

POLITICAL 'CREATURES': THE LILY-OF-THE-VALLEY FESTIVAL IN RAMBOUILLET, FRANCE

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Abstract: There are many festive events associated with particular flowers in France, among the most pervasive being the association of the lily-of-the-valley (*Convallaria majalis*) with May Day and maying customs. This entails a relationship with official policies and politics on both the national and the local level. The town of Rambouillet is a case in point, with its Lily-of-the-Valley Festival, founded officially in 1906. In today's world, a festival may lead rather a crowded life among many other offerings and the interaction of politics, policies and the many people who work to create and perpetuate it provides us with a glimpse of the interweaving of the festive and the political.

Keywords: lily-of-the-valley, *Convallaria majalis*, maying, politics, festival, France, Rambouillet

A Festival in its Home

The Lily-of-the-Valley Festival in Rambouillet, France, is an invention, and a relatively well documented one, held in mid-May, since this is the season when *Convallaria majalis* L. is in flower in the northern half of France, where the lily-of-the-valley thrives in moist forest conditions, typical of the State-owned forest of Rambouillet. The presence of the forest is an integral facet of the identity of the town for many of its inhabitants and is often evoked in conversation or interviews. Rambouillet's castle was until recently the official presidential second home, and hosted both the 1959 De Gaulle-Adenauer talks preceding the Elysée Treaty and the 1999 negotiations over Kosovo, a convenient location, as the town is located west-southwest of Paris, half way between the capitol and Chartres. This is far enough away to provide for at times quite independent initiative, although one might also say that any town this close to the capitol may be doomed to living in the shadow of the City of Light.

The Lily-of-the-Valley Festival consists of the "round" of planning and events over the calendar year including the Nuit du Muguet ball in January to select the Queen (Reine du Muguet) and her two Dauphines. Over the years, this "Fête du Muguet" has come to fit into a series of diverse festivities that today include a spring festival, a hunt festival, highly popular antiques fairs, a funfair at the Quasimodo, the classic French holiday of Bastille Day on the 14th of July, as well as varied cultural events ranging from hip-hop contests to choir meetings, and

the well-attended biennial autumn Saint Lubin Festival, all of which may crowd around the Fête and perhaps give it more company than it might need.

The timing of the Fête du Muguet may resemble a juggling act. The month of May in France at times includes the spring schools break and Christian holidays such as Easter, Ascension, Whitsun and Pentecost. The FM has traditionally been held in mid-May, after the Saints de Glace days, 11-13 May, when the weather is said to turn towards the milder and the lily-of-the-valley should be in flower. 2013 saw an early warm spell in February, then a wave of very cool weather and some suspense, as the wild lily-of-the-valley to decorate the parade floats just was flowering.

This both allies the Fête du Muguet in Rambouillet with May Day, when commercial lily-of-the-valley is massively utilised in festive practice on and closely around that date, and sets it apart from May 1st, since the flower is not “offered” in the same way at all in the Rambouillet festival.¹ It most certainly is “ritual” in the deepest etymological sense of “ordering” community life, and is set into the “life of the city”, the polis, with a special place in the social fabric and cohesion, although the term “festive” is used here, only one interviewee having as yet referred to “ritual”.² Political is taken in the broad sense of including both politics and policies, the latter of which can be the lifeblood of a festival or sound its death knell, underwriting a nuanced spectrum of intervention and non-intervention. It is often said that French people love tradition and hate rules, and the *muguet* customs may well be a good illustration of this, as regards popular custom, since people speak very often of tradition.

As an example of this, May Day is the only day in the calendar year when it is “legally tolerated” (an interesting expression in itself) to sell an item in the street – wild, hand-gathered lily-of-the-valley. “Sale of lily-of-the-valley on the public thoroughfare by individuals the First of May is related to an allowed tolerance on the part of local authorities in conformity to a long *tradition*” [my italics].³ Law is one thing, implementation is entirely another and may be highly variable on the ground. Neighbouring communities or even boroughs may handle the issue in strikingly different ways, the one insisting on unadorned, unwrapped sprigs, the other allowing all embellishment, yet another going so far as to confiscate sellers’ flowers, so this leaves considerable leeway for local actors and local policies to work.

