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The Red Cross Missing Persons Service

The service for tracing missing persons created by the Red Cross in the 1950s handles about 200 applications a year. Often with success, thanks to a world-wide communications network. The individual services are free and the Red Cross in principle processes only those cases in which either the applicant or the missing person is or is believed to be in Switzerland. Initially, the tracing service used to be called upon to deal only with a few, rare cases. But the wave of emigrating Hungarians in 1956 brought the first large run on the service. Entire families then sought to trace relatives, some of whom were living

vice has found itself faced with the phenomenon of population shifts. Very many refugees in camps in South-East Asia call on the Service in the hope of tracing members of their families who have found asylum in our country. «In the case of applications from areas of conflict», says Helène Marbacher, «we turn to the central Missing Persons Service of the ICRC (International Committee of the Red Cross), with which all particulars of civil and military prisoners and internees are filed, and which is trying to trace the missing persons».

The ICRC central tracing service also acts as intermediary for the exchange of news between members of families who have been cut off from their familiar surroundings owing to the ravages of war. In this way, in 1986, a Palestine refugee who lives in Switzerland got news of his uncle from a camp in Beirut which, months previously, had been attacked and occupied several times. «In most cases, the missing persons service of the Red Cross Society in the country where we are trying to trace somebody is our most import-

ant partner», says Helène Marbacher. As between each other, the one hundred or so national Red Cross societies maintain a world-wide and indeed unique mediation network. That over 60% of requests for searches sent out by the Swiss Red Cross in Berne end in success, is no doubt thanks to this close co-

operation between the national societies, but also to the confidence that the Red Cross enjoys with the political authorities. This has meant that within a period of ten years over 1,000 people have been able to find a relative again.

Bertrand Baumann (condensed from «Actio»)

«Dirty Paradise»

Four cave explorers from the canton of Schwyz have discovered a new cavern in the Muotatal. Two of the speleologists, Erwin Auf der Maur and Albert Lüond, came across traces of a cave in the winter of 1986. Then, eighteen months ago, they found the entrance with the help of pendulum apparatus, but first had to clear away some 25 to 40 cubic yards of detritus and clay before they could get into the cave. Once inside, the explorers came upon stalactites after only a few yards of progress. Still later, all four spelunkers were able to penetrate the cavern to a distance of some two miles. On average, the team meets once a week to con-

tinue their exploration of the «dirty paradise» they call their cave.

The explorers and their friends in the know, all together ten people, want to keep the location of the cave a secret for the time being, that is, until they have fully explored and measured it. The reason is not far to seek: anyone who has surveyed and measured a cave is regarded as the official discoverer; should the location be made known now, other people could come and measure it up and then get acclaimed as the discoverers. Franz Suter: «There are various instances where it has already happened; we want to avoid that.»



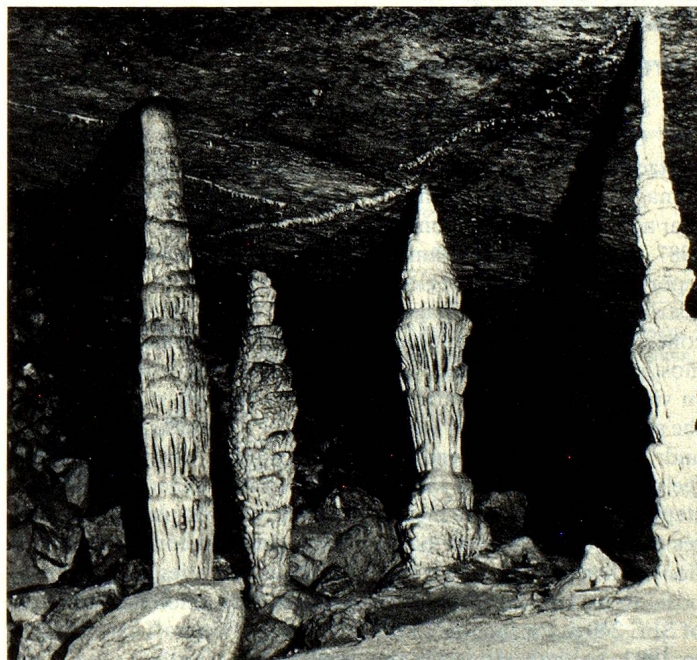
A reunion after long years of separation (ICRC Photo Archives).

scattered throughout Switzerland. «Still today, the majority of applications come from the communist bloc states and concern refugees who have settled in our country. It is often a question of alimony problems or maintenance. Of course, it is left up to the person being sought whether he or she wants to respond or not», explains Helène Marbacher, responsible for the running of the Missing Persons Service.

For some years now, this Ser-

The Services

- Requests for searches by persons in Switzerland for missing persons abroad and requests from persons abroad to trace missing persons in Switzerland.
- Establishing contacts between former Red Cross children (in need of holidays after the second world war) and the families who then cared for them in Switzerland.
- Exchange of news between separated persons.
- Re-uniting of families.
- Obtaining confirmation of the internment of foreigners in Switzerland during the second world war. Such documents are often needed by the applicants to be able to submit claims for old-age and disablement pensions in their own countries.

