



Text: Erika Suter

SHIP AHOY, LANCES UP!

Once every three years, the guilds of Zurich turn the peaceful river Limmat into competition grounds for their nautical jousting tournament. Next again in July 2014.

Lance raised, feet firmly on the podium, the fighter stands ready at the stern of the small flatboat. Downstream, the opponent approaches, his stance no less heroic. A drum roll starts up. The padded tip of the lance comes ever closer. Would dodging it be an option? On no account! “Cowardice in the face of the enemy” is punished by disqualification. So the fighter straightens up, throws out his chest, and awaits whatever may come. The lance hits him hard; he keeps his balance, for another moment at least, then follows the inevitable fall into the Limmat’s cold water. The spectators cheer, and so does the victorious joustier.

A Taste of the Middle Ages

In nautical jousting – “Schifferstechen” in German – two boats pass alongside each other. On the podium at the stern of each boat, a combatant tries to shove the other joustier off with his lance. According to lore, the event has its origins in the Middle Ages, an era that saw nautical jousting on the waters of almost all European cities. In a certain sense, it is the bourgeois continuation of the more conventional jousting tournaments – with the difference that the fearless fighter finds himself on a wobbly, narrow podium at the stern of a Weidling flatboat instead of on horseback.

In the past, nautical jousting was often part of the standard program of annual guild festivals, or it was held in honor of high-ranking guests. Swiss sources record such jousting events in Geneva, in Ouchy, Vevey, and Estavayer-le-Lac. Jos Murer’s city map of Zurich (1576) proves that nautical jousting also took place in Zurich during that period: his map shows two boats in battle between two of Zurich’s historic



Wet shirt contest

In the course of the tournament, some historic costumes get wet.

"IT IS A REAL CHALLENGE HOLDING THE LANCE STRAIGHT AND KEEPING YOUR BALANCE ON THE WOBBLY BOAT."

» *Guild master, Peter K. Neuenschwander*

bridges, the Rathausbrücke and the Münsterbrücke – precisely at the same place, the tournament is held today. “The map was the trigger that inspired us to reinstate the event in Zurich. In collaboration with the Limmat Club Zurich, we organized the first tournament in 1979,” says Peter Neuenschwander, lawyer by profession and master of the Boatmen’s Guild.

Ever since then, the tournament has been taking place every three years, pitting the guilds of Zurich against one another. Held on the Limmat right in front of the famous Hotel Storchen, the guild house of the Boatmen’s Guild, the competition is set against the backdrop of the green river, Zurich’s picturesque old town, and the seemingly Venetian piers.

From Battle to Folk Tradition

The participants represent the 12 old and the 14 new guilds of the City of Zurich. Each of the 26 combatants wears a costume in the colors of their guild to the battle. Today, it is the athletic and folkloristic aspects that stand in the foreground of the tournament. Historically, however, the competitors entered a serious battle, wearing armor and a helmet, and wielding a shield and a pointed lance. Accidents and death by drowning were not uncommon. “Our ancestors had a different outlook on risk, violence, and danger,” explains Neuenschwander.

With time, certain rules have changed – fortunately. Since armor was abolished, the lances used are blunt and protected with leather pads. But it still takes courage to stand on the podium and face the lance of one’s rival. “If that lance hits you, the impact is pretty rough. The rules decree: The lance has to be aimed at the opponent’s chest. At the same time, one’s own chest must be offered up straight and without fear, without turning to the side or trying to dodge,” says the guild master. Whoever fails to face battle correctly is disqualified. As is anyone who aims too high, targeting the opponent’s neck or head, or too low, aiming for the lower body or the legs. Combatants who try to hold on to their opponent’s lance, or who drop their own – something that happens all too easily – are also disqualified. “The lances are about five meters long and very heavy. It is a real challenge holding the lance straight and keeping your balance on the wobbly boat,” he adds. Unpracticed combatants often fall into the Limmat before the actual battle even begins.

Balance and a Dash of Luck

Are athletic people the better nautical jousters? Or those with a strong build? “Mass and a degree of fitness certainly don’t hurt,” Neuenschwander explains. “Most important, however, is a good sense of balance. The current of the Limmat can be strong and the boats can gain speed rapidly.” In the end, a dash of luck is needed, too, to hit the opponent at the right time and angle to push him off the boat.

