

**Zeitschrift:** Jahresbericht / Akademischer Alpen-Club Zürich  
**Herausgeber:** Akademischer Alpen-Club Zürich  
**Band:** 128-129 (2023-2024)

**Rubrik:** Club-Geschichten

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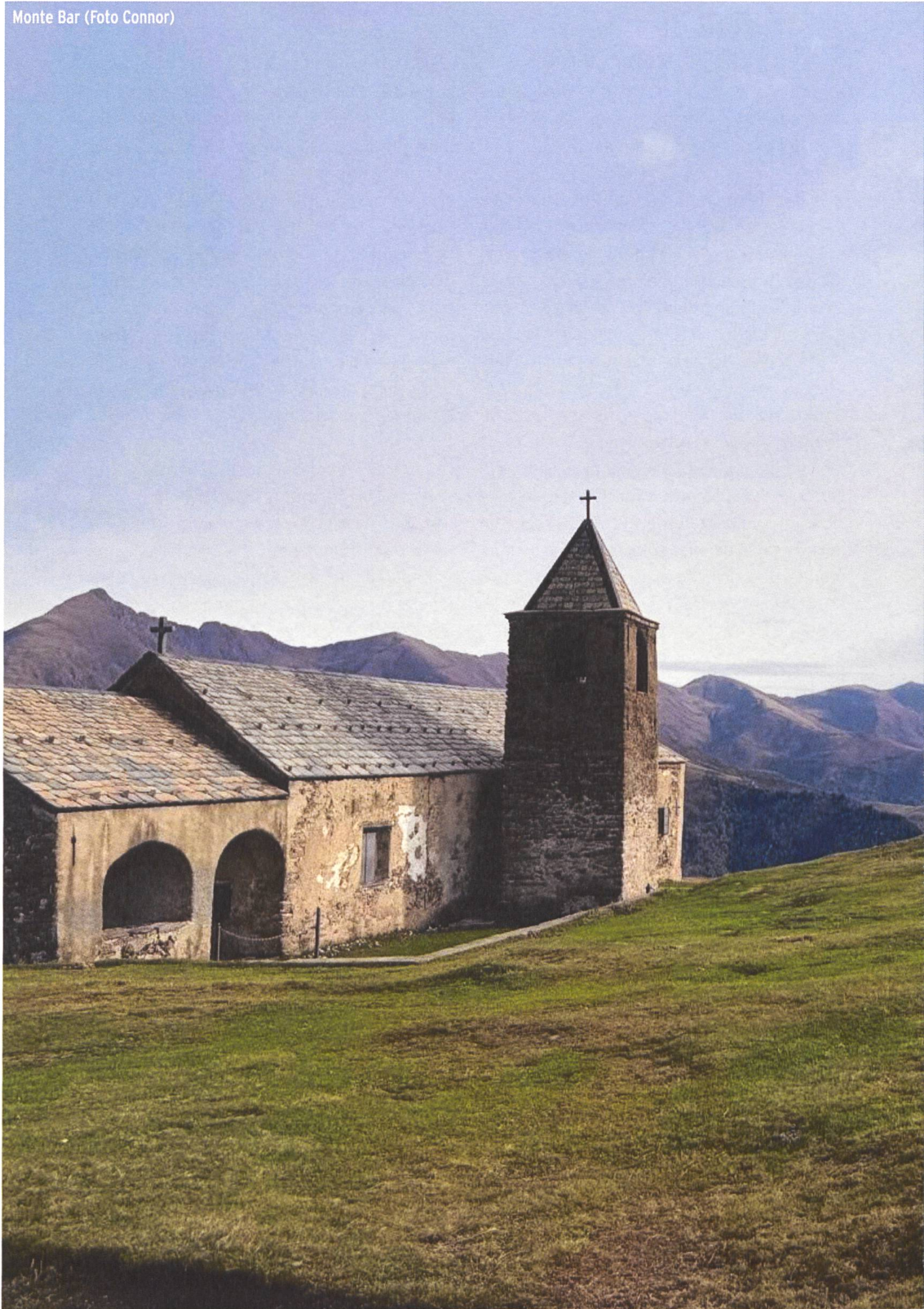
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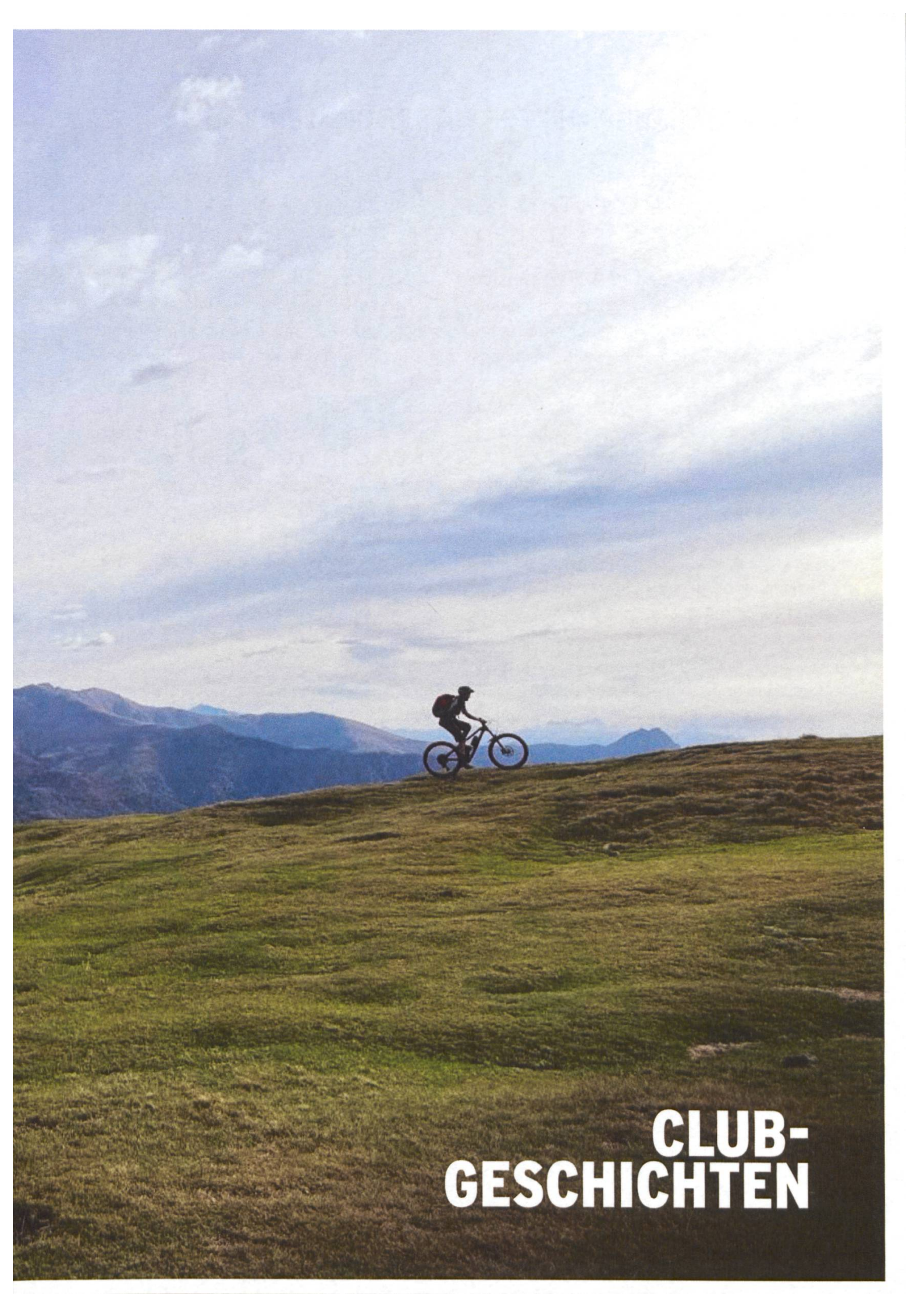
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**CLUB-  
GESCHICHTEN**

# CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE FUTURE OF ALPINISM

Climate change is leading to drastic changes all over the world. In the Alps, the air temperature has increased at a rate that is twice faster than the global average (+2 °C vs +1 °C since 1900). In Switzerland, this increase of temperature has various significant impacts on glacier coverage, snow cover distribution, water resources, natural hazards, economics (such as energy production from dams), and tourism in the mountains.

Since 1931, Swiss glaciers have lost half of their volume. In 2022 only, the volume of ice lost in Switzerland represented 6% of the total ice volume. This is the highest value since the beginning of glacier monitoring in the Alps. The future of glaciers strongly depends on the scenario of CO2 emissions. For a utopic scenario in which CO2 emissions completely stop tomorrow, half of the glacier volume will remain at the end of the 21st century. In other terms: half of the glacier volume is already lost due to the climate change of the past decades. In a scenario which we could characterize as "business as usual", i.e. without efficient governmental strategies to reduce CO2 emissions, almost all the glaciers in the Alps will be gone at the end of the century, and only ice patches above 4000m will subsist.

The changes in precipitations are less understood than the changes in temperature. Recent studies however indicate that a decrease in snow at low elevations (below 2500m) can be expected but more rain,

thus a shortening of the winter season, and an increase in snow quantities in high mountain regions (due to a general increase of precipitation).

The permafrost in the mountains is also strongly affected by the rise of temperature. The permafrost acts as cement in the alpine rock walls. The melting of the permafrost (and thus its degradation) at increasing depth triggers rockfalls in mountain areas. This increasing risk must be considered when choosing alpine climbing routes late in summer, especially after a series of heatwaves. Moreover, the summer heat penetrates the permafrost with a lag in time; hence rockfalls can be triggered later in autumn, although the air temperature has already decreased.

The character of alpinism as we have inherited it is now changing, as it had already changed throughout the last century as a result of gear revolution and athletic performances. Climbers will have to abandon routes that are becoming too dangerous, discover new climbing opportunities, and adapt to new time constraints. For example, some routes will have to be climbed in winter and no longer in summer, or climbed faster, in order to keep a decent safety margin. After all, that is what alpinism is about: the art of creation and adaptation, and that is what climbers have been doing since the very beginning: they climb obstacles and tackle new challenges.

*Christophe Ogier*

## A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CLIMATE IMPACT OF THE AACZ

Starting in 2022/23, a small working group of AACZ members and candidates including Alicia Köster, Carl von Holly, Max Poletto, Rachel Kunstmann, and others, started to look into the climate impact of AACZ activities with the goal of decreasing the environmental footprint of the club. In autumn 2022, the group sent a climate survey to AACZ club members to gauge support for different kinds of emissions-reduction interventions, from encouraging vegetarian meals at club activities to using human power to transport materials to Windgällenhütte. The survey received 42 responses, of which 70% were from club members and 30% from candidates. Based on the results, the group decided to focus on transportation and meals at club events and at the club's huts. For both themes, we created detailed reference documents ("Low-carbon diet for the AACZ" and "Low-carbon transportation for the AACZ") with analyses and recommendations.

Improving the efficiency of transportation to and from club activities is an important step. Even by conservative estimates, public transit (and, under certain assumptions, all-electric cars), have 4-20x lower emissions per person than cars with combustion engines, even with car-pooling. Over the course of a year, a club member who uses public transport may save the equivalent of ~5% of the annual emissions of an average Swiss person: a significant amount for a single lifestyle change. As a result, the group recommended that official local club activities be reachable by public transit. Human-powered approaches to the mountains (e.g., by bicycle) are also a

good alternative. For infrequent long-distance expeditions, we recommended using high-quality offsets to offset a multiple (2-3x) of estimated emissions.

Dietary choices are also an important factor in climate impact. Food production accounts for a quarter of all human greenhouse gas emissions. Switching to a vegetarian diet, or simply one that avoids red meat and is light on dairy, can cut an individual's food-related emissions by half. (Hut resupply by helicopter has negligible per-kilogram emissions relative to those of meat production.) Vegetarian diets are seeing increasing adoption in mountain huts in the Alps and in clubs such as the DAV and SAC. We therefore recommended that club events such as the annual ski weekend provide vegetarian meals by default, with meat available as an option. The same recommendation was made for the reservation system of the AACZ huts. AACZ hut wardens already largely avoid beef and lamb and pay considerable attention to climate issues: using detailed emissions models, we estimated per-guest per-night emissions to be 3.2 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e for Windgällenhütte and 5.5 kg CO<sub>2</sub>e for Mischabelhütte, quite low relative to comparable huts.