This is a good reason to take a glance at the full cast of actors around the Fête du Muguet in the Rambouillet polis, only a few of whom it will be possible to listen to here, as this is an ongoing inquiry. In earlier years, the Army and Republican Guard played an important role, but their presence in Rambouillet has

1 For more general lily-of-the-valley customs, see GRIFFIN-KREMER 2009.

2 ERNOULT ET MEILLET 2001. 574.

3 “La vente du muguet sur la voie publique par les particuliers le 1er mai s’apparente à une tolérance admise à titre exceptionnel de la part des autorités locales conformément à une longue tradition.” Source: Service public, le site officiel de l’administration française, <http://www.service-public.fr/actualites/00837.html>, “La vente du muguet sur la voie publique le 1er Mai: quelle réglementation?”, Publié le 19.04.2013 - Direction de l’information légale et administrative (Premier ministre)

been much diminished. This leaves the police and the Sub-Prefect, an appointed official, as the town is a Sub-Prefecture. Media communication is undertaken by the local newspapers and town hall magazine, as well as by posters and programmes, and the painted shop windows by local artists. Entertainment is provided by voluntary or hired groups including the funfair professionals, musicians, and the fireworks display experts. Local associations contribute greatly, with the elaborate floats for the parade with the Queen and her Dauphines, whose candidacies are entirely the responsibility of associations, not always the same as for the floats. The Catholic Church is an actor in one event on the Sunday morning when the "Royals" are welcomed to a mass, along with the mayor (also a Member of Parliament), regional councillors and sub-prefect. What these actors have to say is rich in nuance about the relations between the political, the festive and the ritual, or how all this orders the city.

Conversations with Actors

Among the "media" actors is the communication agency, CaféNoir (BlackCoffee), who put out the trimestrial town information magazine called *Rambouillet Infos*. According to Mr. Bertrand Le Corre, *Rambouillet Infos* magazine is regarded by the agency and the town hall as a "public" document that "stays on the table", attractive enough to be left on coffee tables or in the waiting rooms of, for example, a doctor's office. Hence, it is felt to be particularly dedicated to conveying an image of the town as the town hall conceives of it and he said explicitly that this conception is of a "ville bourgeoise" (a bourgeois town). In the era of political correctness, this statement might appear somewhat surprising, but it comes up repeatedly in casual conversations, as well as in an interview situation.⁴

This issue of the magazine arrived in late February, 2013, nearly three full months before the Fête du Muguet.⁵ Mr. Le Corre emphasized the close contact between the agency and the town hall advisor, Madame Crozier, in matters of the Fête du Muguet. She wanted to make sure there was a very fine cover about the festival well before the appointed date, as well as a two-page article immediately after the Mayor's editorial. According to Monsieur Le Corre, the essentials of what the town hall wanted were clear: a cover that would be a "synthesis" of the identity of Rambouillet as a bourgeois town, hence presentation of this year's theme of carnivals, in the plural, with Venice as a particular model, with its traditions of elegant and aristocratic costumes, nonetheless with at least tacit references to northern Europe and the carnivals held in Belgium or even South America. Above all, the cover was to convey a sense that this could all be in Rambouillet, "a presidential and royal town" (referring to the castle's past occupants or users). The "winning" visual for both the festival posters and the cover

4 Interview with Mr. Bertrand Le Corre in the CaféNoir offices on 8 April 2013.

5 *Rambouillet Infos* (magazine), Printemps 2013, N° 246.

combined a Venetian-like mask with emphasis on floral disguise, the muguet being accorded pride of place on the cover literally facing the mask.

The lady often called “Madame Muguet” in Rambouillet, who handles most of the coordinating and planning for the Muguet Festival is Madame Joëlle Crozier.⁶ She is the town councillor in charge of “Association Life and Festivals” and is deeply committed to making both the *muguet* event and the biennial September festival called the Saint Lubin work, as well as remain popular. One of her basic tenets is participation, as she pointed out to me, which is clearly stated in the *Rambouillet Infos* article on the Muguet Festival, with the opening lines “A wolf, a mask, a necklace of flowers, a striking disguise... Use your imagination and take part in this grand parade of lily-of-the-valley by bringing your own personal touch.”⁷ It is worth noting that one of the most emphasised and evidently popular elements of the Saint Lubin Festival is disguise linked to a particular historical period.

