



**PROFILE:**  
**JOHANN WANNER: BASEL'S OWN**  
**FATHER CHRISTMAS**  
 BY ZAC STEGER

*N*estled along a charming lane in Basel's old town, the Johann Wanner Weihnachtshaus at Spalenberg 14 has been a tradition in Basel for over thirty years. Its owner, the affable Johann Wanner, is a connoisseur of holiday fashion and the city's very own "Father Christmas," a title he's proud of.

For the seventy-one-year-old Wanner, the Christmas season never really ends. Each year in autumn he releases around fifty new designs and, when everyone has long since packed up their decorations in January, he is getting started on new ideas for the next holiday season. Somewhere along the way he makes time for book projects and media inquiries. It is not uncommon to find him working sixty-hour weeks, often with his wife, Ursel. Retirement simply does not interest him.

There are three components of Johann Wanner's work; retail shop, services, and consulting. He has been a trendsetter in the world of holiday décor and is relied upon locally and globally for the very best decorations and style. It is no wonder that his clients have included the Clinton White House and a "who's who" of European nobility, including the Hohenzollerns, Grimaldis, and even Lady Diana. In 1998, he even dressed a tree for the Vatican with eight hundred ornaments in St. Peter's Square.

Of course, he has not always been a Christmas icon in Basel. Born the first of six children, he has performed as an ice skater, studied art, and traveled several years in Asia. By the 1960s, he had returned and opened a small antiques shop in Basel. At one point a man brought him a selection of mouth-blown Christmas bulbs from the famous Lauscha glassblowers in Thuringia. They quickly sold out and he increasingly sought out more mouth-blown, hand-painted decorations and molds, leading him to the few remaining glassblowing workshops in Bohemia, Poland, and East Germany. Eventually he went as far as China.

His travels into the Eastern Bloc required special permission and he had to pay for a license to transport the ornaments out of the GDR. In the process, he helped the traditional artists preserve their trade as a true cultural heritage. In Lauscha alone he was spending half a million marks annually at one point, which not only revitalized their glassblowing economy, but also ushered in a sort of Renaissance. This, he says, is one of his proudest achievements.

A majestic display of hand crafted ornaments fills his shop from floor to ceiling, with wreaths, trees, crafts, various fabrics, vintage postcards, gift wrap, and a few other random items thrown in for good measure. With quality, naturally comes a price, particularly in Switzerland, but, that does not stop customers from waiting in line each year for the latest fine quality tree ornaments to add to their collections.

Speaking outside the shop and posing for a few photos, Wanner smiled somewhat mischievously as he pointed above the shop window to text reading "Johann Wanner Weihnachtsbaumschmuckausstattungsspezialgeschäft." It is, he says, the longest word in the German language used to describe a store.

As we prepared to say our goodbyes, Wanner decided to graciously walk us around the corner to Schneidergasse 7 and put us in a tiny elevator up to his salon and café, open only for a few months during the holiday season to host private gatherings for businesses and individuals. A place for private gatherings did not seem like a big deal, but after getting to know him briefly at the shop, I had a hunch this might be worthwhile.

While the shop, with all its stunning display of ornaments and other works, was impressive, stepping out of the elevator was an all out Christmas extravaganza. Looking like a cross between a Parisian café and Santa's workshop, it is a magical affair determined to warm your bones and your soul. You would fully expect Mrs. Claus herself to come out with a pot of tea and cookies straight from the one hundred fifty-year-old oven in the kitchen.

There were tables with baskets overflowing with immaculate ornaments, trees trimmed with twinkling lights, and just about anything else you can think of in fashionable Christmas décor hanging from the rich red colored walls. Sorry, no battery operated singing St. Nicks shaking their jolly bottoms here. This is ultra-chic Switzerland, after all.

A collection of antique suitcases curiously lined the floor. Wanner put on a dapper white jacket and his eyes began to twinkle as he opened a small suitcase to reveal an early Mickey Mouse design inside. At that moment, under the watchful eye of a hanging angel, the mood of the room began to change.

Here under the shimmering light of chandeliers and tree lights it became clear that, despite what the price tags would have you believe, the most precious thing Johann Wanner sells is absolutely free; the pure joy of Christmas memory. And we were buying up as much as we could savor. **GL**

**TOP LEFT: A SMALL SELECTION OF THE MANY HAND CRAFTED BULBS.**  
**MIDDLE LEFT: A DAZZLING DISPLAY OF TREES AND DECORATIONS INSIDE WANNER'S SALON.**  
**BOTTOM LEFT: A SELECTION OF THE MANY HAND CRAFTED BULBS AT JOHANN WANNER.**  
**TOP RIGHT: WANNER'S ORNAMENTS ARE NOT ONLY COLLECTIBLES, BUT A SMALL PIECE OF HISTORY.**  
**MIDDLE RIGHT: TABLE FILLED WITH ORNAMENTS INCLUDING BIRDS, MUSHROOMS, AND EVEN THE STARS AND STRIPES.**  
**BOTTOM RIGHT: AN ALMOST OVERWHELMING DISPLAY OF HAND CRAFTED ORNAMENTS FILLS WANNER'S CHRISTMAS SALON AT SCHNEIDERGASSE.**  
**CENTER: WANNER SHOWS OFF AN ANTIQUE SUITCASE WITH A SPECIAL FRIEND INSIDE.**

Photos courtesy Zac Steger.