Climate change is a complex problem that cannot be solved by single individuals or mountaineering clubs, but we hope that these measures will reduce the AACZ's impact and better align our actions with the spirit of preserving the mountain environment.

*Max Poletto*



## VICTOR DE BEAUCLAIR'S LAST CLIMB

*Book review: AACZ member Emil Zopfi's new documentary novel recreates a tragic story from the Belle Époque of climbing and ballooning.*

But were they really a pair? Visitors who step into Zermatt's churchyard see them at once – the twin headstones leaning tenderly towards each other, one for Irmgard Schiess (b.1903) and the other for Victor de Beauclair (b. 1874). Both died on 15 August 1929, "am Matterhorn". Noting the age gap of almost three decades between these ill-fated rope partners, most visitors just sigh, shake their heads and move on – leaving the question unanswered.

But not our Emil Zopfi, who is best described as the doyen of the AACZ's arctic/mountain literature cadre. Taking as his challenge the almost complete lack of accessible public information about the couple – just try Googling them – he has recreated their lives and times in a documentary novel, *Victors letzte Fahrt* (Victor's last climb). Along the way, he sheds plentiful light on the origins of ski-mountaineering, high-altitude balloon flying, and guideless climbing as pioneered by the AACZ.

Despite the French-sounding surname, Victor de Beauclair was born in Cantagalo, Brazil, where his father, an expatriate German doctor, had a practice. The family returned to Germany in 1878, settling in Freiburg im Breisgau, not far from the Swiss border. Emil suggests that this early deracination left de Beauclair somehow adrift – he never gave up his Brazilian passport, never married and never stayed long at any address.

In 1892, de Beauclair started his first year at Zurich University. His medical studies did not prosper, then or later. A glance at his alpinistic record suggests why. By 1896, de Beauclair had started to build up an impressive list of both summer and winter ascents. This was the year when he made the first ever ski ascent of a Swiss three-thousander, the Oberalpstock, with Wilhelm Paulcke, Peter Steinweg and Erwin Baur.

Another notable first was the first ski traverse of the Bernese Oberland's central glaciers, undertaken over four days in January 1897 with Paulcke and three more companions. Again, Paulcke was the moving spirit, having pioneered ski-mountaineering in the mountains around Freiburg. The geologist even designed his own improved ski binding for the Oberland tour – one of the book's revelations is that modern alpine ski-touring was effectively invented in the Black Forest.

As a member of this Freiburg-based group, de Beauclair soon became an acknowledged expert and evangelist ("Wanderprediger") for ski-mountaineering. In 1899, he was elected into the AACZ.

Two years later, de Beauclair helped to found the Skiclub Zürichs, serving as its first president – later he co-founded the Schweizer Skiverband, a national federation, too. And in 1902, in a neat twist on the guideless theme, he ran the first ski course for the Bergführer of Zermatt.

Pioneering a new mountain sport came with the inevitable nemesis. In January 1899, during a ski-tour on the Susten Pass, an

avalanche overwhelmed Gustav Mönrichs and Reinhold Ehlert, two of de Beauclair's companions on the Oberland traverse. De Beauclair spent several days that winter searching for them, but the bodies appeared only when the snow melted in June.

Yet it may have been a summer accident that more decisively changed the trajectory of de Beauclair's career. In 1907, an afternoon storm trapped three prominent AACZ members near the Matterhorn's summit, one of them dying during the forced overnight bivouac. Zopfi suggests that the accident helped to hasten de Beauclair's drift away from the club's orbit.

In any case, he'd already made his final breach with Zurich University – without qualifying as a doctor – and he'd taken up a new form of high-altitude pioneering. In fact, de Beauclair's first flight with his new gas-filled balloon "Cognac" had taken place as early as August 1906. A companion on two of these early flights was Heinrich Spoerry, the AACZ member who would perish on the Matterhorn the following summer.

