

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 45 (2018)
Heft: 2

Artikel: How a mountain village made headlines worldwide
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-906522>

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How a mountain village made headlines worldwide

Albinen is combating emigration through a financial incentive. This story created a global furore that took the commune completely by surprise. We paid a visit to this besieged mountain village in Valais.

JONAS SCHMID

He finally gives vent to his frustration: "You're all mad," Beat Jost scolds the assembled crowd of journalists. The president of the commune of Albinen plucks at his moustache, mumbles something about an "absurd story" and storms off. Why is this man whom residents describe as hands-on and charismatic so exasperated? It is the proposed funding of homes in his village that has surprisingly caused such a stir all over the world. In the run-up to the communal assembly meeting, Albinen's most senior official worries that his citizens may refuse to support him over this issue for fear of being overrun by outsiders. He complains that his opponents could not come up with a better campaign and makes no mention of the fact that the commune has pulled off a remarkable PR coup.

Let's go back to the start. Albinen, an archetypal Valais village lying 1,300 metres above sea level, is in a tranquil spot and enjoys wonderful views. Yet the idyllic setting is deceptive. While Switzerland's urban centres complain about trains crammed full with passengers, peripheral re-

The story was presented as it inevitably would be in the age of online journalism. After some media outlets had reported matter-of-factly on the initiative last summer, the issue provided the "20 Minuten" online platform with material for a Christmas story that was too good to be true: "Would you move here for 70,000 Swiss francs?" read the newspaper's headline. The authors of the piece only mentioned the stringent conditions attached in passing. The news then spread like wildfire around the globe. Media outlets worldwide picked up the story. The UK tabloids were the first to run it, followed by media in Russia, India and China. They vied to outdo one another with headlines like: "This Swiss village will give you 70,000 Swiss francs to move there. Pack your bags!"

Appearing with suitcases in the village shop

There was an immediate response. Officials were inundated with thousands of applications. Initially, they treated this with good humour. But they stopped smiling when Italians with their suitcases packed turned up in the village shop enquiring about the money. Jost, a former trade unionist and journalist, was overwhelmed by the developments. He went to ground and even wanted to ban journalists from attending the decisive assembly meeting. But he was called into line by the canton, which reminded him of the principle of public access. This led to a showdown at the fire station in early December.

The residents of Albinen backed their president, overwhelmingly approving the proposal that had caused such a furore beforehand. The young people celebrated, Jost smoothed his hair and all of a sudden willingly appeared in front of the cameras. He was once again at peace with himself, the journalists and the world.

The young villagers are still faced with a dilemma. Should they stay or go? Would they be better off heading to places offering employment, schools and supermarkets? Three young families recently moved away. The elderly are left behind. Next year, half of the village's 240 residents will draw a pension. "We're on our deathbed," warns Jost. He still hopes the housing subsidy will help rejuvenate the village by attracting five to ten new families. In the best-case scenario, that would mean the school reopening.



The idyllic setting is deceptive. Like many Swiss communes in peripheral regions, Albinen, a village in Valais, is also being adversely hit by emigration.

gions like Albinen are desperately fighting emigration. So, to keep young people in the village or to attract new families, the commune put forward an unorthodox proposal – compensation of 70,000 Swiss francs for a family of four who decide to stay in the village. The money is subject to strict conditions – a ten-year stay and an investment of at least 200,000 Swiss francs in accommodation. Foreign nationals must hold at least a C residence permit.

JONAS SCHMID IS AN EDITOR AT THE "SÜDOSTSCHWEIZ" NEWSPAPER