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CONTENTS

Forum



Switzerland from underneath 4

Politics

Portraits of the parties: CDP 11

History

The tragedy of St. Gingolph 13

Cover:

The Matterhorn comes from Africa. This is one of the surprising results of a national research programme on "Switzerland's Underground Geological Structure". It has brought to light ancient lakes, concealed valleys and rock layers hitherto unknown. Sources of natural heat have also been revealed. And measuring operations have brought new knowledge about the origins of the Alps and the interlocking of Europe and Africa. (Photo: zvg)

IMPRESSUM

Swiss Review, the magazine for the Swiss Abroad, is in its 21st year of issue and is published in German, French, Italian, English and Spanish in more than 20 regional editions. It has a total circulation of over 300,000. Regional news appears four times a year.

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Switzerland's high reputation does not rely only on watches and chocolate. Its ordnance survey maps are known worldwide for their accuracy. The surface of our country does not hide secrets any more – every square metre has long since been mapped topographically and combed geologically to the last detail. But not so what lies below the surface. The composition of our country's nether regions remained a mystery until very recently and occasioned the wildest speculations. But the national research programme, "Switzerland's Underground Geological Structure" has answered important questions. We now know where and how deeply the Alps have their roots. And we must recognise that Switzerland's most popular mascot, the Matterhorn, comes from Africa.

Echoes from the underground are extending geological knowledge about our country. They provide what we may call "vertical local history" of practical value. Through such research programmes, we obtain precious information about the earth's natural heat, the sources of earthquakes and raw materials, as well as the knowledge needed for tunnel-building – for the latter is nothing more than applied geology. Only people who know a lot about the interior of mountains are in a position to work out large-scale projects like the new Alpine railway tunnels. Or indeed to know when to refrain. Since the great tunnelling machines started boring ever deeper into the rock in 1993, there have been nagging doubts. Geologists, tunnel experts and those politically involved have warned against disaster. Opponents argue that the base tunnel is going to be much more difficult to realise than the planners thought, and in any case it will cost much more than the 5 billion Swiss francs budgeted for and approved by voters. And even this is not the worst. Critics like to remind us of the fiasco of the mammoth Lötschberg railway tunnel project, when workmen were buried under masses of rock and water as a result of faulty arithmetic.

Glaciologists have also been sounding the alarm. With headlines like "Are our glaciers dying?", they have

been telling us that the surface of the Alpine glaciers will shrink by a quarter in the next 25 years. The cause is the greenhouse effect: since 1850 the climate has warmed by more than half a degree Celsius. During the same period the snow line has risen by 100 metres.

From icy heights to what lies beneath our feet. For thousands of years men have been attracted to the unknown depths in spite of fear of the dark, the cold and the wet. They force their way through measureless caverns where no foot has ever trod. Driven by a passion for worlds below our own they creep through low passages, make their hands raw on the rough stone, slide on the slippery earth, force their way through narrow fissures in the rock and crawl along sopping ropes for kilometres into the earth – all of their own free will.

In this number of Swiss Review we are taking our readers into subterranean Switzerland. In the next number we shall swing them aloft and let them see what our country looks like from the sky. We shall show them that mountain ranges – in the past the image of solidity itself – are in fact in constant motion. Every year the Alps get a millimetre higher. And continuing pressure is squeezing Switzerland together: the distance between Lugano and Schaffhausen is getting smaller all the time.

In this edition we also bring you a report which shows how social strata are drifting ever farther apart. Our report on the Zurich drug scene reveals how today's heroin addicts vegetate below the bridge of an old railway station where drug traffic has replaced rail traffic. Letten has become a station where for many travellers there are no more exits and no ways of alighting. A serious bone of contention in Switzerland's underworld. Which brings us more or less full circle – back to geology!



Alice Baumann
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