



## Sechs-ism: Beyond the Böögg

*For the first and only women's guild in Zurich, the quest to march in the Sechselaeuten parade hasn't exactly been a walk in the park. The Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster's 21-year struggle for equal rights demonstrates the ongoing battle between tradition and modernity in both public and private Swiss life.*

By Chantal Panozzo | As children, Beat Messerer and Karin Kramer\* had one thing in common: they marched in Zurich's Sechselaeuten parade. But while Messerer has continued to participate for decades, for Kramer, at 16 years old, it was all over.

While Zurich's spring festival, Sechselaeuten, is a public holiday in Zurich, the event is privately organized and run by Zurich's 26 social clubs known as the guilds, of which there are 3,500 members ... all male. And while guild members allow their children and grandchildren of both sexes to join them in the parade, women are still not allowed to take part.

In 1989, Catherine Ziegler decided to try and do something about this situation. Along with a few other women, she

founded Zurich's first ever women's guild – the Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster – and became its first president, a position she held for 12 years. The mission of the organization was to integrate its women into the Sechselaeuten parade and also to honor the history of the women of Zurich – in particular, the women of the Benedictine convent, founded in 853 AD on the site of the Fraumünster church.

## First steps

Slowly, after an initial outcry from both men and the media, the Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster started making progress towards their goals. In 1999, 10 years after forming their organization, the men's guilds granted them the right to march 30 minutes ahead of the official Sechselaeuten parade. A few years later, that amount fell to 15 minutes.

Today, despite 21 years of struggle, the women still haven't been integrated in the Sechselaeuten parade and their organization is still not officially recognized by the men's guilds as, well, a guild.

According to Beat Messerer, a member of the Schmidenzunft (the goldsmith guild) since 1979, integrating the women is not easy. "The guilds represent an old tradition, a social club with only men as members. In Zurich this tradition is cultivated in an especially active way."

## History lessons

Guilds in Zurich, like the Schmidenzunft, originally represented trades and have been around since 1336. Back then, the guilds had political power, however this power was lost in 1798 and now the guilds are societies with the goal of maintaining and celebrating tradition and heritage.

“Twenty years ago, we didn’t see the necessity for women having their own guild,” says Messerer. In fact, it wasn’t until the women stopped fighting for equal rights and started pointing to facts from the Middle Ages that the men started listening.

“It was not common sense then, that in the Middle Ages, some women (like the abbesses of the Fraumünster) were important and had power in political and economic life. Once the Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster members took emancipation out of their thinking and focused on tradition, our acceptance towards them began to grow and we started looking at them differently,” Messerer says.

So instead of focusing on equal rights, the women’s guild now concentrates on making the history of the Fraumünster women better known, so that people realize women in Zurich played an important role in its history. Each year, on the morning of Sechselaeuten, the members parade to the home or workplace of a chosen historical woman to pay tribute. They then hang a plaque and sell pamphlets about the woman.

“We’ve stopped fighting so much [for equal rights in the parade]. There’s no point anymore. That time is past. The men are up on a hill and they must come down to us. We’re just waiting now,” says current Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster president Regula Zweifel.

### **Thawing relations**

The women’s new strategy seems to be working. Over time, their relationship with the men’s guilds has improved. “Today the guilds are more open and we are treated with more respect. Because they have seen that we are patient,” says Ziegler.

The women started organizing a medieval market – held in Zurich every three to four years – where they present how goods and food were made a couple of centuries ago. The men in Messerer’s Schmidenzunft now volunteer to help during the event. “The women have focused on local tradition and we appreciate that,” he says.

Some of the men’s guilds now also invite members of the Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster to attend their functions. But according to Zweifel, while they’re invited, they are still not recognized as equals. “I attended a concert at a guild last night and the men knew I was there. They invited me. But I got no public introduction [like] the other heads of the men’s guilds received.”

To be an official guild in the definition set forth by the men, the Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster must be accepted by the ZZZ (Zentralkomitee der Zünfte Zürichs), which is like the parliament of the guilds. But even after 21 years, the women haven’t attempted to ask for their guild to be voted as “official” by the parliament. And according to Messerer, because of the long history of the guilds and their intense and proven relationship with the city of Zurich, to ask would be “too early and too much for now”.

### **Evolution not revolution**

Last year, at their Sechselaeuten tent, set up near the Zurich Opera House, the Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster members handed out programs with an image of the traditional Böögg sitting alongside his female counterpart. But even though men passing by accepted wine from the women’s tent, some still refused to take the group’s program.

“I’m no psychologist, but somewhere one has the feeling that men feel like we’re taking something away from them. But we don’t want to turn their tradition inside out. We just want to add to it,” says Zeigler.

According to Ziegler, the Sechselaeuten festival needs a face-lift and her organization could help. “There are a lot of young people that don’t come to the Sechselaeuten parade because they think, ‘Oh, God, men in tights going through the street.’ These [young] people prefer Street Parade. And Swiss TV communicates that too.”

While the guilds are not political organizations, politicians from Zurich and other cantons are invited by the women’s guild and the men’s guilds to various events during the Sechselaeuten holiday. And according to Ziegler, their organization has many political supporters. But despite this, the city cannot enforce equal rights for women during the event, even though Zurich invests a lot of money in police, barricades and crowd control. “The point is not public rights, we have those. But the guilds are private and decide for themselves what they want and they don’t want.”

Zweifel agrees. The problem is not being “equal before the law, but equal in life. At this point, the Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster not being allowed in the parade is a men’s problem. Not a women’s problem.”

### **Winds of change**

The men are slowly starting to accept the women. Every year, the men’s guilds invite guests to join them in the parade. Often these guests are family members, politicians, or leaders from other

organizations. But on January 21, the men decided that the Gesellschaft zu Fraumünster would be their guests for the 2011 parade. So next year, for the first time in its history, the women will march in the parade alongside the men – not as equals, but as guests.

Still, Frau Ziegler smiles. “It is coming now. We no longer stand behind the barricades.”

“But this is just for 2011, reminds Messerer. “Past that, we don’t know.”

*\*Name has been changed out of request for anonymity.*

### **Sidebar: The history of Sechselaeuten**

Zurich’s spring festival, Sechselaeuten, was originally celebrated in guildhalls across the city during medieval times because it was the first day of summer working hours.

Literally meaning “the six o’clock ringing of the bells”, Sechselaeuten marked a joyful occasion because during the summer, at six o’clock, the working day was officially over and people still had daylight hours to enjoy some leisure time. While the holiday was originally held on the first Monday following the vernal equinox, today it is held on the third Monday of April.

Following the guild parade, a snowman called the Böögg is burned and the quicker his head explodes, the better the summer weather is said to be. The event has been held in its current form since 1867.