

Zeitschrift: The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK

Herausgeber: Federation of Swiss Societies in the United Kingdom

Band: - (1951)

Heft: 1154

Artikel: Behind the headlines

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-689841>

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BEHIND THE HEADLINES.

World Sympathy for Switzerland and her Avalanche Catastrophies.

By DR. HERMANN BÖSCHENSTEIN.

The Swiss people are accustomed when disaster strikes other countries to come to their help and show their sympathy in a practical manner. That Switzerland herself should one day become the object of International commiseration and should receive world sympathy, appeared to be something quite unimaginable; Switzerland does not suffer from any great maritime disasters or mining catastrophies, and for a long time now she has been spared from war and earthquakes. Thus, it is only at the death of some Swiss statesman, as was the case at the beginning of 1940, when Giuseppe Motta passed away, that the heart of the world is stirred in sympathy for Switzerland. The two avalanche catastrophies which occurred on the 19th and 20th January have aroused so great a sympathy throughout the whole world and in the International Press, not to speak of the peoples of other countries, that the Swiss themselves are quite overwhelmed by the expressions of friendship and pity which are pouring in. The newspapers continue to receive letters from abroad with the request that they may be published so that the people in Switzerland may know how much those countries, which are wrongly termed foreign, participate in their grief. The sympathy aroused in Great Britain for instance, was quite overpowering; the British have always felt themselves very closely allied to the Alpine world and its inhabitants, and treasure countless precious memories of men and places, and of well-known mountain guides, who have fallen victims to the avalanches. The official expressions of condolence through numerous diplomatic and government channels have not been looked upon as empty messages of courtesy, but have been accepted as the expression of those feelings of friendship which are entertained by the broad masses of public opinion both in Europe and outside Europe, in regard to Switzerland. Many a Swiss has said to himself secretly that his small country would not have had to stand alone if it had been attacked during the last war, and this, quite apart from Continental strategic interests, which are at stake whenever any displacement occurs either in regard to frontiers or power. Switzerland could, assuredly, have counted on strong and faithful feelings of friendship and sympathy on the part of International public opinion. It is quite understandable that in the Press reports much is said regarding the romanticism and heroism of aspect of life in the Alps, and the conduct of the guides and the rescue squads is given great praise; it was important for Switzerland that a wide publicity be given to the penurious and often dangerous conditions of living which the mountain folk have to face — it is a good thing that this be made known and understood. Unfortunately, far too many foreigners are under the impression that the mountaineer lives are just pure joy, up there in the sun and wonderful air and in the vicinity of the rich foreigners who spend their holidays in Switzerland.

In reality, this life is a hard struggle and the depopulation of the mountain regions has become an urgent problem for Switzerland. The numerous pictures which have now been published in the big foreign newspapers, in the American "Life" and in the

British "Times" and "Manchester Guardian", where they occupy sometimes the whole and sometimes half of the front — or back page, have furnished a clear, documentary picture of life here as it really is. A great many false notions regarding this nation of hotel-keepers and watch-makers, have thus been corrected, quite incidentally. That this International desire to help, this participation in our troubles has not found expression in any financial aid, is quite understandable to us Swiss. We are in a position, by means of an act of solidarity carried out on a large scale to mitigate the distress through our own contributions, and the collection organised for this purpose by the Swiss Red Cross is growing day by day in a most satisfactory manner. Many childless couples have offered to adopt a child whose parents have been swept away by the avalanches. And so it may be hoped that through the sympathy and the desire of the whole people to be of assistance it will prove possible to soften the hard lot of these helpless sufferers.

During the last years and decades, one often asked oneself whether there still existed any such International solidarity as was to be found on many occasions during the 19th Century. Events, such as took place on this "Black" Sunday, have left behind them the comforting conviction that the peoples of the world, in spite of frontiers and national sovereignty, continue to feel for each other and share in those sentiments which are most human, that each one can readily understand what it means to lose one's loved ones and one's home. From this standpoint, the Swiss have been sincerely grateful for the tremendous echo which has reverberated throughout the civilized world as a result of thunder of the avalanches as they crashed down into the valley. It has given them confidence that the Swiss people will never be left alone and abandoned should a national misfortune occur.

OUR NEXT ISSUE.

Our next issue will be published on Friday, March 30th, 1951. We take the opportunity of thanking the following subscribers for their kind and helpful donations over and above their subscription: R. Delarageaz, J. Wanner, Giron Frères, Manchester, J. A. Seiffert, Swiss Benevolent Society, Auckland, New Zealand, M. Buchmann, J. E. Margot, M. Wiesendanger, A. Schmid, F. Delaloye, Mrs. M. Zimmermann, F. Conrad, C. Bourquin, L. Audenmars, A. E. Banderet, E. Ritzmann, A. C. Stahelin, J. E. Schneider, E. A. Nussle, H. Schwander, H. Hafter, J. Schad, R. Müller, A. Steiner, E. F. Richard.

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