



Silvesterchläuse from Urnäsch (Switzerland) – Where the new year begins twice

Here, New Year's Eve is celebrated in a special way, and twice at that. On the "new" date, December 31, and on the "old" date on January 13. The tradition of Silvesterchlausen (bellringing and "zaure") on December 31 is practiced in many villages in the region but mainly in Urnäsch do they celebrate it again on January 13. The date goes back to a dispute at the end of the 16th century when the Protestants of Ausserrhoden refused to recognize Pope Gregory's new calendar. For many local people, the former New Year's Eve, according to the Julian calendar January 13th, is still the most important day in the year. A magical feeling floats through the air, especially if the countryside is still covered by snow. The whole valley resounds to the primeval rhythm of the bells and the men's voices.

"Rolle, Schelle, Zaure"; the myth of the "Silvesterchläuse"

The name "Rolle" comes from the round bells which are an important part of the "Chlaus" outfit. The name "Schelli" comes from the large cow bells the "Chläuse" wear on their chest and backs attached to straps across both shoulders. "Zaure" or "Zäuerle" is a wordless, almost sacral sounding yodel which is typical of the canton of Appenzell.

"Rolle, Schelle, Zaure"

From early morning to way past midnight the "Chläuse" wander around, ringing their special bells. They stop mainly at isolated farmhouses and in places where they know they will be welcomed with joy. When they arrive, they stand in a circle and ring their bells in a special ritual. Once greeted by the inhabitants, the "Chläuse" begin singing a "Zäuerli". Mostly, the "Chläuse" receive money and a drink, usually "Glühwein". In the evening the "Chläuse" visit the restaurants in the village, all packed with local people and tourists who come from far and wide to enjoy this unique experience.

A "Schuppel" and their "Groscht"

The "Chläuse" walk and perform in groups of six (occasionally up to twelve) men. The leader is the "Vorrolli" who wears a special yoke made of leather to support the 13 round bells which are fixed to it. He is followed by the "Schelli" and the last one, who is called a "Nachrolli". Although the "Rolli" are dressed as women, only men can take part, as being a "Chlaus" is physically very hard work! The complete outfit (including thick clothes, bells, and hat) often weighs more than 65 pounds. In a day, a group walks easily up to six miles in these heavy outfits. A "Silvesterchlaus" not

only needs to be very fit but also has to have a good voice. The harmonious sound of the songs is very important. It is good to see with how much enthusiasm young people take part in this tradition. They often come from farming families or families who have practiced this custom for generations and have these special sounds and rituals in their blood.

The various "Chläuse"

The "Schöne" (the "Beautiful")

"Chläuse" wear colorful velvet clothes. The "Rollis" wear dresses, a lacy apron, white gloves, and a smiling woman's mask. The "Schellenchläuse" carry big cow bells, one on their chests and one on their backs. The spectacular headdresses worn by "Rolli" and the square hats of the "Schellenchläuse", decorated with thousands of colored glass beads, are well-known. They represent miniaturized scenes from country life: A farmer at work, going up to the alps in summer, different trades, or customs. The wooden figurines are carefully carved and painted.

The "Schö-Wüeschte" (the "Beautiful-Ugly")

They find the material for their outfits in nature. Pine branches, holly, silver thistles, moss, etc. Their capes are created with care and decorated with pinecones, acorns, and bark. Their headdresses are decorated with country scenes.

The "Wüeschte" (the "Ugly")

They embody the demonic and primeval. With their wild masks made of animal teeth, horns, and bones, they look frightening. Their capes are shaggy--covered thickly with hay, straw, holly, pine branches, dead leaves, or other natural materials. They remind us of a long-gone time when people tried to scare away demons by wearing fearsome outfits and making terrible noises.

Origins unknown

The exact origin of the "Silvesterchläuse" is unknown. For many years different groups wanted to forbid the custom because it had taken on wild-chaotic forms. But now "Chlausen" has become a valued cultural asset which fascinates people far and wide. This interest has inspired the publication of various books and films on the subject.