She feels this idea of a theme as a guiding principle in the Muguet Festival is among her most important accomplishments in regard to both events: “a theme and a red thread (*un fil rouge*), that should carry throughout the event, from first to last, from the election of the Queen to the Festival.” Commenting upon the observation she had often heard that the floats in particular had once been more magnificent, she said it was no longer possible to have “pharaonic floats” and that one must accept moving with the times, ours being a period when people simply had less time, as well as being “consumers of other things”, rather than devoting hours of work to a float. This brought up an important point in relation to what Monsieur Le Corre had said about her wish to have the *Rambouillet Infos* image of the Muguet Festival express the fact that it was a “bourgeois town”. She said of the float-makers: “it used to be that these people were manual, absolutely without any pejorative value,” and that consequently they knew how to design and build material objects. In most cases, the people currently working on floats are no longer drawn from a manually skilled trade.

The concern with strong support for the float parade goes hand in hand for her with trying to keep all generations interested in the festival and this includes allowing people whose float-making skills are visibly lesser than the old hands to have their own floats anyway, most especially the younger people. The first thing she did, when she took over organising the festival, was to do away with the bands (*fanfares*) that were once a staple of the musical offerings, because “it doesn’t attract young people”. Of course, this did not include one of the historical pillars of the festival, the Rambouillet Musical Society. She also opted not to encourage the participation of majorette groups, who had been a staple of the event and the reaction to this has not gone unrecorded. An article in the local weekly newspaper notes the well-known Houdan majorettes regret no longer

⁶ Interviewed in her office in the town hall on 26 April 2013.

⁷ *Rambouillet Infos*, Printemps 2013, N° 246. 4.

being a part of the Rambouillet fête, seemingly within a more general downward trend in popularity of the genre, although they hope this is but a passing fashion.⁸

She has adopted the September Saint Lubin Festival with great enthusiasm and reacted quite firmly, when I asked the possibly delicate question of whether it might be providing more competition to the Muguet Festival than the latter could absorb. She replied that she managed both of them and deals with that in entirely different ways, the *muguet* event revolving around the association element, so “always the same rhythm, the same ritual – the mass, the hounds, no surprises, the surprise is the diversity”. The timing is different, since the Saint Lubin is once every two years, each time with a totally different historical period as theme and the foundation of that is the “comices agricoles”, the important agricultural shows Rambouillet was once the venue for. More effective organisation included the principle that competition should extend to aspects of the festivals that had not been treated in this manner before her and which she emphasised was the “legal” way for a town hall to operate: tendering bids for the Fête du Muguet fireworks displays, for example, and taking the best-quality, most cost-effective candidate, which she stresses should produce emulation, as well.

When asked how she saw the question of continuity in relation to the Muguet Festival, she replied with “of course, there is the crisis, and people need a safety valve (*soupape*); big popular festivals provide a time to dream in, you can get away and it works. The real credo with the Mayor, is that it’s a festival for everybody, accessible for everybody.”

The Mayor, Monsieur Gérard Larcher, is well known for his commitment to the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival, but this engagement extends to the other local politicians, such as Madame Christine Boutin, who is the Rambouillet representative on the Yvelines *département*⁹ General Council. She has been active in the Council General of the Yvelines for the *canton* of Rambouillet since 1982, then assistant mayor (*adjointe*) of Rambouillet from 1983 on. She participates in the Fête du Muguet every year and has quite definite ideas about it.¹⁰ These include it being a source of social cohesion and she proposes that one of its major functions – she qualified this as its “justification” – was firmly anchoring the city in the Forest of Rambouillet. She quite enjoys giving you the gift of a counter opinion in exchange for even a tentative opinion, so when I proposed that the founding constellation in 1906 of mayor, aristocrat and shopkeepers had recently come to lack the formerly stout support of the present-day shopkeepers,¹¹ she came back with

8 Les Nouvelles de Rambouillet, mercredi 15 mai 2013, N° 3412, p. 26 (in the section on the smaller towns, from Montfort to Houdan)

9 A *département* is an administrative territory run by a *commissaire* of the Republic and a General Council. See the very rich Wikipedia presentation on the Yvelines at <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yvelines> and the official website for the Conseil Général des Yvelines at <http://www.yvelines.fr/>. Also see the official Parliamentary website (Assemblée Nationale) for Madame Boutin’s political itinerary, as she was a Member of Parliament until 2012: http://www.assemblee-nationale.fr/13/tribun/fiches_id/632.asp. She is also the President of the Parti Chrétien Démocrate, <http://lepcd.fr/organigramme-du-parti-chretien-democrate>, all references accessed 21 April 2013.

