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Who is poor in affluent Switzerland?

WHILE 220,999 SWISS WERE SEEKING EMPLOYMENT LAST YEAR, Swiss companies once more posted massive rises in profits. This led to such a sharp increase in Swiss share prices that even analysts were amazed. Given this situation, it is not always easy to understand reports of Switzerland's economic difficulties. While growth is modest, profits are rocketing. Is Switzerland doing well or badly? The fact is that these earnings are not profiting everyone to the same extent, and the gap in income between management and simple wage-earners is steadily growing. High earners are enjoying even higher salaries, while the rest are being forced to tighten their belts another notch. According to a Credit Suisse survey, 71 percent of Swiss are anxious of losing their jobs and 29 percent are afraid of becoming poor. Five years ago, things were completely different.

This January Caritas issued an alarming report stating that, according to "cautious estimates", one million people in Switzerland must be classified as poor. But who is poor in affluent Switzerland? The Swiss Conference for Social Assistance has defined the following poverty thresholds: CHF 2500 per month for a single-person household, and CHF 4500 for a family of four.

Other statistics have also caused a stir: According to tax statistics, one in four pensioners in the cantons of Zurich and Aargau has a personal fortune of one million francs. At the same time it was reported that more and more young people are taking on financial burdens and face mountains of debt only shortly after attaining the age of majority. Perhaps advertisers should change their target groups and aim for pensioners rather than the younger generation.

Statistics on second homes also reveal some astonishing facts. In the course of his investigations, our reporter Rolf Ribi found that one square meter is built on in Switzerland every second. Per day that is the equivalent of a small farm, and per year to the surface area of Lake Brienz.

The number of second homes and holiday homes has doubled to 450,000 residential units since 1980. One in nine dwellings in Switzerland is only used temporarily. In many villages in the Engadine, between 60 and 80 percent of all houses and apartments are holiday homes, occupied on average for only 75 days of the year. The result is that many villages in Upper Engadine have become ghost towns, and closed shutters are the dominant feature of such locations.

Motor sport is the subject of two separate articles in this issue of Swiss Review, and with good cause: Tom Lüthy, a young man from the Emmental, was voted Sportsman of the Year and is a firm favourite with the public, while Jo Siffert is rapidly becoming a cult figure whose eventful life is currently the subject of a documentary being shown in Swiss cinemas. Did you know that when he died, 50,000 people attended his funeral in Fribourg?

Köbi Kuhn's appeal in the Swiss Review for young Swiss footballing talents resident abroad has attracted a great deal of attention. More than 200 young people have written to the Swiss Football Association in the hope of being invited to Swiss selection trials. Hans Ruedi Hasler, Technical Director of the Swiss Football Association, explains the next steps in the selection process on page 17. More information is available at www.football.ch, menu SFV, "Formulare".

HEINZ ECKERT

IMPRESSUM: "Swiss Review", the magazine for the Swiss Abroad, is in its 33rd year of publication and is published in German, French, Italian, English and Spanish in 21 regional editions. It has a total circulation of over 380 000. Regional news appears four times a year.

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