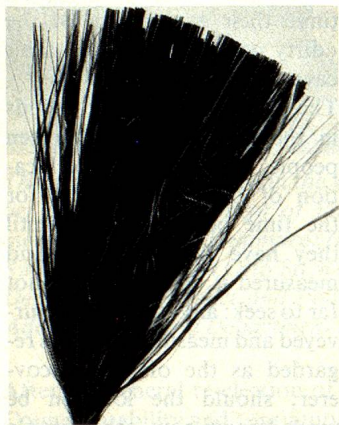


No one can yet see the stalactites in the newly-discovered cave. Are they as beautiful as those in the famous Reclère caverns in the Bernese Jura (photo: Keystone).



Gibraltar bridge with Swiss technology?

The Swiss Federal Materials Testing and Research Institute (EMPA) in Dübendorf is working on an exciting project for a suspension bridge across the Strait of Gibraltar. Part of the project provides for the use of modern, high-technology, lightweight materials. The bridge, more than ten miles long, is to be suspended on carbon-fibre



cables. Our picture shows the unravelled end of a six-mm-thick wire consisting of half-a-million carbon fibres. Four hundred such wires would go to form one suspension cable of the bridge (photo: EMPA).

Forests go on dying

The Swiss woods continue to die. On average, throughout Switzerland, 56% of trees are damaged, i.e., 6% more than a year ago. This emerges from the 1987 Sanasilva forest-damage report. In so far as the regional distribution of the damage is concerned, the deterioration is most marked in the Jura. In view of this deterioration in the state of health of our woods and forests, the government feels compelled to take further steps, in addition to the measures adopted to reduce air pollution. It has put forward a proposal to parliament for a credit of SFr. 240 m for the years 1989 to 1992, so that, alongside the measures already taken to combat forest damage, the care of young woods and plantations,

the further training of forestry personnel and self-help action for forestry and the timber industry can be fostered.

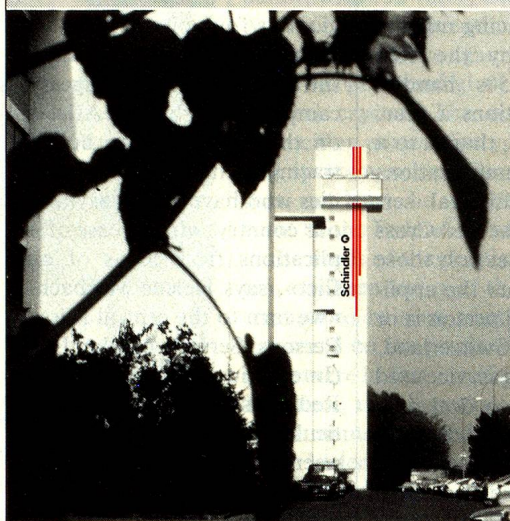
Lethal cheese

In the last four years, Vacherin-Mont d'Or soft cheese contaminated with listeriosis bacteria has caused over 30 deaths in the canton of Vaud. About half of the cases were stillbirths. The production and sale of this popular cream cheese has been banned. Listeriosis is particularly dangerous for pregnant women, elderly people and for persons with immuno-insufficiency. The bacteria are found practically only in the rind of the cheese. Other local and imported varieties of soft cheese are now undergoing intensive investigation and in the meantime further types of cheese have been banned.

The fragrant weed

Major offensive against smoking in the Federal Administration: the government's staff department has inveighed against the blue haze in offices and public rooms, with stricter rules for the protection of non-smokers, still further general restrictions and with withdrawal courses. An enquiry mounted within the Federal Administration revealed that tobacco smoking causes internal problems in two out of three Federal offices because passive smokers feel themselves increasingly burdened by it. So the Federal Personnel Office is to issue more stringent regulations for the benefit of the non-smoker. According to the new rules, smoking is to be forbidden particularly on counter duty, in offices where the general public is served, in open-plan offices with large staffs, in conference rooms and in libraries and waiting rooms. Non-smoking areas must be set apart in staff canteens and cafeterias. Further, the Confederation is to set up courses to wean smokers away from the fragrant weed.

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Telegrams

■ The *Local Radio Trial Decree*, originally in force only until the end of 1988, has been extended by two years. As from 1989, local radio stations will be able to broadcast advertising for banks, jobs and real estate.

■ *Schwyzerdütsch* seems to be ever more popular in Romandie, i.e. western Switzerland. More than 14,000 Romans have already attended courses in Swiss German.

■ Silent *butterfly deaths* in Switzerland: some 66% of

butterflies and 54% of dragonflies are threatened or have already died out.

■ Since the second world war the *density of doctors* in Switzerland has increased by 75% and is now 14.7 doctors to every 10,000 inhabitants.

■ Continuing steady *trend towards the land*: in 1986,

too, the Swiss population grew faster in rural than in urban areas.

■ A combination of various ecological and environmental factors has made the Alps the *most-threatened mountain system*, worldwide. These are the findings of a meeting of international experts.



Auf der Sonnenterrasse des Unterengadins (1712 m ü. M.)

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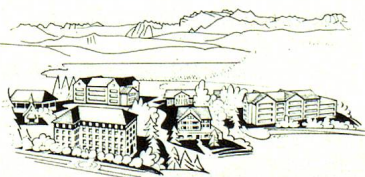
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