10 Interview 19 April 2013 in her office in Rambouillet.

11 See GRIFFIN-KREMER 2011. 78.

another suggestion – that one of the major elements now missing was the Army. In fact, Rambouillet has lost much of the very visible and active presence of the Armée de Terre (Land Army) over the last fifteen years, either amalgamated with other units or outright dissolved by the invention of new structures.¹² For her, the Army's presence represented an important sense of tradition in the townspeople's self-perception. This element would have been one of three major axes in the festival: the military, the hunt (recalling the huntress, the Duchesse d'Uzes, the festival's aristocratic co-founder), and the lily-of-the-valley, the flower being the only survivor.

When I mentioned that what had attracted me first to the Fête du Muguet was the astounding hand and head work to be seen in the floats of the "corso fleuri", the term for the float parade that takes place on the Sunday afternoon of the festival, Madame Boutin immediately recommended an interview with her assistant, Madame Marie-Josée Le Nagard, who is also an assistant mayor in charge of relations with citizens and the handicapped in the Rambouillet town hall. Madame Le Nagard provides us with a smooth transition to the hands-on work aspect of the festival, since she participated in the float-building, when she was in the town's Technical Services, being what she described as a "petite main" (sempstress, as contrasted with the couturier or couturière), that is, a helper rather than a designer. She mentioned an interesting earlier interweaving of the political and the personal in the festival: the float *muguet* was once gathered on the private property of the former mayor (from 1947 to 1983), Madame Jacqueline Thome-Patenôte, in the Clairefontaine neighbourhood.

Madame Le Nagard's most vivid memories were of the 1970s, when there was a Europe N°1 television channel podium on the train station square with famous entertainers invited. She sees the Muguet Festival as having two quite separate aspects: the funfair (*fête foraine*) and the lily-of-the-valley parade (*défilé du muguet*). To the specific question of whether she found the Fête du Muguet *populaire*, she replied "it is a very popular festival, touching all the neighborhoods" and nuanced this with "it's the fête of Rambouillet, popular in the noble sense", since *populaire* can mean both well-liked – rather a more recent meaning – and also plebeian, of the people.¹³

As regards the Saint Lubin event every two years in September, she pointed out a tangible difference with the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival in that the Fête de la Saint Lubin "attracts a class above. There is no funfair (*fête foraine*), so it's not at all the same thing. It doesn't attract the same people (*population*), it's higher. There is straw put out in the streets, the stands for handcrafts and trades (*artisanat*) from

¹² Wikipedia "501^e régiment de chars de combat" (the 501st Regiment of Combat Tanks), resident in Rambouillet from 1946 to 2010 http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/501e_r%C3%A9giment_de_chars_de_combat#De_1945_C3.A0_nos_jours The Commissariat de l'Armée de Terre (Commissariat of the Land Army) was dissolved in 2009 and part of its duties taken over by the Service du Commissariat des Armées in 2010. http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Commissariat_de_l'arm%C3%A9e_de_terre, both accessed 21 April 2013.

¹³ See the 1994 update of the 1967 *Le Petit Robert* dictionary that speaks only of "being of, for, by, from and appropriate to the *peuple*," which has the connotation in French of being opposite to the upper or governing classes, says the same source.

old times, it's another style of festival". As for the equally visible decline in participation of the shops for the Fête du Muguet, only a few of which have retained the painted window décor, she agreed and notes the shopkeepers are more motivated by the Saint Lubin Festival, when they do far more business.

Madame Le Nagard is a direct bridge between the political, being an assistant mayor, and the festive, having once taken part in the float work. Most people who actively participate in the Fête du Muguet are on one side or the other, so to speak, and this is true of the band, the Société Musicale de Rambouillet or SMR, founded in 1870, and that has been a mainstay of the festival since its beginnings.¹⁴ Actual mediation between the town hall and the festival participants is generally handled by Madame Crozier, although the musicians do have some contact with the organisers and are consulted, especially in the case of the SMR through their President, Monsieur Bernard Marillia, who is a tenor saxophonist in the group.

Mr. Marillia is retired, but is Honorary Director of the Banque de France and a member of Forex International, as well as holding the Legion of Honour. This means he is rather experienced in conversational exchanges about a target subject that might call for discretion or a nearly invisible guiding hand. He is also a storyteller of the first order and led the interview with him on 3 May, 2013, having structured it according to the SMR program of involvement in the FM: the Saturday evening concert in the park at the "Rondeau" (the artificial lake with one oval end where the podium is set up to receive the Queen and Dauphines after the SMR concert), the Sunday procession from the central town square up to the church, then back down again to the Roi de Rome Garden, for the before-lunch outdoors champagne reception and, finally, their leading place in the float parade. In the twenty years since he has been participating, the musical offering and the fireworks display have had to be cancelled due to inclement weather three times, a reminder that the weather is an important fact of life in the success of the Fête du Muguet. He is invited to the preparatory meetings for organisation of the festival, which the mayor always attends. And it is here that one feels the threads of the political and the festive touching quite tangibly.

