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HELVETIA

MAGAZINE OF THE SWISS SOCIETY OF NEW ZEALAND

FEBRUARY/MARCH 2020 YEAR 86

Highlights

- Switzerland's militia
- Staheli Story
- Luke
- Dead Plain Glacier

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Celebrating Chalandamarz

Ancient Graubünden Custom to Chase away Winter

March 1st is the day when children in the Engadin, the Albula-, Begaglia-, and Posciavo-Valleys, and the Oberhalbstein celebrate Chalandamarz - an ancient custom to chase away winter with much noise: shaking cowbells, chanting, rattling and whip cracking.

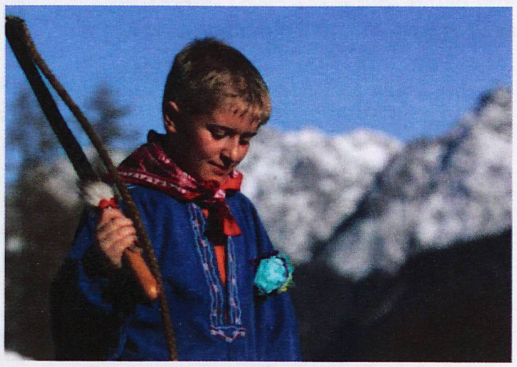
Chalandamarz is totally in the hands of school children - grown-ups are, at the most, allowed to help with preparations. Chalandamarz is Romanisch - the local language - meaning "the first day in the month of March". The custom differs from village to village.

The anticipation starts at the beginning of February, when the children begin to rehearse the ancient songs, practice their skills in whip cracking, organize their bells, prepare for the parties, and make the "Rösas" - fragile roses made of tissue paper to adorn the hats. Boys wear blue peasant blouses with pointed caps or hats adorned with "Rösas" (roses) and red scarves around their necks, held together by an empty matchbox.Girls wear heir beautiful Endgadin costumes and participate often as spectators only. The boys shake the bells, crack their whips and make their way around fountains, through the village lanes and wander from house to house.

Together, they sing typical Chalandamarz songs, conducted by an older child. The custom though that only boys are allowed in the parade, dissolves slowly and in more and more villages, girls join the boys in ringing the bells.

In Ftan, a small village in the lower Engadin, Chalandamarz resembles more a carnival, with masked boys chasing girls with dried pig bladders that look like small balloons.

Also, the songs are often different from village to village. The one song that everybody sings is called "Chalandamarz, chaland'avrigl laschai las vachas our d'uigl", composed for the Calvenspiel[1] by Otto Barblan and ends with the words: "If you give us something, God will bless you. And if you give us nothing, the wolf will eat you!"

That could almost be perceived as a warning. Throughout the day, children collect food and money from the spectators. The food is consumed at the subsequent party, and the money is spent on school trips. So, if one gives nothing the song predicts a bad end...

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