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The legacy of last winter's avalanches

The three communal authorities of Reckingen, Münster and Geschinen in the valley of Goms (Canton of Valais) have recently called on local School children to help cleaning the local landscape damaged by last winter's avalanches.

Massive Weather Problems in Switzerland over the Past Months

By the beginning of February, snowfalls were said to be reaching a one in fifty year event. As winter finally came to a close in mid-April, the situation had escalated to more like a Century problem.

Many of the winter resorts were cut off from the outside world for up to two weeks. The population of Guttannen (BE) was sheltering in its nuclear bunkers for almost a month. In Grindelwald, thousands of tourists had to be evacuated by helicopters at a cost of Sfr.60 per person. The road and railway from Interlaken to Brienz were closed for the best part of a month. To bring in supplies and provide some sort of transport, the BLS (railway/ferry company) brought a steamer out of winter mothballs! Hundreds of people had to be evacuated to safer places, thereby saving many lives. The Gotthard Motorway was closed three times; once for almost a week. Avalanches closed the road to Zermatt and carried a whole railway bridge away, as well as 1,500 meters of tracks. According to insurance assessors, as many as 500 avalanches damaged property and installations. About 30 fatalities were recorded, a figure which reflects favourably considering that in February 1951, over 100 people were killed in just one week.

Throughout the northern side of the Alps - from Grenoble in France

to the Tirol in Austria - depths of 10-15 meters of fresh snow were recorded. According to a Professor of History, the only other time of similar snowfalls dates back to 1566. That year, devastating floods hit both Switzerland and other countries along the Rhine river.

As early as mid-March, the Government of Canton Berne set up a committee of experts to see what measures, if any, could be taken to ease the expected flooding. But apart from lowering the lakes to levels not detrimental to the fish breeding season, not much else could be undertaken.

By mid-May, things began to happen with a vengeance. Combined with warm temperatures, heavy thunderstorms and extreme rainfalls, rivers, many already flooded since February, rose to record levels in no time at all. The buffers the lowered lake levels were expected to provide lasted only a day or two. At one stage, the inflow into Lake Thun was three times as much as could possibly flow out of the other end! Not surprisingly, low lying suburbs both in Thun and Berne were flooded out. The Capital's airport, Belp, was under water and out of commission for a week. With rivers in flood, the water tables began to rise to alarmingly high levels as well, setting large number of basements and cellars into swimming pools! Up until late June, many basements had to be left flooded, as pumping them dry

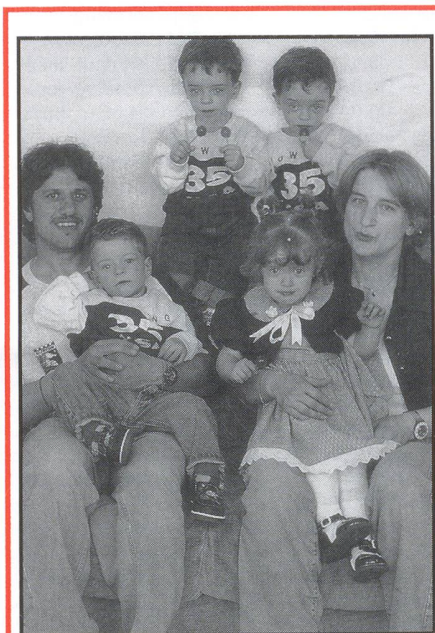
would have endangered the foundations. Where cellars had to be emptied due to rotting problems, once cleaned, they were refilled to provide the necessary stability.

In Olten, during a normal Spring, the Aare river carries a flow of some 200-300 m³/second. But between mid-February to mid-June, it was never below 500 m³/sec., at one stage reaching a high of just under 900 m³/sec.

Whilst the situation in Canton Berne began to improve, it was Lake Constance which was reaching record levels. Again, more water was flowing into the lake than the Rhine was able to carry away. Since late February, various sections of the Rhine, from the North Sea to Rheinfelden, were closed to shipping for up to five weeks at a time.

Like in any adverse situations, what is devastating for some can also be beneficial for others. Thus, the many low pressure hydro schemes operating along the Aare river were able to produce three times as much electricity than in a normal year.

Contribution by Heinz Leuenberger



The quadruplets of Arbon/ Switzerland are 2 years old!

Father Toni Amato, an immigrant from Italy who has lived in Switzerland for the past 30 years is pictured here with his Wife Annemarie and the quadruplets Angelo, David, Pietro and Syria.