According to Monsieur Marillia, Monsieur Larcher is an enthusiastic hunter and hence likes to grant a privileged place in the festival to the hunting horn group from the nearby, smaller town of Les Bonnelles.¹⁵ When Monsieur Marillia suggested during a preparation meeting that this year the SMR depart from their customary uniforms – not for the Saturday evening concert or the Sunday morning procession to mass at church – but that they wear whatever they want as long as it is the most colourful possible for the float parade, Monsieur Larcher reacted with enthusiasm. This reminds us that Madame Crozier's by-words were renewal and innovation, in line with helping the Fête du Muguet to "evolve" with

¹⁴ Société Musical de Rambouillet website: <http://smr-rambouillet.fr/presentations/presentation/>, accessed 21 May 2013

¹⁵ Called officially Le réveil de Bonnelles, see <http://www.mairie-bonnelles.fr/index.php/Annuaire%20des%20Associations?idpage=44&idmetacontenu=1124&idossiercontenu=1039> Accessed 25 May 2013

its time. This likewise demonstrates that the mayor both welcomes new ideas and is ever-present in the planning and implementation processes of the festival.

Alas, the 2013 Fête du Muguet held the seeds of disappointment for the Société Musicale de Rambouillet, in the form of the weather forecast and its reality. Their Saturday evening concert had to be cancelled, hence the fourth time in the twenty years Mr. Marillia has been with them, due to rain. He had said quite frankly that, as far as their participation in the festival goes, they would be less disappointed to have the float parade cancelled than their Saturday evening concert. Needless to say, this is exactly the opposite of the interest of those who build the floats. This decision lies on the shoulders of the mayor. Quoting the announcer at the Saturday evening FM event on 18 May,¹⁶ Monsieur Larcher, as “a good patriarch”, had taken the decision to cancel the concert, to his great regret and most especially to protect the musicians’ instruments from rain damage, a point that Monsieur Marillia had emphasised during the interview.

Another interesting issue was raised by Monsieur Marillia – the procession on Sunday morning to the mass at Saint Lubin Catholic church: what if, one day, the Queen were Muslim? Here, he made his only remark linked to class and, in its deliberate reiteration of an adverb, it seemed to me he attributed significance to it. He said, “You know, the town of Rambouillet is quite bourgeois, quite right-thinking and quite Catholic” (“La ville de Rambouillet est bien bourgeoise, bien-pensante et bien Catholique”). The translations of “bien-pensant” depend on the context and can range from logically-minded through conformist to narrow-minded or reactionary in English.

He mentioned that when the choice came for the members of the SMR about going into the church for mass, they generally voted 100% with their feet to have a nice, cool beer in the café on the route from the church to the garden where the aperitif is offered by the town hall to its citizens before Sunday lunch. They must watch the time carefully, as they are called to duty again quickly as soon as the mass lets out to accompany the royalty from the church to the garden, a matter of a few minutes’ downhill walk. Once in the garden, they play a couple of numbers and the hunting horn group does the same, although the latter are the ones many people rush to photograph, being a rather more exotic species for most onlookers. As for the final parade, when they head the line-up of musicians and other performers accompanying the float parade, they arrive at the end point exhausted and disband in relief immediately. He believes none of them wait to hear the decision about the prizes to be awarded to the floats. As far as he knows, there is no overlap whatsoever between the musicians – including their families and close friends – and the float-makers, and this highpoint for some appears to be an anti-climax for the Société Musicale troops.

