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Modern Knights Meet for Culture, Fun and Ceremony

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Schlaraffia is unlike most other all-male international fraternal organizations. Members, or "knights", dress up in robes and silk helmets and meet in halls filled with medieval paraphernalia. Addressing one another with humorous titles, the members carry on all conversation in German.

Meetings are often devoted to cultural discussions, with members reciting poems they have written or performing their own works on musical instruments. Any mention of religion, politics or business is forbidden. Humor and friendship and an appreciation of the arts - not necessarily Germanic - are stressed. Rivalry and jealousy have no place at the clubs' meetings.

Schlaraffia - the word is German - is an idealistic fairy tale land. Gustav Mahler and Franz Lehár were members of the organization, founded in Prague in 1859. Today the club roster ranges from a former Olympian to opera singers, artists, engineers, inventors and master chefs who follow the guidelines laid down by a group of German performers, the founders of the first Schlaraffia.

Worldwide, there are 11,000 members in 258 chapters, with 915 members in the United States and 100 in New Jersey. A 15-member board of directors represents five zones: North America, Latin America, Switzerland, Germany and Austria. The group is based in Berne. New Jersey has three Schlaraffia clubs: Newarka in Dover, Portus Betsiae in Plainfield, and Totowa in Clifton.

Members of the modern Schlaraffia follow the same tradition as the club founders, poking fun at nobility, even inducting themselves into knighthood. Beginning as a page, a member moves on to the rank of squire and then, with a lavish presentation, becomes a knight. "We think of ourselves as the last knights of romantic 13th and 14th centuries," said H. Werner Seher, a member of the Newarka chapter who was president of the North American Region.

The emphasis is on entertainment, but only with is culturally sound, nothing that remotely borders on coarse humor. And yet this fraternal group has had to ward off threats from monarchies, along with attempts at annihilation by the Nazis and the Communists.

"Schlaraffia is an idealistic organization based on friendship and tolerance," Mr. Seher said. "We believe that the human being counts; we don't care where a man prays or what his politics are, only that he performs within our circle."

Mr. Seher, who represented Germany in water polo at the 1956 Olympics in Australia, added: "I used to think sports were a unifying force, but no more." There is no other group quite like the Schlaraffia, he said.

It was a lack of tolerance that spurred its founding, Mr. Seher said. "In Prague a high society arts club, Arcadia, who numbered among its members nobility from the Hapsburg monarchy, rejected the membership of Albert Eilers, who later was selected by Wagner to sing the role of Fasolt in Bayreuth. His fellow German artists, performers at the German Theater in Prague, saw the rejection as a wanton act of snobishness and promptly formed their own club, the first Schlaraffia."

But over the years, seemingly harmless entertainment at the meetings has been viewed as suspect. In 1935, Hitler directed the Schlaraffia fraternities in Germany, some 144 strong, to rid their clubs of Jewish members. Mr. Seher said: "The Schlaraffias circumvented Hitler's orders to

remove Jews from the membership list by writing a letter to our Jewish friends telling them: 'You are no longer formally on the membership list, but, of course, as usual, we'll see you Monday night at the meeting.'

The Schlaraffia clubs did not heed Hitler's follow-up demand that they voluntarily disband. Then in 1937, Hitler ordered that the Schlaraffia meeting rooms be trashed and the books burned. After the war, members in Eastern Europe had to meet secretly because the clubs were outlawed by the Communists.

Recently, representatives from Schlaraffia clubs worldwide held their convention in Vienna. Traveling to Prague for the first time since 1937, the organization's members were allowed back inside the former German Theater, now the Czech State Opera House. Vaclav Havel, the President of the Czech Republic "graciously granted our request," Mr. Seher said.

"When the orchestra played selections from the Schlaraffia lieder book, our members rose and with tears in their eyes sang with emotion that reflected what it meant to be back where our group was founded," Mr. Seher said.

The medieval aspect of the organization requires some getting used to, members said, recalling their first encounter with the group. In the ornate meeting room, dominated by a throne and wall hangings that include banners, coats of arms and crests, they remembered that as prospective members they had been greeted by men attired in cloaks heavily decorated with medals, wearing helmets and carrying swords.

Mr. Seher said that at his first meeting he attended, 20 years ago, he thought: "How can these serious gentlemen act so silly?" He continued: "But then I saw that the artistic part was done within a framework of mimicking the medieval times when they gave out medals and stars for everything. It was all done with great humor."

Members are addressed as Ritter (knight) followed by names that are a play on their profession or hobby. Victor Symonette, a conductor in New York, is Ritter Diathon der Takvolle, someone who is tactful and has a sense of musical beat; Fred Zant, a retired engineer and a schlaraffia officer, answers to Ritter Poligonius, signifying a many-sided genius.

Mr Symonette said: At first the pomp is an estrangement, and you think these men are acting foolishly. Once you understand that it is a way of moving away from what we call a 'profane' world, into an idealistic one, it then takes on a different sense."

Herbert Bruckner, a custom tailor who has been a member for 38 years, added: "It's an interesting way to back away from everyday life and step into culture. The remarkable thing is that age doesn't make a difference; people come from all walks of life."

Before joining the Schlaraffia, Peter Burboeck thought he wasn't literary enough for a highly literate group. That all changed after attending a few meetings of the Newark chapter. "Not everyone is a great concert player or orator," Mr. Burboeck said, "but the Schlaraffia accepts people the way they are. Suddenly, whether in music or art, you discover you can do something you thought you weren't able to do."

As befitting a club whose members value a sense of humor, the position of court jester is an important one. Fred Ruebel, known as Ritter Ambassador, who works in the construction business, holds that honor in the Newark chapter because of his quick wit.

Commenting on his longevity as a member, Mr. Seher said: "What happens in the Schlaraffia is that it becomes a part of your life like developing a sense of humor. Things that would have upset me 20 years ago, I now can see their humorous side."