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WEATHER EXTREMES

On this hot and sunny afternoon it seems like a dream that we could ever have been cold for weeks on end not so long ago. In Switzerland the consequences of the most severe winter within living memory are still felt, though there, too, the weather has been warm and sunny recently.

The outstanding event of the winter was the freezing over of large lakes like those of Constance and Zurich. The former meant that the bust of John, the Evangelist, is back on the Swiss side of the lake. On 12th February the historic "Ice Procession" took place, when the Commune of Münsterlingen walked across the lake to the German place of Hagnau — some 2,000 people went on this outing. Ever since 1573 the bust changes its domicile whenever the Lake of Constance freezes over. Since 1830 it has been at Hagnau and is now back in Switzerland until the next time the lake freezes.

As late as 13th March the "Basler Nachrichten" carried a photo of an ice barrier which had formed in the river Thur. It was like a fantastic picture of an Arctic landscape — 200,000 cubic metres of ice blocks. The Little Emme was blocked in the same way and there was dangerous floating ice near Schaffhausen.

The lakes did not thaw until March and it was April before the boats could resume their regular service.

Masses of snow melted early in March and there was heavy rainfall. At long last, and for the first time since the severe drought last summer, the lakes and rivers filled up. The hydro-electric power works could start full production again, and the Rhine harbour traffic in Basle which had been paralysed for weeks could function again. Some of the Jura streams, like the Doubs, Birs, Suze and Areuse, carried almost ten times as much water as last autumn. But almost at once there was too much of it — in many places there was flooding and some roads became like rivers and had to be closed to traffic.

Early April was cold again. The old saying that a white Christmas means a green Easter (or the other way round) did not materialise — Easter was most unfriendly and not at all springlike. This, on the other hand, meant that ski-ing conditions in the higher parts were still extremely favourable. Mürren had 3 feet of fresh snow in one night as late as early May and by the middle of May still ten pass roads were closed to traffic.

Other roads were impassable because of landslides and breaking off of rocks. And the notorious "Föhn" wind brought storms and caused heavy damage in many valleys, especially in the Grisons and the Valais. Avalanches came down even in the Glarnerland and the Säntis region. The worst were in the Grisons, the Valais (one fell near the Grande Dixence Power Dam) and in Central Switzerland. The greatly feared "Standeltal" avalanche came down early in April between Wassen and Göschenen and buried the Gotthard line to a depth of several metres. These avalanches not only caused considerable material damage, but unfortunately also demanded several human victims.

It will be quite some time before all the damage caused by the severe winter weather is repaired. The cost to some of the larger towns is fantastic. The Canton of Berne reckons that road damage alone amounted to six million francs. Lucerne spent over six millions on snow clearance alone, not counting any damage. St. Gall and Lausanne each had to shoulder a cost of 2½ million francs for snow clearing and de-icing of roads. Sixteen hundred tons of salt were used in St. Gall for this purpose — more than three times as much as last year. Zurich is the poorer by half a million francs through the freezing of the lake alone (erection

of barriers, lighting installations, extra staff and first aid personnel, repairs to quaysides, boats and swimming establishments). Against that stands extraordinary revenue of Fr. 25,000. — coming from licences for stalls and booths on the frozen lake! Wholesale trade in photographic films reached an unheard-of turnover, and the shoe trade showed record sales. The import of building materials, timber, iron, steel and motor cars showed a decrease due to the hard winter.

Insurance companies maintain that water damage caused by snow and ice amounted to thirteen million francs, whilst fire claims were much higher than in a normal winter. The damage not covered by insurance is believed to reach the fifty-million mark.

As regards vegetation, it was behind a normal year by about a month. The cherry blossom in Baselland was five or six weeks later than normally — but there are excellent prospects now. The drought of last year has retarded live-stock breeding and caused a great shortage of hay. The Confederation had to make a contribution to Cantons where farmers had to be subsidised. It is hoped that given reasonable summer weather the fodder position should soon be normalised.

It has also been shown that the bad winter has been very harmful to vines and fruit trees, particularly in the Valais, where apricot trees and strawberry plants have been dying off. And as if the Valais had not had enough — what with all this as well as the Zermatt typhoid epidemic — there were two slight earthquakes for good measure.

In May the fine weather seemed to have arrived — but no, winter returned to the upper parts and heavy rainfalls to the lower regions.

Still, the warm weather did arrive and it became hot, and that in turn brought heavy thunderstorms and dangerous hailstorms. Again there were floods in many parts of the country. It was as if nature was trying to make up for having been so stingy with rainfall last summer and autumn. If by way of compensation for the extreme cold Switzerland should be regaled by just as hot a summer . . . well, good luck!

(Based on A.T.S. reports)

On going to press: Weather unkind again!

FREE TESTS FOR WOULD-BE PILOTS

Swiss schoolboys who dream of being pilots will have a chance this summer to see if they have the qualities needed to fit them for command of a jet airliner.

From 15th to 27th July — during the summer holidays — Swissair will hold free test courses that will probe the aptitude of hopeful young Swiss. Some of the tests will take place in Link trainers and in aircraft.

Swissair operate the Caravelle, the DC-8, and the Convair 990A Coronado, which is the fastest airliner in the world. They hope to pick out quite a lot of potential pilots through the summer-holiday tests at Grenchen, in the heart of Switzerland's watch-making area.

The airline explain: "Since our big expansion started about eight years ago we have been finding it increasingly difficult to fill our needs by recruiting young pilots finishing air-force service and men passing out of flying schools.

"We are guarding against a future shortage of airline pilots by finding keen youngsters who have the necessary aptitude. Naturally, the tests are stiff. Only the very best will do."

The ones who are chosen as potential pilots will be offered the chance of being trained by Swissair, whose jet routes spread across the world as far as North America and South America, West Africa and Tokyo.