The criteria for selecting their representatives are left to the guilds themselves. Some qualify through their success in past tournaments; others shine in the test jousts the Limmat Club Zurich organizes periodically. Either way: to represent one’s guild at the nautical jousting tournament is an honor. The task of rowing the jousters to victory – or to defeat – falls to the Limmat Club Zurich.

Old and New

For the local audience as well as for foreign visitors, the spectacle ends once the champion has been chosen. For the guilds, however, the festivities continue. Neuenschwander recounts: “On the evening of the tournament, an official dinner is held with speeches and guests of honor. Tradition has it that the guild master of the victorious guild makes a spontaneous speech.”



Showdown of the ambassadors of the guilds of Zurich.

EXCERPT FROM THE JOUSTING RULES

§2

In nautical jousting, two boats – the so-called Weidlinge – are steered past one another in the direction of the river in such a way that the two jousters may push each other into the water using their lances.

§3

All lances are of the same length and weight. Their tips are padded. The fighting platforms at the stern of the boats, too, are of the same size and at the same height above the water surface.

§6

It is a matter of honor for the jousters to compete in full guild costume. Weapons and armor remain ashore. Hats and high boots are optional, as are wigs. However, it is against the rules to compete barefoot or in socks.

§8

Whoever steps off the podium with one or both feet, or whoever falls off the platform, is defeated. If the arbitrating body disqualifies a jouster from the competition under §9, his opponent who has abided by §9 is declared victor – even if he has stepped or fallen off the podium during battle.

§9

Disqualified from the tournament:

- » Whoever drops his lance in battle.
- » Whoever pulls, grabs, or jams their opponent's lance in order to shove the opponent into the water.
- » Whoever turns away from the opponent, dodges the opponent's blow, or does not offer up their chest straight and without fear.
- » Whoever aims their lance too high, i.e. for the neck or the head, or too low, i.e. for the legs or the lower body of the opponent.
- » Whoever is absent or intoxicated at the moment of the battle.
 - » Whoever is unsportsmanlike, or insults the tournament organizers or the arbitrating body.

This year's tournament not only upholds tradition, it also introduces a new element: competing in the nautical joust with the guilds of Zurich are the Boatmen's Guilds of Berne and Basel. "We entertain good relations with both of these cities, and are motivated to pass our tradition on. We are very happy that the Boatmen's Guild of Basel started organizing a nautical joust a few years ago – soon the Boatmen's Guild of Berne will hold a tournament, too."

Lances & Cranes

This year's nautical jousting tournament will be even a little more impressive for the spectators than usual. The Boatmen's Guild has set the event to take place during the port festival in the first week of July, when the newly-erected port crane – a contemporary art project that has proven controversial in Zurich – is officially unveiled on the Limmatquai. "During the Middle Ages, boatmen were looked upon as the masters of the waterways, as well as of all land transports. Our guild was responsible for the transshipment points, the landing stages, and the ports. Given this historical background, we are claiming nautical sovereignty over the port crane," explains Neuenschwander. The news that the submerged jousters will be lifted out of the Limmat by crane is nothing but a rumor, however – especially since the crane has, for reasons of safety, been gutted.

UPCOMING JOUSTS

The guilds of Zurich will soon have their lances ready. The next nautical joust takes place just off the Weinplatz by the Hotel Storchen at 3.30pm on July 5, 2014.

» www.schifferstechen.ch

» www.limmat-club.ch

BOATMEN'S GUILD: FACTS & FIGURES

Founded: 1336

Current master of the guild:

Peter K. Neuenschwander

Guild house: Hotel

zum Storchen

Old occupations: Artisans in the areas of foods and transport, fishermen, boatmen, wagoners, ropemakers, etc.

Modern professions: Businessmen, lawyers, doctors, engineers, architects, boatbuilders, etc.

HOTEL ZUM STORCHEN

The guild house of the Boatmen's Guild is worth a visit – even when no jousters are battling in front of its gates. Established in 1357, it has ranked among the best addresses in town for more than 650 years. The historic building on the romantic Weinplatz in the heart of Zurich's old town stands on the shores of the river Limmat.

» www.storchen.ch