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How does Switzerland celebrate?

In the following articles, selected authors take a light-hearted look at the Swiss approach to celebrations and give an outsider's view of customs and traditions in a region of Switzerland they have come to know well.



Photo: Bildagentur Baumann AG

On St. Martin's Day
Sursee celebrates the
"Gansabhbauet".

The festive spirit is slow to awake

BY EROS COSTANTINI

"WHERE LAUGHTER and pleasure are forbidden, weeping is also banned," remarked Gottfried Keller on his many visits to folk festivals. The great Zurich writer was a dedicated and enthusiastic visitor to such events. As early as the Middle Ages Konrad of

Würzburg wrote of the pleasures and revelries in the country that was later to become a confederation.

Contrary to the prevailing image of our country, particularly in the eyes of visitors from abroad, this proves that traditions, customs and the festive spirit have been eagerly nurtured for centuries in German-speaking Switzerland. By quoting Gottfried Keller above, my aim was not to score any cultural points but rather to highlight the fact that it was through his works that I came to know the fantastical and colourful world of the Basle and Lucerne carnivals,

the spectacle of the Zurich "Sechseläuten", Berne's Onion Market, and other traditional folk festivals in German-speaking Switzerland.

Like any other country, Switzerland boasts its own customs and popular traditions. The nature and extent of the festivities depend on their historical origins – modest or spectacular, popular or aristocratic, religious or secular. They are the product of ethnological-historical processes whose origins in some cases date back to pre-Christian times. Yet one key aspect of festivals has remained unchanged to this day: they provide everyone

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lebrate?

with an opportunity to get together and let off steam. But what animates a festival? It appears in Switzerland at least that there is no universal, nationwide spirit of festivity and no common sense of humour.

Restrained merrymaking

In view of the fact that I have lived, worked and celebrated festivities in German-speaking Switzerland for over 20 years, I feel entitled to make some light-hearted observations on the festive customs of my Germanic compatriots. Naturally traditions vary in different parts of the region, for instance between Zurich and Basle or Uri and Berne. At first glance people behave in much the same way as at festivals the world over: they stroll, stop and chat, laugh, eat, drink, sing and dance – or, in the case of Basle's "Morgestraich", wait in silent anticipation of the coming event.

But these similarities are merely superficial. At his core the German-Swiss is ruled by a festive spirit peculiar to his breed: one



On the evening before New Year's Eve, "Trychler" march through the villages of Oberhasli.

that is slow to awaken and swing into action. Rarely is the atmosphere explosive or electric as in other regions and parts of the country. Weeks and months of loyally observing duties and obligations cannot be drowned from one second to the next in a glass of beer.

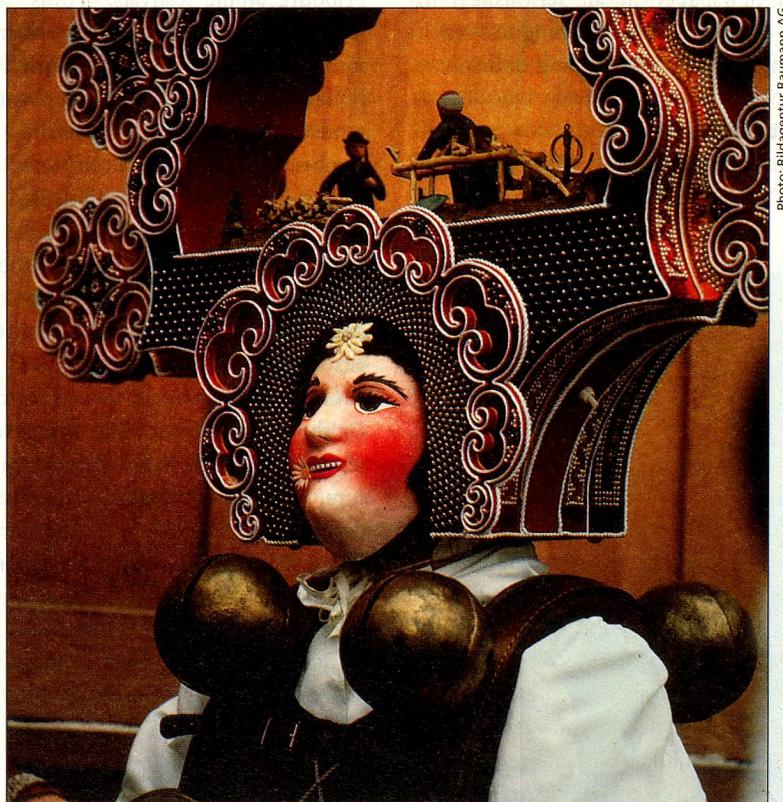
Alongside exercising the laughing muscles and providing an excuse to dance, a festival is intended to warm the soul. In the eyes of

Swiss in the Ticino, the merrymaking of the German-Swiss appears very controlled, as if carefully orchestrated by unseen conductors. One's first impression is that festivals and celebrations are also to be taken seriously, rather than surrendering to improvisation or spontaneity.

Meticulous planning

Frankly, I have experienced festivities in German-speaking Switzerland that were as precisely organised as a rocket launch at Cape Canaveral. Everyone punctually at his post. Military precision in planning. Disciplined, tactically co-ordinated teams, like the erstwhile Swiss national team under coach Rappan. Even at carnival time many of the participants need a certain period of preparation before they can exchange the mask they wear throughout the year with their carnival mask.

This is the first impression of someone who finds themselves at festival drinking benches alongside German-Swiss swaying with arms linked and singing in unison. At times one feels a complete outsider. Yet at other times one feels in complete harmony, as when visiting the alpine festivals and country fairs which for centuries have played a major role in the annual cycle of rustic traditions. Once things have heated up at such events, the mood can become liberated and euphoric. Discourse is general and simple. At such moments one risks crossing the boundary between languages and cultures – and the reward is well worth while.



The filigree headdress is the main characteristic of Appenzell's "Silvesterkläuse".