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Switzerland's Underground - Part 4

Life beneath the Earth, Protecting the Population

In the past, hidden and protected by mountainous terrain, Switzerland had always been 'well armed' in having this natural barrier as a first defence against enemy invaders. But times changed with the advent of aerial and atomic threats and suddenly, the Alps were no longer enough to protect against foreign invasion.

The Swiss Military had already begun building underground fortresses in 1831, but the bulk of the development took place during the World Wars, and particularly with the advent of the Cold War. No one can really say how useful these bunkers would have been had they earnestly been required.

With great diligence and an inordinate amount of money, Switzerland began building underground shelters for its entire population. In fact, there are more than enough - a world record at approx. 115% capacity. The 2300 larger facilities (mainly built by local authorities), and 360,000 smaller shelters (mainly beneath homes and apartments) were predominantly constructed in the 1970's and 80's to give everyone a chance of survival in the event of a nuclear attack. The aim was to also provide underground medical centres for 0.6% of the population, amounting to about 50,000 beds. It is conservatively estimated that, laid side by side, all of these shelters would be over 1200 km long - the distance from Auckland to Christchurch.

Sonnenberg (LU)

One of the world's largest civil defence facilities is the nuclear bomb-proof underground bunker at Sonnenberg, near Lucerne, for 20,000 people. Today, it is seen as a prime example of basic bad planning.

Sonnenberg was created for the Third World War. It took six years to build, completed in 1976 – but was never used. In the case of a real emergency, those making up the 20,000 inhabitants were

to be civil defence workers at all levels; doctors and medical personnel; cooks; priests; and air filter, waste disposal and water specialists.

Today, local historians have created the 'underground survival' project, and run guided tours – the only way the public can access Sonnenberg.

On the other side of the locked entrance doors is a long grey tunnel leading to a place where it was once envisaged 20,000 people would be able to survive a nuclear catastrophe.

Inside, the world seems upside down, with the entrance to this seven-floor 'building' at the top and containing the centre of this underground city - a post office; a hospital with its own kitchen and two operating theatres, a new born unit and mortuary; police cells; a radio studio; a chapel - as well as offices and accommodation for civil defence management and administrators, who are basically the new 'government' tasked with running this new reality. Also housed at this level are water reserves, power generators, fuel stores - and food storage rooms with the notice: 'can only be accessed by approved personnel - goods may only be dispensed with permission from the facility head.' In any case, it was anticipated that people would bring their own food provisions for the first few days anyway!

The running of all phone and power lines, as well as ventilation and dehumidification systems, is all controlled from this level.

In 1960's propaganda, civil defence advertising stated that if Switzerland were to build sufficient shelters, 80% of the population could survive a nuclear bomb. Back then, Lucerne did not yet have the mandatory space for 33% of the population – until someone had a brainwave: a city motorway had recently been built, partially under the city, so it was decided that in an emergency, the two 1.6km tunnels could be used to house people. Sealed with heavy doors, the city highway became the

survival bunker. Even then, at Fr.40 million, it cost the city relatively less than others, as the tunnel itself was a federal asset. City inhabitants would only be admitted on proof of identity – and then be assigned a bed number.

20,000 4-tier collapsible beds were produced and stored on the 7th floor of the Sonnenberg facility. It was estimated it would take two weeks to transport and erect the beds inside the tunnel, but a 1989 practice run showed it would take even longer - in reality, far too long in an environmental emergency. It could only be hoped that in the case of a nuclear bomb, the USSR would give the world sufficient warning!

Designers seemed to plan well for the technical aspects of underground survival, but gave little thought to practicalities – for instance, they later realised no space allowance was made for any luggage 20,000 people would come with, including the recommended clothing and food, so capacity was later reduced to 3-tier beds for 17,000.

And could people really stand living in these underground conditions? Even without thousands of breathing and sweating people, the air inside is always damp; there is the constant buzz from air conditioning; minimal space; no daylight or fresh air; and a lack of privacy – how long would peace reign with people living down here like ants? And above all, the fresh water supply would have lasted for no more than two weeks....

Today, Sonnenberg has been reduced to 2,000 spaces. The Police have also leased three floors, to be used to accommodate 300 people in the case of 'civil disorder'. To this end, it has only ever been used once – by participants of a cultural demonstration in 2007.

In reality, the success of such a facility is questionable and thankfully, Sonnenberg has never had to be put to the full test - it exists today only as a monument to the Cold War era.

Information from Schweizer Familie Magazine; photos sourced online from Sonnenberg website.

