

Commentary : the chemical disaster near Basle : a town awakes

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From America to East Asia

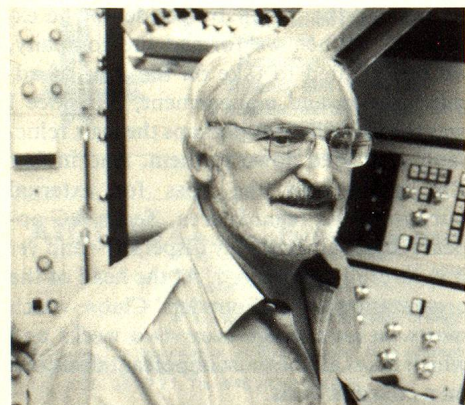
As long ago as 1982, Heinz Abplanalp opened a branch in North Carolina. The beginning of 1986 saw the launch of Tecan Asia Ltd. in Singapore, a bridgehead to markets in China and Japan. Today, Tecan exports as much as 90% of its production. Yet the founders of the firm want to go even further, and intend soon to place their shares on the bourse.

One or other member of the Tecan outfit is not loth at times to let fall an aside or two as to his political opinions: «'Green'»? «Yes, if you exclude all the pejorative connotations of the term», says Heini Maurer, «we would like to be able to prove that ecology can co-exist with responsibility and high technology». Against nuclear power?... Certainly. «For me, it is very important that our products remain compatible with my convictions».

Alain Jeannet (shortened article from «L'hebdo» newspaper)

Lowest strike rate

Even in the long term, Switzerland has proved to be the industrial country with the smallest strike frequency. Over here, on average, only 1.7 working days a year were lost per thousand persons employed from 1970 to 1985. «Top performer» in this respect is still Italy which in the same period had to record around 1,300 lost working days annually.



Nobel prize award

Switzerland again has a Nobel prize winner – for the first time for five years. Together with two German researchers, Heinrich Rohrer, a 53-year-old physicist hailing from Buchs (SG), has been honoured with the Nobel prize in physics for the joint development of the scanning microscope.

Commentary: the chemical disaster near Basle

A town awakes



Schweizerhalle. A suburb of Basle. Wide tracts with rows of factory building after factory building, hall after hall. Concrete, glass and metal constructions filled with drums and containers. Chimney-stacks, too, towering into the sky. The Basle chemical industry has transferred part of its production plant and warehousing facilities to Schweizerhalle. But this is no place to stay in: whoever gets off the bus here, must work here. Ever since November 1st, 1986, Schweizerhalle has no longer been a suburb like any other. Nor is Basle any longer just one of the many towns on the Rhine. And Sandoz is no longer simply one of many multinational chemicals producers. On the 1st of November, 1986, Schweizerhalle was an inferno: 1,200 tonnes of

toxic agricultural chemicals caught fire in a storehouse of Sandoz AG, Basle's third largest chemical concern. A part of the chemicals wafted in a poison gas cloud towards Basle; another highly-concentrated part was washed into the Rhine with the water from the fire hoses. That is how it happened; and what happened has as yet unforeseeable consequences.

The experience has become deeply engraved upon the memory. On this early Saturday morning the Basle region awakes between three and six a.m. – is awakened, rather, by the wail of sirens and by a penetrating, acrid smell which permeates the bedrooms. Up from the streets below booms the order from police loudspeaker vans to shut all windows, to stay indoors. Basle and its conglomeration lies there almost as if fossilized; even the trains no longer run into the disaster area.

These nighttime hours of endurance inside the shuttered houses; this waiting in the uncertainty as to whether the poison gas cloud threatens human life; this dawn as the Rhine turns red from the chemicals sluiced in by the firemen's hoses, when the fish – later to be dredged out in tons – float dead on the water's surface; these hours throw the region into deep shock – which still persists.

In the week after November 1st it seems that hardly a day goes by without more bad news of chemical accidents. «Schweizerhalle», the name given to the Sandoz chemical fire by most people, marks «only» a beginning. Now other chemical concerns report spillages and leakages from their operations: discharge of fumes containing phenol into the air, amylene that has leaked from a burst pipe, atrazine seeping into the groundwater. Since Schweizerhalle, people who live there at least know what they are having to smell – down to the last chemical detail. And each time there is of course no danger to human life or nature, or so it is said. But it was also said about Schweizerhalle and that turned out to be wrong.

In one night, a protecting cloak seemed to have been torn from the region. A harsh limelight now glitters on this north-western tongue of Switzerland, always previously looked upon as a dormant province. Basle is being lumped together with Bophal, Chernobyl, Seveso. German and French politicians hand out notes. Swiss Environment Minister Egli apologizes on behalf of the Basle chemical region to the Rhine states down as far as Rotterdam.

Below the surface of this town and its suburbs lying at the northern foot of the Jura mountains there has been a rupture that as yet hardly bears a name. We have survived it all, but confidence is shattered – the confidence, for example, between the city and the so-called self-responsibility of the chemical industries, one of the pillars of Swiss environmental protection. Our relations with the neighbouring countries, too, have been adversely affected, and the reputation of Switzerland as an environment-protection-conscious land has been stained. In the words of Alphons Egli to the national parliament: «The fruit of years of hard, dogged work has disappeared in the course of a single night». In retrospect, the slogan Sandoz gave to its centenary celebrations last summer sounds like a mockery: «100 Years for a Life with Future». Future? This question, this breach of confidence, pervades all spheres of life of the Basle region, for Basle and the chemicals industry are inseparably linked together.

The sense of helplessness breaks through in graffiti, in pamphlets, in the effigy of a fisherman. In a «Requiem for the Rhine», one of many artistically-organized Schweizerhalle demonstrations, black-garbed music students, playing their instruments, walk in procession over one of the proud bridges, over the beloved river of this town. The river flows on. The death of the fish and eel stocks is no longer so evident. But the ecological balance of the Rhine has been destroyed. Only micro-organisms have survived.

Erika Brugger, Basle