During the entire proceedings and most especially the float parade, the feeling of rhythm can be pleasant or not, we might say. A recurrent complaint over the last three years from onlookers was that the float parade was much too stretched

¹⁶ Over the public address system at the “Rondeau” in the château park during the Saturday evening Fête du Muguet events on 18 May 2013.

out and that it got frankly boring. As Monsieur Marillia said, the Société Musicale in the lead have often looked back and seen the others were not following briskly, but they have no way of knowing why – it seems that three people from the town hall coordinate by radio with walkie-talkies. One year, there was a very visible reason for the delay – when the Queen's float proved too high to pass under the garlands overhanging the street and the town's technical services had to be given an emergency call to come to lift the offending banners up higher. Another reason is an important courtesy halt, in the years when the *corso fleuri* starts from the Groussay neighbourhood (rather than the Grenonvilliers spot as in 2013): the former route takes them past the retirement home and all the parade folk do a very full performance of their charms to please the residents there.¹⁷

Monsieur Marillia notes there has been a general feeling – difficult to register officially besides an impression of how crowded the sidewalks are – that attendance has declined noticeably in the last few years. When this trend appeared to have reversed towards “record crowds” in 2012, Monsieur Marillia said that the mayor was very heartened, as a suggestion had been bruited in the town hall about holding the FM every two years, as is the case of the Fête de la Saint Lubin. By the way, this was confirmed by Madame Le Nagard in her interview.

If devotion to the cause of the festival suffices to keep it going, no one could fault Mayor Larcher and Madame Crozier. They make a blitz visit to the float-builders to give them a pep talk on the Friday evening preceding the festival, as they did this year to the five association groups working together in the hangar of the local horse race course. Quick or not – just long enough for everyone to have a plastic cup of champagne with them – it seems to be deeply felt as encouragement to all of the float-makers. One of the groups, the Association Rémi, actually comes from the neighboring small town of Gazon. Founded as a support group for families suffering from severe mourning stress, they participated in the Rambouillet *muguet* festival for the third time in 2013 to reciprocate for the mayor's welcoming them to the larger town and providing them with a meeting place there. This is very clearly articulated by their president: “We want to keep up the spirit of the festival to bring pleasure to people, so that they have a good time.”¹⁸

During his speech at the champagne party held in the Roi de Rome public garden immediately after the Sunday morning mass in Saint Lubin church, Mayor Larcher spoke alone, in contrast to earlier years, when the Sub-Prefect and Madame Boutin often gave speeches. This appears to be part of an overall strategy to accelerate events and it most certainly had an effect on the garden champagne party and the float parade, neither of which were overly drawn out. In an interesting loop back to what Madame Boutin emphasised, Monsieur Larcher insisted on the importance of the surrounding forest in the town's image as a “living forest” and pointedly cited her. The mayor likewise repeated the

¹⁷ Madame Sidalina Marques, Interview 17 May and additional note 2 June 2013.

¹⁸ Interview with Dominique Chevalier, Président of the Association Rémi, 17 May 2013, in the Hippodrome de Rambouillet hangar.

leitmotifs of youth as represented by the Queen and Dauphines, the ephemerality of the flower, the tremendous commitment of the associations, and the general mobilisation of working hands, from the town police to the technical services, among many others.

Monsieur Larcher's group in the town hall goes under the umbrella title of "Rambouillet Ensemble" (Rambouillet Together). It is appropriate, in an unfinished enquiry involving this sequence of cautious to diplomatic to enthusiastic commentary about the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival and its workings, to have a word from the political opposition in the person of the Socialist representative for the group "Rambouillet Renouveau" (Rambouillet Renewal) on the town council, Monsieur Jean-Luc Trotignon, who has been an elected official since 2008.¹⁹ He certainly agrees that the Fête du Muguet is successful in bringing together all social partners, describing it as "original, authentic and traditional", and noting that many of his colleagues on the Left felt the entire event was something that should not be interfered with ("il faut pas toucher à ça").

His principal objection, expressed in 2008, was surprise over the way the election of the Queen was held, being entirely in the hands of the association members and their friends who attended the paid-entry January ball event, which he compared to censal suffrage in the era of Napoleon III, when only those high enough up on the tax rolls were entitled to a vote. This procedure has been modified in the meantime, with the inclusion of voting ballots for the general public provided by the local newspaper, and another of the opposition's suggestions has likewise been taken into practice: that each candidate should have not only their charms to offer, but a project of a cultural, social or historical nature, and the winner should receive support from the town hall for this project.²⁰ In a similar line of questioning to that of Monsieur Marillia, the President of the Société Musicale de Rambouillet, who proposed the question of what might happen, should a Muslim Queen one day be chosen, Monsieur Trotignon also wondered whether the Sunday mass with reserved places for the town hall officials was not somewhat disaligned with the principles of laicity of the Republic, as well as not taking into account the rise of other religious affiliations within the French demographic.

