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River Candles

Joyce Earley Lyndon

The people of Zurich from their two thousand years of history have kept many old customs, but in 1962 a schoolmaster, Hansruedi Obi, and his class at the Ilge School introduced a new one, new in the sense that they took an ancient practice, floating lights on streams, and gave it a time, the eve of the last day of school before Christmas, and a place, the Limmat River in the heart of the city.

The place is the mile-long stretch of the Limmat between the Quay Bridge, where the river leaves the lake, and the National Museum just beyond the main railway station. Zurich has many interesting public open spaces, but this section of the river is probably seen, every day, by the greatest number of people. It is the natural and the original center of the city.

Seven bridges divide the Limmat mile into a series of rectangles, each one given a different character by the adjacent historic buildings. Two bridges are reserved for pedestrians, the newest one, built three or four years ago, and the oldest, the Rathaus Bridge, on the site of the first recorded river crossing. It was recently widened into a piazza, with market stalls, plants, and seats with swingover backs. On a clear day you can see the Alps.

Along the embankments, built in the river in the nineteenth century, traffic

swirls and roars. But on the left bank, between the second and fourth bridge, old waterfront buildings still stand by the river, and a walkway is partly cantilevered over the water and partly threaded through sixteenth- to eighteenth-century courts and arcades at different levels. It is a good place to watch the populations of native birds. Mute swans, white and normally graceful, feed ridiculously, upended. Mallard ducks squawk, outraged. Laughing seagulls shriek over the soot-black coots (diving birds like eggs on legs, with big feet and Chinese white face masks).

The time is the end of a workday afternoon in December. Usually cold and dry. In the streets, thousands of starlights hang out of the dark overhead, over hurrying natives, foreigners, and occasional musicians. The shops are bustling in the last half-hour before they close for the night; cafés are doing good business, as always.

At the river, the black voids between the bridges are decorated with tinsel reflections from the lit buildings, street lamps, and lines of moving traffic. Lime trees on the Limmat Quay are outlined with strings of tiny white lamps, like frozen forked lightning.

The floating lights are launched off a long dock running out from the left bank, below the Quay Bridge



I Making candle rafts.
Comet Photo AG.



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where the river leaves the lake. Pedestrians on the Munster Bridge, seeing a luminous gold strip extending over the river, are watching the preparations, black silhouettes along the railing.

On the launch dock, there is a babble of children's talk, and you can see their dark shapes moving about. Four of them are assembling the lights at the foot of some steps down from the embankment. One takes out of a box a nine-inch styrofoam square, the raft, with a dark circle in the center. Another sticks on to the circle a short, stout candle. A third lights the candle. A fourth adds the shade, a translucent yoghurt cup with the bottom cut out, inverted. The finished rafts are handed along a line of children on the dock and added to the rows already in place, which are arranged in sets with narrow gangways. Meanwhile the workspace on the dock gets narrower. There are said to be seven hundred candles. At a safe distance, a silent audience of coots watches the preparations; evenly spaced like the rafts, white masks a grey blur in the darkness, they interrupt the reflections of the street lamps on the water.

A pair of emerald eyes moving silently down from the lake turns out to be two open police boats; you can just see the "P" on the sides. They pull in to the far end of

the dock. Children climb into them and begin stowing on the floor candlerafts passed along by others, two at a time, until the gunnels of the boats are silhouetted, candlelit, against the river. One boat moves upstream, close to the opposite bank, and stops. The other, ducks flying low in front of it, holds a position across the current, midstream.

The watchers on the quays and bridges are quiet. Clocks and bells chime six. The first raft is afloat and drifting steadily away. The second follows and the light goes out; the next two are set down more carefully. All along the dock and from the boats, candlerafts are being gently launched until the spread of the river is decorated with blobs of golden light—milky, or lettered, according to the brand of yoghurt.

The long procession moves downstream, under one bridge after another, at the same pace as the small children who are following alongside on the walkway with their parents, attentive and thoughtful. It is the kind of magic they expect at Christmas.

The birds, in contrast, are uneasy. Every bird on the river, and there are thousands, wants to avoid a confrontation with these dangerous smelling objects that move like ducks with their brains on fire. Near the arcaded houses on piles a

family of swans moves upstream in a dignified single file. On a parallel course ten feet away a convoy of lights is approaching. The first light, caught in a cross current, swings in under the arcade. The leading swan veers to avoid it and the two convoys merge in a crossing maneuver where the lights determine the pattern. A small child wants to know why the swans are afraid of the little ships. His mother says it is because they are strange; the swans have not seen such things before. The ducks are less fearful. They are a third as long as swans and much more agile. A small flock can tack around a single light. On a collision course with a flotilla, they take off together and land in the nearest patch of black water, repeating as often as necessary.

Downstream from the approaching front of candlerafts battalions of coots have closed ranks, hoping to intimidate the invaders, and are moving forward as one body. The lights, in contrast to the birds, are a loose collection of individuals following the currents and eddies unpredictably. The coots take off. Hundreds of big-footed, heavy birds run along the water for several yards before becoming airborne, feet pattering, wings vigorously thrashing the surface, a roaring, rushing, tearing storm.

The rafts take about an hour

to reach their destination, one of the city's power stations. Tomorrow they will be collected and the holidays begin.

In 1971, we described the ceremony to some friends, long-time residents of the city. "Candles, you say? On the Limmat?" They shook their heads, almost in disbelief. "But then, so much happens in Zurich."

In 1984 the ritual of the lights was listed in the city's official program. The quiet fantasy has become one of the traditional events of Zurich's Christmas.