

# The Swiss Guard

by Lucy Gordan

A rare look inside the tradition and ceremony surrounding the smallest army in the world charged with protecting the Holy Father – at any cost

**E**very year on May 6 at 5:00 p.m. in the St. Damaso Courtyard of Vatican City's Apostolic Palace about thirty (thirty-two in 2003) new recruits, brandishing eight-foot halberds or pikes with a bear-shaped Swiss blade, are sworn into the one-hundred strong Swiss Guard. Founded by Pope Julius II on January 22, 1506, they are the oldest, smallest, and most photographed military corps in existence.

During the hour-long ceremony, one-by-one, each recruit, dressed in the frequently photographed red-yellow-and-blue striped uniform with bouffant sleeves, an armor breastplate and red-plumed helmet, promises in his mother-tongue – French, German, Italian, or Romansch, (Switzerland's four official languages) – to obey his officers and to protect the life of the pope at the risk of his own life "may God and his saints assist me!" Particularly important are the Guard's patron saints: St. Marin (November 11), St. Sebastian (January 20), and St. Niklaus von Flue, "Defensor Pacis et pater patriae" (September 25).

This year's ceremony included Dhani Bachmann, the first non-white Swiss Guard ever. Of Indian origin, he was adopted by a couple from Lucerne and is a Swiss citizen. Recruits must be Swiss citizens from birth, unmarried, between nineteen and thirty years of age, at least five-feet eleven-inches tall, of good character, Catholic, have completed preliminary training in the Swiss army,

and must sign a contract to serve a two-year tour of duty.

Before 1914, the Guard was only German-Swiss. Now its recruits come from all parts of Switzerland, but most still come from the German-speaking cantons of Unterwalden, Uri, Schwyz, and Lucerne especially. Serving in the Swiss Guard can also be a family tradition. Twenty-four Pfwyer von Altishofens have served as officers – nine of them as Commandant or Commander-in-Chief.

"About seventy-five percent do not re-enlist," said the present Commander, Elmar Theodor Maeder, formerly a lawyer and financial auditor who joined the Guard in 1998 as Vice-Commander, "but some of us make a career and stay on for as long as thirty years. The recruits' main problems are low pay (\$100 a week in cash), monotonous guard duty, tough army discipline, long hours (two days of ten-hour shifts followed by a third day free), and there's always duty on Sundays."

"Some of us join for religious reasons," said Jérôme Montani, a halberdier, age twenty-four, who joined last year and hopes to become a fireman. "Others, like me, join to 'find themselves' and have two years to decide on what to do with their lives. Still others join to come to Rome."

"We live in barracks and aren't even allowed to bring any women friends into the Vatican for social visits," said Tiziano Guarneri, a corporal who joined the Guard in June 1994 and last May married an Italian

kindergarten teacher. "We can't marry unless we've completed a minimum of three years of service, sign up for another three and one of their eleven apartments assigned to the Guard inside Vatican City vacates; officers, four in all, even unmarried ones like the Guard's chaplain, who, by the way is the only Guard to be chosen personally by the pope, have precedence. In our free time we must study Italian and special technical and commercial courses to prepare us for a future as civilians."

Forty-five Swiss Guards are on duty at all times. One of the first things the recruits must learn is how to handle the eight-foot halberd – part pike, part battle-axe – and how to sink gracefully on the right knee with it held perpendicularly in the right hand, in the motions of the papal salute. Although they brandish this halberd, the Guards also carry containers of a mace-type spray, concealed in their uniforms. Since the attempted assassination of the pope in 1981, they have studied karate and judo with a black-belt master.