Monsieur Trotignon used the word "tradition" as often as all other persons interviewed and broke new ground (for me), adding twice the term "traditionaliste", once evoking "a rather traditionalist network", *réseau*, a word often used to designate persons interlinked in a web of obligations, reciprocal favours, gift exchanges and so forth.²¹ As regards the float parade, he felt the town hall quite

¹⁹ Interview in his group's office in the town hall, 31 May 2013.

²⁰ Both of these points expressed in the 31 May 2013 interview and in the "Tribune Libre" (Free Speech) section for the opposition on the last page of each Rambouillet Infos issue, in this case N° 197, July-August 2008, p. 25.

²¹ 31 May 2013 interview. NB "traditionnaliste" in French refers firstly to the doctrine according to which human beings cannot have knowledge but through revelation and Church tradition, and may apply to extremist religious doctrine advocating a return to Catholic traditions, see *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*, Paris, 1994 edition.

effectively supported the associations participating, but wondered if it would not be possible to envision floats without the very demanding lily-of-the-valley work, as that might encourage groups to participate who do not at present. (This has been done, at least in 2013, with the example of the Shopkeepers' Association, which had a float with the flower motif printed on plaques around the sides.)

The Lily-of-the-Valley Festival: 2013 Avatar and Perspectives

Now, for the dénouement. The 2013 Fête du Muguet over the weekend of 18-19 May came off as rather a mixed result: the highly popular funfair suffered noticeably from the rainy weather and the Saturday evening concert by the local band was cancelled. There is weather and also timing. The weekend before coincided with both the Thursday Ascension holiday and the last days of the two-week schools spring break, so that date would not have been favorable. This left the festival to compete with the Whit (Pentecost) Monday, likewise a popular long weekend. This cuts both ways – had the weather been good, it might have represented quite a profitable three- instead of two-day weekend for the funfair.²² Unfortunately, the Monday was drenched and many of the funfair folk had closed their stands and were leaving by four in the afternoon, whereas their official pack-up time was between eight and ten in the evening. As an aside (collateral political damage) in matters of scheduling of the *muguet* festival in Rambouillet, the choice of weekend it falls on can have an impact on other towns nearby, for example, the Fête de la Saint-Fort in Poigny-la-Forêt, only 8 km northwest of Rambouillet, where there is a fishing and a horseback obstacle-jumping contest in the forest, as well as a tombola. Town councilwoman Virginie Bourdon notes “between the weather and the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival, which is usually earlier, we weren’t helped out this year.”²³

For the Fête du Muguet in Rambouillet, the Saturday evening events programmed after the cancelled concert – the arrival and crowning of the Queen, then the “gift” of a fireworks display for her, clearly qualified as such by the mayor – came off as the weather improved to very fine night visibility, although the artificial pond water had risen to dangerous levels. The fireworks experts managed to handle this technicality effectively, as Monsieur Larcher mentioned in his extensive thanks to all involved during the Sunday noon champagne party in the Roi de Rome public garden. That also went off very well with full sunshine, and the float parade missed all but a few drops of rain at the very end, which discouraged no one. However, the general impression of people in the street, gleaned from a few remarks, was that attendance could not be compared with last year’s far better record. Observations overheard or stated were quite

²² Michel Blanchet, owner-operator of the Crazy Cars ride, interviews 18 and 20 May 2013.

²³ In the local weekly newspaper, *Les Nouvelles de Rambouillet et la Région*, mercredi 22 mai, 2013, N° 3413.

positive – that the overall timing was very good for the float parade, running a bit late, but pleasantly accelerated in comparison with the rather dragging pace of the two years before, and very merry. This is very approximate business, as such impressions are drawn only from spontaneous remarks during exchanges with people and whether the onlookers are thin or thick on the sidewalks.

The interview with the mayor (from 1983 on), Monsieur Gérard Larcher, is upcoming, but he is a well-known political figure in France, having been the President of the Senate, literally the first in line to take over, should anything untowards happen to the President, so there are ample references to him in the national press. “In order to understand him, you have to have attended the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival in Rambouillet. He’s an animator who has nothing to envy Jacques Martin for. He adores people, gives them his time, often at the expense of his wife and family. When he gives, he doesn’t calculate and knows no limits – like for his appetite! He’s also a man with convictions and the king of conflict management.”²⁴ The support he and other officials invest in the float-makers’ work may be translatable into a strategy peculiar to localities where a political figure has a long reign. Many – especially older – people refer to him as “our mayor” and it seems to reflect the construction of a sense of kinship, of a filiation, in which people are so attached that they have, so to speak, adopted him, and will adopt his dauphin.²⁵ The younger man, Jean-Frédéric Poisson, indeed appears to fit very well into this kinship with Madame Boutin and Monsieur Larcher, forming a triumvirate (etymologically, with all due respect to the lady), a reigning political family, a “system”, one might propose, of reproduction.

