four or five more groups to come. We'll have to send for our pajamas. It's your fault. Do you want Total Karneval?"

The crowd answered with a roaring "Ja!" So it went on: more fanfares, more medals, more "Alaafs", more Joe Miller jokes, more songs with Schunkeln. At 2 a.m. the show was still going strong.

The man sitting next to me commented on the production: "Look around you. These are all good burghers. But this is a second-rate Sitzung. The Alt-Köllen can't afford to get all the topflight entertainers. That's why they have to ask for contributions. People come here more 'to be seen' than to be 'merry'. Partly it's the women. They kill it. The atmosphere is better in the bigger 'societies'."

David Binder
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