

Behind the Fasnacht Mask

By Andrea Beck

A man in a magnificent rooster costume enters a restaurant on the outskirts of Basel and orders a cup of coffee, just as he has done every year, at the same time, in the same place. His costume is an exaggerated, light-hearted mocking of a French icon. While the implication may be lost on Marcel Braun, the 11-year old son of the restaurant's owners, he is enthralled by the costume's mystery and intrigue. With neither parent being from Basel, Braun has no "traditional" connection to the Basler Fasnacht. Regardless, by the following year, the young boy is, literally, taken under the rooster's wing—Braun enters the world of a Fasnacht clique.

Fasnacht, or carnival, began in Basel over 700 years ago. Other communities around Switzerland also celebrate Fasnacht, but Basel's is the largest and most popular (and takes place a week after everybody else's). It is condensed into only 72 hours and always begins 6 weeks before Easter. With almost 500 cliques participating, there are over 10,000 people involved in the Basler Fasnacht. Cliques are the official groups that are registered with the "Fasnachts Comité" and have certain obligations and privileges during the carnival. Many of them have their origins from distinct neighborhoods, but today most of them have fixed meeting places in Basel's historic center, usually a cellar and a reserved restaurant table (Stammtisch).

I was fortunate enough to meet with Braun at the Stammtisch of his clique, the Central Club Basel 1911 (CCB 1911), in the Restaurant Sperber in Hotel Basel. When I entered the cozy but classy restaurant, I was reminded of the old American sitcom, "Cheers", which takes place in a friendly, Boston neighborhood pub and has a theme song that repeats, "Where everybody knows your name." There were inviting smiles and warm welcomes all around. It was instantly obvious that Braun was well liked and well respected in this environment.

For over 30 years, Braun has been a member of this large clique. It is one of the oldest drum-and-fife cliques. Before the 1990's, it was male-only but, as enrollment numbers declined, it was decided to gradually include women. Now, out of the total 330 members, the gender ratio is fairly equal. To gain enrollment in the clique one must demonstrate dedication, some understanding of German, and musical talent, if one wants to pipe or drum.

Between gentle interruptions, Braun explained that only about 140 members are currently active in the clique. CCB is divided into three subgroups: 1) The "Jungi Garde" has 55 members ages 6–18 who are trained on their musical instruments; 2) the "Stamm" group includes 60 members ages 18 and older who perform during Fasnacht (20 are "Vortrabs" or vanguards, 20 are pipers, and 20 are drummers); and 3) the "Alti Garde" with 40 members over age 45 who still play, but not as diligently.

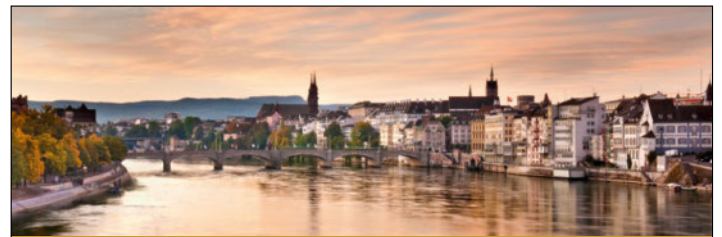
Braun's role as a drummer in the "Stamm" group entails a huge time and financial commitment. Since August, the club has been meeting every Thursday for two-hour drum practices. They are also expected to practice regularly at home and to attend clique meetings. Braun pays CHF 535 per year to cover the costs of costumes, music teachers, lantern painting, and other expenses. In addition, his drum is his financial responsibility—an investment of approximately CHF 2,000. There can be thievery at Fasnacht, but it is an unwritten code of all participants to be on the lookout for any suspicious instrument possession.

Our meeting was on the first Saturday of the new year, which coincided with the first day when this year's Fasnacht "Plaketten" were sold. Plakettes are badges that are designed with the Fasnacht's annual theme, and a proportion of each clique's plakette sales are retained for the clique. The Jungi Gardes are especially motivated to sell plakettes as they receive a direct portion for their own. This year's Fasnacht theme is "Jump out of the frame" or "Go beyond the scope". This theme struck a nerve in me. I recalled my first experience of Fasnacht, and my preconceived notion of "cliques" being elitist and exclusive. With the masks and piercing piccolos, I felt kept at a distance, and so I labeled the event in my mind as "strange."

However, meeting with Braun, I was able to see beyond the frame of Fasnacht, to really see what was behind the amazing masks, costumes, and music. I witnessed firsthand in Restaurant Sperber how welcoming and accepting CCB is. There was something deeper, something connective, going on, when there were no masks or marching. I was learning how receptive cliques are to new members, young or old, male or female, Swiss or foreign. Socially, the cliques get to know each other and form relationships. In a small town like Basel, these contacts lead to even further networking. On a political level, the cliques discuss and explore many pressing current events. Together, clique members expose some unpleasant truths in our society.

Braun then leaned closer and whispered that one of the ladies at the table used to let some of them cat-nap in the back of a kindergarten during Fasnacht when he was a teenager, just so they didn't miss out on any of the action. Sitting on my bar stool in the corner, I almost felt like an intruder at a family reunion, but I couldn't help but smile at this fond memory. Braun, and perhaps all of the carnival participants, do not take part in Fasnacht for me, or the tourists, even if he admits the tourists are great for Basel. There is much more to carnival than just lanterns and costumes, or drinking and partying, or drumming and piping. Underneath it all, Basel Fasnacht is a connecting force "that glues this city together."

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Andrea Beck is an English teacher, tutor, counselor, and writer from Canada. She will be shortening her vacation this year so she can be back to join in the Fasnacht celebrations!



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