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In the control room, a year before the accident (1968)



An eerie calm – tunnels in the damaged Lucens reactor



Technicians being dressed in protective clothing shortly after the accident

Swiss reactor meltdown

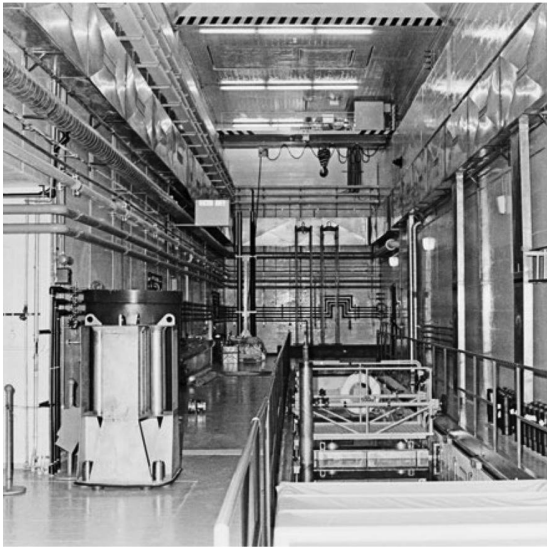
If, Heaven forbid, there was a nuclear meltdown today and the Geiger counters went off the scale, pictures of the accident would be flashed around the world within hours. Which is why the photos of Switzerland's biggest-ever nuclear accident are a little disconcerting. Only now – 50 years later – have these visual reminders seen the light of day – belated proof that the “power of images” we hear so much about is sometimes never felt.

What happened? A core meltdown, a severe nuclear reactor accident, occurred at the Lucens underground nuclear reactor (in the canton of Vaud) on 21 January 1969. The reactor was destroyed and the plant itself, built in a chamber inside a mountain, was severely contaminated. Switzerland narrowly escaped a nuclear catastrophe. In hindsight, there is an emotional edge to the unspectacular, strangely clean-cut images taken at the time. The discreetly handled accident in Lucens shattered Switzerland's dream of building nuclear power plants from scratch itself. According to recent historical research, the accident was also a major factor in Switzerland shelving plans to develop its own atomic bomb. In 1958, the Federal Council publicly stated that the army needed to have the most effective weapons at its disposal to protect Switzerland, “including atomic weapons”. Historian Michael Fischer, who is conducting research on the matter, believes that the Lucens reactor could have bred the plutonium needed for weapons. Historian Jürg Stüssi-Lauterburg, who was able to access files that remain confidential, says, “Yes, Switzerland was a nuclear threshold state.” Lucens was the end point.

(MUL)

The photographs shown here are from Keystone-SDA's Lucens image database. Numerous Swiss media outlets published them this year.

The interior of the reactor in January 1969



Corridor leading to the radioactive interior of the Lucens reactor



Nearly a decade later Lucens was the scene of anti-nuclear movement demos (1978)