In 1908, "Cognac" lifted off from the meadows beside the Eiger rack-railway's Eigergletscher station and landed the following day at Gignese in Italy. Depending on how one defines the term, this was the first transalpine flight by any kind of aircraft. Alas, the following year, the balloon was lost at sea after another transalpine flight, when de Beauclair had to ditch it in the Gulf of Genoa. This reverse didn't stop him from co-founding a Zurich-based club that is still flying gas balloons more than a century later.

He kept climbing too. In 1911, he made a first ascent on the west face of the Mönch, one of the Bernese Oberland's four-thousanders, in the company of the guide Fritz Steuri, who would later win fame on the first ascent of the Eiger's Mittellegi Ridge. There was also a professional reason to focus on this region, since he was now working as the secretary of the Jungfrauobahn rack-railway company. Then, all too suddenly, the Belle Époque was over.

Since records for the 1914–17 period are thin, it's hard to say whether Victor de Beauclair had a good war. As a Brazilian national, he was exempt from the fighting. But many of his former climbing companions found themselves in uniform, whether in neutral Switzerland or in the armies of the warring powers. Several failed to return from the conflict, and those who did had experienced things that would forever put a distance between them and their former climbing partner.

When the smoke cleared, the world had changed. Balloons were "cold coffee"; now it was heavier-than-air craft, piloted by younger men, who made the dramatic flights over the Alps. But de Beauclair was still an acknowledged alpinist, and it was as a rope partner and ski tour leader that he got to know Irmgard Schiess and her twin sister, Herta (known to family and friends as Spatzi and Hatzi) together with their father, Erhard, also a keen mountaineer.

And so we come to 15 August 1929, when de Beauclair reached the summit of the Matterhorn with Herta, Irmgard and the guide Andreas Kohler. Descending in two rope pairs, the party was already within sight of

safe ground when de Beauclair pulled on a loose rock and fell down the east face with his rope partner, Irmgard. "Once again the Sphinx of Zermatt has demanded her toll ..." began the eulogy written by a friend.

It would have been a considerable feat just to ferret out the facts of de Beauclair's life, of which the above is the barest summary. But Emil has done much more – he has fashioned these facts into a convincing narrative arc.

Writing in the dramatic present, and ranging boldly back and forth through time, he assembles a series of tableaux that gradually build up a portrait of the protagonist and other dramatis personae. Everything moves inexorably and logically towards that fatal rendezvous in Zermatt.

As in a well-crafted film, the focus changes constantly. Some scenes are recreated in exquisite detail, elsewhere an entire world war passes by in a couple of pages. In part, this zoom technique reflects the variety and variability of Emil's sources – books, archives, genealogies, and conversations with descendant families – for the source materials are part of his narrative too.

In this, he is ahead of the game. At the very university once attended by Victor de Beauclair, a current professor of modern history calls for "a greater acknowledgement of authorial metadata in the writing of history" – in other words, historians should be more open about how they go about selecting and using their archives.

This is exactly how Emil works. The author is present in his work, starting with an account of his own fateful encounter with the "Sphinx

