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Autor: Schneider, Lukas M. / Gruber, Luzi Reto
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No risk of invasion from abroad

INTERVIEW: LUKAS M. SCHNEIDER

The Swiss construction industry has emerged from a difficult period. Thanks to the electorate's approval of the proposal on financing public transport, the prospects look somewhat brighter for the underground construction sector.

Mr Gruber, thanks to its geographical situation Switzerland is a land of tunnels par excellence. To what extent is this attributable to technical know-how?

Underground construction in Switzerland accounts for an annual market volume of over CHF 1 billion, and is set to grow further over the next few years. Politicians are increasingly calling for infrastructure construction to be shifted below-ground. In a densely populated country, this means that many roads and infrastructure links will disappear into tunnels, not only in the Alps but also the Mittelland. This explains why Swiss underground construction companies need to have a high-level technical knowledge base. Compared with other countries, Switzerland has enjoyed a high wage level over the decades. This forces us to resort to technologies which are heavily mechanised.

Are the skills of Swiss tunnel construction specialists also in demand abroad?

The export of know-how is virtually non-existent.

The interviewee Luzi Reto Gruber, dipl. Bau-Ing. ETH/SIA, is a member of the management of Batigroup and is in charge of the Underground Construction Division. With over 4000 employees Batigroup is the largest construction company in Switzerland with revenues of over CHF 1 billion.

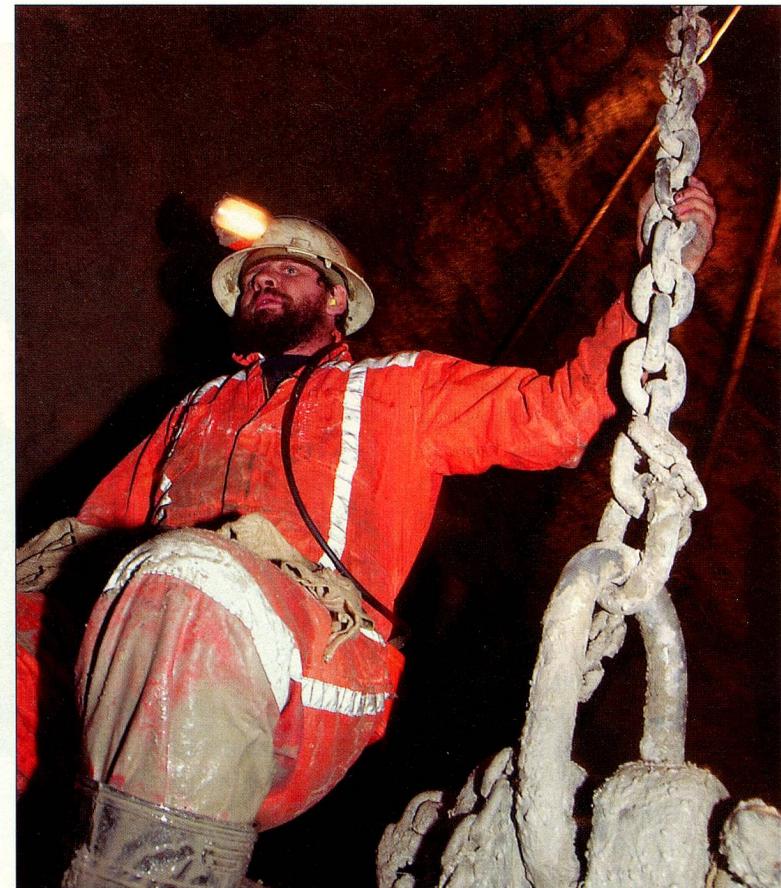


Photo: Markus Senn

Engineers work in three shifts in the Sedrun shaft – round the clock, seven days a week.

existent. On the one hand the vast majority of our specialists are already non-Swiss. On the other, mobility in the management ranks is extremely low. There are people who say, I want the tunnel on my doorstep and am not willing to travel two hours a week to work.

To what extent has the competitiveness of Swiss tunnel builders changed?

Switzerland continues to play a leading role, particularly in hard rock excavation. For alpine drilling as well as Mittelland tunnels we do not really have to rely on special know-how from abroad. Rather, we are regarded as the real specialists in this area. In principle, underground construction in Switzerland has no need to fear an invasion of tunnel experts from abroad.

Is sufficient care being taken in the education sector to uphold our special know-how in tunnel construction?

There are two types of employee in the underground construction industry: technical employees and management staff. In both cases Switzerland lacks special training opportunities.

The focus is on "learning on-the-job". Major efforts are under way to offer day courses for further training by the Association of Swiss Underground Construction Employers. But these are only courses and are not associated with vocational training. Nor can the tunnel builder's profession be learned at the management level.

Where do the greatest dangers in modern tunnel construction lie?

As before, cave-in remains the greatest risk. This is why safety is given top priority. To be standing in an excavated space when the roof collapses on him is the stuff of every tunnel excavator's nightmare. Unfortunately, the risk is never completely excluded.