Their job is guarding the state of Vatican City and they stand sentinel at the three main entrances to Vatican City: the gate to Nervi's Audience Hall, the Bell Arch, and St. Anne's Gate. In addition, they patrol the Apostolic Palace and

**RIGHT:** Swiss Guards at attention during the swearing-in ceremony on May 6, 2003.



The thirty-two new recruits and their officers meeting with the pope just before their swearing-in ceremony on May 6, 2003.

stand sentinel in the corridor just outside the papal apartments twenty-four hours a day. They also keep order at the pope's every public appearance: liturgical celebrations in St. Peter's, general audiences, and visits to the pope by ambassadors or heads of state. A number also accompany the pope to his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo and on all papal visits abroad.

The Guard's other duties include inspections, briefings, marches, and shooting practice (even though Pope Paul VI banished the use of firearms in 1970 except during emergencies), choir and band practice, and soccer matches with other Vatican City teams.

Contrary to what most guides tell tourists, their multi-colored, striped dress uniform was not designed by Michelangelo nor by Raphael. Actually worn for the first time in 1914, the apparel was designed by an unknown Swiss Guard. The puffy sleeves, however, go back to the

middle of the sixteenth century, and were quite possibly inspired by a Raphael painting. Before 1914, over the centuries, paintings and frescoes depict many changes in its style, whereas the everyday completely blue uniform has remained more or less the same.

The Swiss Guards narrowly escaped annihilation on the steps of St. Peter's during the Sack of Rome when, on May 6, 1527, a thousand German and Spanish soldiers under Emperor Karl V stormed the Vatican. Three-quarters of the 189 Swiss complement or 147 men including the commanding officer Kaspar Röist were killed; the invaders, on the other hand, lost more than 800 soldiers. The surviving forty-two Guards protected Pope Clement VII and thirteen of his cardinals as they fled along the Vatican ramparts into the impregnable Castel Sant'Angelo fortress.

After the 1527 slaughter, the Swiss Guards never again saw combat, but on several occasions the

Guards had to lay down their arms on papal orders, rather than face extermination. This was true when, during his invasion of Rome in 1809, Napoleon carried Pope Pius VII off to exile at Fontainebleau in France.

During World War II, Pope Pius XII made the Guards store away their firearms, so they patrolled the frontier between the State of Vatican City and Italy with only their halberds. Nazi Germany's Panzer tanks never once dared to cross the border.

Another true story that Swiss Guards like to tell about their corps is the one about the coronation of Clement XIII in 1758. On that occasion, some Swiss Guards turned away a Franciscan friar who did not seem to fit in with all the cardinals and dignitaries on hand. Eleven years later, after the same ex-friar had been crowned Pope Clement XIV, he said, "I enjoyed this coronation. This time the Swiss Guards let me in!"



Foto: Michael Stoyanowski



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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Recruits waiting in line at their cafeteria. New recruits being fitted at the tailor for their dress uniform. Dhani Bachmann, the first non-white Swiss Guard ever.

The honor of being a guard does not stop with the end of service. When no longer in service, they keep in close contact with each other through the "Ex-Guardsman Association" which publishes a regular bulletin, the "Exguardist." The members gather periodically for regional and federal meetings, attended, if possible, by the Commandant and the Chaplain. However, the most important reunion of ex-Guards takes place in the Vatican every May 6 for the "swearing-in" ceremony. GL

*Lucy Gordan is a regular contributor to Bookdealer, Renaissance, Epicurean Traveler, Food & Beverage International, and La Madia, an Italian food and travel monthly.*

For the complete story of the Swiss Guards, past and present, order Antonio Serrano's *The Swiss Guard of the Popes*, published by Verlaganstalt "Bayerland" in 1992 and illustrated with excellent photographs, from the Vatican's publishing house, Libreria editrice vaticana, Via della Tipografia 2, 00120 Vatican City, ISBN 3-89251-138-1. Price: €16 or order the splendid video, "Soldiers of the Pope, the Story of the Swiss Guard" by calling toll-free: 1-800-476-2492 or 610-584-3500; fax: 610-584-6643, e-mail: info@catholicvideo.com, www.catholicvideo.com. Price: \$19.95.