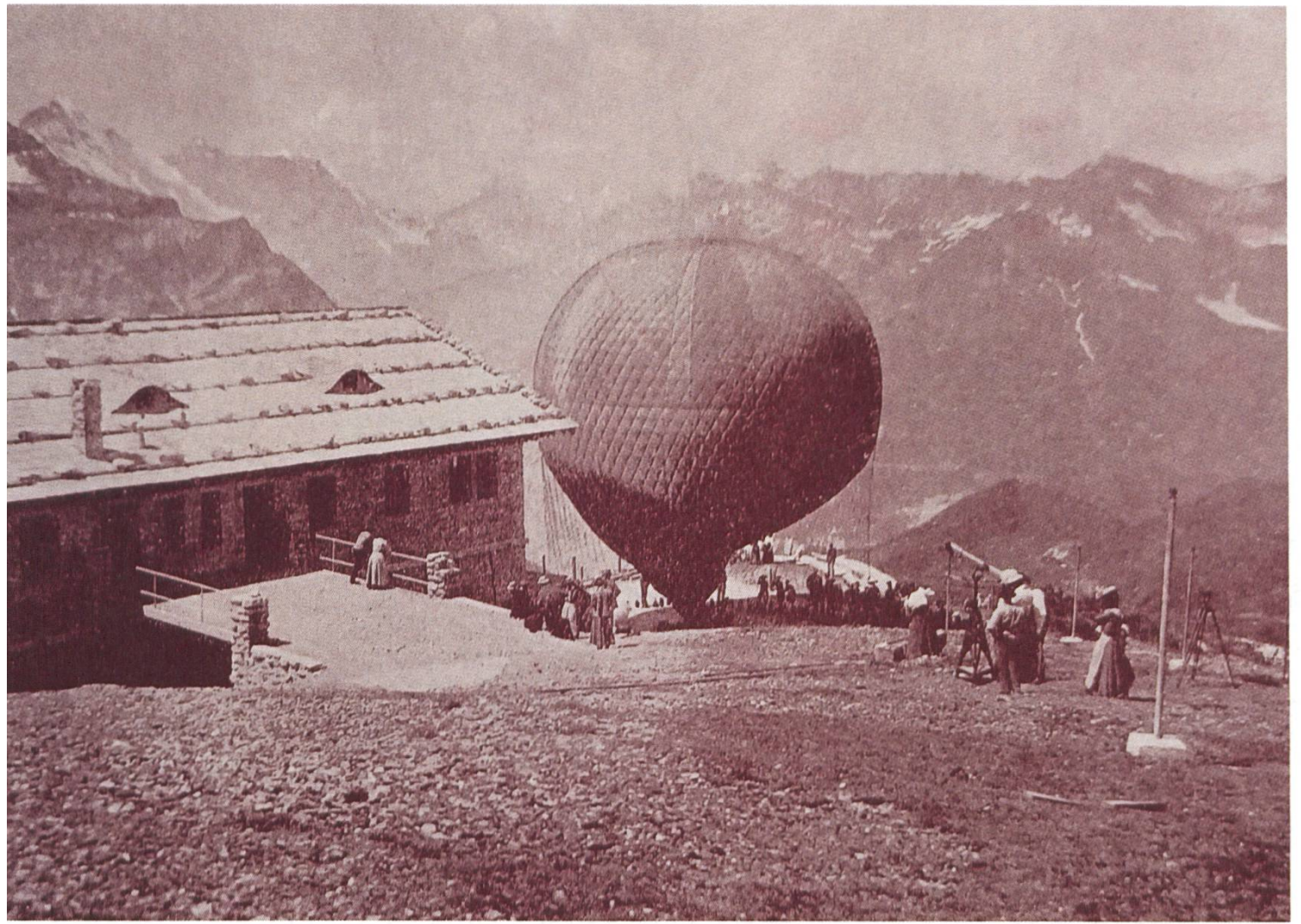
of Zermatt" in the summer of 1964. And so are his sources: take the scenes in the book's early pages in which he recreates the Whitsun weekend of 1929 when de Beauclair led a ski-touring group that also included the Schiess twins. "And you, my young friend, will write up this trip," says the fictional de Beauclair, clapping a young writer named Alfred Graber on the shoulder. Of course he will. For it is Graber's memoir that Emil will tap for this scene, almost a century in the future.

*Victors letzte Fahrt* is the work of a master craftsman. Or Emil might perhaps prefer the analogy of a gifted route-finder, given that he spent many years at the extreme end of the Swiss climbing scene. The narrative technique is polished, and the action, as in all the best novels, driven by psychological insight. The book should be read by anybody interested in "how it was" within alpinistic circles during that faraway era.

After all that, may we still ask if Victor de Beauclair and Irmgard Schiess really were a pair? Suffice it to say that Emil addresses the question with all the subtlety that the sources demand and allow. And circling back to those twin gravestones in Zermatt, he concludes the book with a thunderclap revelation. As to its nature, your reviewer isn't saying. You'll have to read the book for yourself...

*Victors letzte Fahrt* (Victor's last climb) is a biographical novel by Emil Zopfi, published in 2023 by AS Verlag, Zurich (269 pages, German language). It includes an appendix with a comprehensive chronology of Victor de Beauclair's life, lists of persons and families involved, and a comprehensive bibliography.

*Review by Martin Hood*



Emil Zopfi

# Victors letzte Fahrt

Alpinist und Luftschiffer  
aus Leidenschaft.  
Ein Leben.

AS



*Victor de Beauclair*  
1898