Monsieur Poisson was mayor of Rambouillet himself from 2004 to 2007, although Monsieur Larcher appeared beside him consistently in the picture accompanying the mayor’s editorial in the town magazine, *Rambouillet Infos*. He spoke about the continuity and future of the Fête du Muguet at length, stressing the link with the forest as part of the community’s perception of their identity, as well as of the how this has been mobilised more explicitly over the last fifteen years, noting that the Fête is a “tool of anchorage” and “serves the cause of social peace.”²⁶ When asked why the FM “works”, he replied that it was theatre (*spectacle*), and that there were not many such events, that it was theatre combined with social recognition and esteem, a collective work, as well as providing antidotes to the problems of the modern world, such as social isolation, an opportunity to take part in the common good, all of this within the context of the very essential activities of associations (*vie associative*) characteristic of the town. As for the question of whether it was overly quaint (*ringard*), he replied that, of course it

24 L’Express (monthly magazine) “Le système Larcher” by Jacques Trentesaux, citing Nicolas Fadel, head at that time of the emergency ward in the Rambouillet hospital. Jacques Martin was a popular radio and television journalist and show host. http://www.lexpress.fr/region/larcher-boutin-undr-ocirc-le-d-attelage_478347.html (page VII in print version, online version accessed 27 April 2013).

25 Very clearly stated in the words “notre maire”, uttered with great warmth, by Madame and Monsieur Régimbart in the 22 May 2013 interview.

26 Interviewed in his office in Rambouillet on 3 June 2013.

was, but that was not the issue: "it is not so much a question of being in its *time*, but of being in its *place* [my italics]."

What you have seen here is but a part of the very rich conversations with interviewees, but hopefully gives a hint at their thoughts and how what they say often overlaps, or at times seems to contradict, what others say. The entire question deserves more development, but it is time for a buzzword – full disclosure. What attracted me to the Fête du Muguet from the very beginning and still does most strongly is the immense – one might even say disproportional, were it not inaccurate – investment in the float work, which I have qualified elsewhere as a gift to the community.²⁷ Hence, the closing words here will be left to a former master float-maker, Monsieur Maurice Régimbart, who understands the work he used to do as part of a team and who refers often to a major actor in the transmission of tradition, the late Monsieur Christian Becq, mastermind of the twin-cities (Rambouillet and Kirchheim-unter-Teck in Germany) float group.²⁸ When the twin-cities float-makers stopped participating after 2006, Monsieur Becq put himself at the disposal of other float-builders to help them "find the tradition" and improve the quality of their work, most readily adopted by the Amis des Fêtes Association. It was, however, Monsieur Régimbart who expressed the motivation of his group of float-builders, a philosophy that is at once highly political and beyond politics: "We just want to do something".²⁹ What they do is *act* in their polis, in the life of the city, with their hands and minds, by constructing and giving a gift that is one thread in binding the community in a myriad of ways which are usually expressed simply as respecting "tradition" in reference to the Fête du Muguet. Over the years, this has involved working with the tension between innovation and tradition, a juggling act that relies on political, community and individual commitment, but – as regards the future of the Lily-of-the-Valley Festival – also on intangibles such as the weather and the tides of fashion in popular events.

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²⁷ GRIFFIN-KREMER 2009. 149-150.

²⁸ Interview with Madame Monique and Monsieur Maurice Régimbart, 22 May 2013.

²⁹ "On a envie de faire quelque chose", interview 22 May 2013.

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Fig. 1. Carnaval mask on Amis de la Fête float, Fête du Muguet 2013



Fig. 2. Poster and magazine cover 2013 Fête du Muguet / Creation Agence CaféNoir and Ville de Rambouillet



Fig. 3. Royals before the cortege to church



Fig. 4. From church to garden party



Fig. 5. L to R J-F Poisson, C. Boutin, G. Larcher sharing a laugh before garden party



Fig. 6. Central figure on Amis des Fêtes float, the “sexy” Harlequin