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Highlights

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

Inside

Words from President and Editor	2
Swiss Landscape Gardeners	3
Heidi: Swiss myth's road to fame	4-5
Switzerland's Militia	6-7
Momö Mosterei	8
Chalamandarz	9
Luke - Proud Young Swiss	9
Here to there - Staheli story	10-11
Dead Plain Glacier	12-13
Club News	14-18
Obituary	19
List of Officers	19
Photo Gallery	20

Celebrating Chalandamarz

Ancient Graubünden Custom to Chase away Winter

March 1st is the day when children in the Engadin, the Albula-, Begaglia-, and Poschiavo-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 their beautiful Engadin 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' 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... *continued on Page 9*



Chalamandarz Continued from frontpage



Attempts have been made to connect the origins of Chalamandarz to the Romans. A correlation between the term "Chalanda" and "calendae" is presumed (the Roman term for the first day in the month). March was the first month of the ancient Roman year until approximately 153 BC. Written sources though trace Chalamandarz as a continuing festival only back to the early 19th century.

Whatever the case, Chalamandarz has been celebrated since then to expel the evil spirits of winter. At some point, the village council was sworn in on that day too, which is still observed in Ardez and Sent.

Thanks to the book "Schellenursli", Chalamandarz is known far beyond the national border. In the story - written by Selina Chönz and illustrated by Alois Carigiet - the small boy Ursli is teased by his classmates, because he only wears a small bell. He goes on a search for a large cow bell, and when he does not return by nightfall, parents and the residents of Guarda look in vain for him. He returns in the morning with the biggest bell of them all and now he is allowed to lead the parade.

Even though segments of Chalamandarz are the same throughout the valleys, the festival is celebrated quite differently in each village.

Guarda: The original "Schellenursli village" celebrates on two days. Only boys can participate in the bell-shaking parade from fountain to fountain throughout the village. On March 1st,

boys and girls visit the houses of Guarda and surrounding hamlets;

Zuoz and Madulain: In addition to the bell-shaking, boys also crack their whip. The event starts two days before March 1st. Older boys start wandering from house to house at 4am and call the younger boys (wearing smaller bells) to join the parade. The large parade starts at 7am March 1st and the event ends at the village square with whip cracking;

Sent: Last day in February. Standing next to a snowman on a pedestal, the outgoing Mayor holds his "s-chüsa" - a speech where he apologises for his follies, and the new mayor holds his opening speech, whereupon the children behead the snowman. The parade leads through all neighbouring hamlets. The girls are fully integrated in the whole occasion. The students' choir is conducted alternatively by the oldest girl and the oldest boy. The youngest children are dressed as gnomes;

Castasegna (Val Bregaglia): The two oldest boys lead the parade with flags. Noise instruments include also goat horn and drum. The Shepherd and a young calf follow behind a cart with the butter churn. Girls are fully integrated into the parade. Lunch with chestnut and whipped cream. Theater in the evening;

Poschiavo (Val Poschiavo): Traditional parade through the village and over the fields "to call the grass" (chiamano l'erba) and wake up nature. Burning of a snowman made of wood and straw, as a symbol for "burning winter away."

www.swissvistas.com/chalamandarz.html



Proud Young Swiss Man



Mangorei School Pet Day

This year the miniature scene theme was World Culture- so I did Switzerland of course. My main features were the Alphorn, Swiss cheese, Cheese fondue, Swiss Army Knife, Toblerone, Bern Bear and the Swiss Alps.

I think my Swiss Army knife creation looks real. I used two nail files and painted them red and made the cutting blades from silver card. I also learnt researching that 15 million Swiss Army knives are made every year. WOW!

Toblerone is my favourite chocolate- it must be because I'm Swiss

I love listening to the Alphorn. I recall the last time I heard it was at a funeral. The sound it makes and music it creates is wonderful.

I am very proud to be Swiss and I enjoyed learning more about the magical things of Switzerland

Luke Pennington (10 years old)

