

**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:** - (1969)

**Heft:** 1580

  

**Artikel:** An Enquiry that leaves open Questions

**Autor:** [s.n.]

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-696672>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 04.04.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

*With sincere reluctance I bade Switzerland farewell. Who can leave such a country without regret? If we find its governments defective, or its societies dull, there is always a resource against every feeling of dislike, or of weariness, in the meditation of that glorious scenery, the view of which renders the mind insensible to human evils, by lifting it beyond their reach. Switzerland has opened to me a new world of ideas; its landscapes are indelibly impressed upon my memory; whenever the delightful images of nature present themselves to my imagination, I find that I have been thinking only of Switzerland; and whenever I amuse myself in that sort of visionary architecture, called castle-building, my chateau is always seated at the foot of an Alpine hill, a torrent stream rolls invisibly past the dwelling, and an enormous glacier lifts its snows in the neighbourhood.*

HELEN MARIA WILLIAMS

(from the S.N.T.O. booklet "Romantic Switzerland")

## AN ENQUIRY THAT LEAVES OPEN QUESTIONS

Why have we waited four years for the first results of an enquiry on the worst glacier catastrophe of the century to be made known? The geological and glaciological report asked for by the enquiring judge had alone taken three years to produce. The experts have not made their own task easy, neither has, for that matter the Judiciary of Valais, who, immediately after the disaster, had done everything in view of a completely impartial and independent enquiry. For that reason, it had commissioned foreign experts completely uninvolved with the construction of the Mattmark and strangers to the Swiss electricity business. The three experts in question were Professor Bernhard Brockamp, Director of the Geophysical Institute of the University of Munich, Professor Louis Liboutry, director of the French National Glaciological Institute at Grenoble and Professor Leopold Muller, director of the Institute of Rock Mechanics of the Karlsruhe school of technology. These three internationally renowned capacities have investigated

the site of the catastrophe for months and have produced their findings in a 150-page report which, however, does not give a clear answer to a number of questions. These experts insist that there could have been no possible way of foreseeing such a catastrophe. On the other hand, their report seems in some sections to point to the contrary. Many of the essential questions put forward by the judge of enquiry must still be considered by the outside observer as unanswered.

## The Families of the Victims Renounce a Further Enquiry

In spite of this, the lawyers of the dependants of the victims have not asked for any further enquiry. One reason is that all the civil amends that the wives and children of the victims were entitled to receive have long ago been made good by the insurance companies. The judge of enquiry, at the demand of these lawyers has asked for the opinion of three other experts, without asking from them a fully-fledged report. These experts were Italian, a fact which sheds light on the political background of this shifty enquiry. 56 Italians died in Mattmark and a good dozen motions and interventions have been made in the Italian Senate, mostly by communists or union representatives. This shows that the Italians are very keenly interested in the outcome of the Mattmark enquiry. The Swiss judicial authorities are well aware that, in view of its international connections, the causes and responsibilities of the Mattmark disaster ought to be clarified in an unrepachable way. The Valais judiciary had done all it could in this respect, the lack of competent jurists was another matter.

### "Nobody had thought of it"

Over seventy witnesses have already been heard. Due to the Valais' legal system, which calls for a secret enquiry, we do not know yet what these witnesses, some of them highly important, have said. Maybe their depositions will clear some of the aspects not fully answered in the 150-page professoral report. Public opinion is meanwhile interested in the three following points:

First: In September 1949 already, 50.000 cubic metres of ice had broken away from the Allaling glacier. The

photographical documentation of the department of hydrology and glaciology at the Federal Polytechnic in Zurich show that similar ice-slides have occurred in 1954, 1961 and 1963. During the construction of the dam, slipping ice had blocked a road and destroyed a compressor house. This incident had not led to any regular watch over the glacier. As stated by the report, no one thought that these ice movements, frequent in the alps, could be the forerunners of a catastrophe. On the other hand, the professors agreed that an experienced glaciologist could have distinguished from a low-flying helicopter the imminent breaking away of the glacier's snout.

Secondly: The round-the-year photogrametric survey of the glacier that had been planned by the Federal Polytechnic to make a study of its movements was not carried out through lack of funds. According to the report, the experts officially commissioned to supervise the glacier had only been concerned with the safety of the future dam. The numerous warnings voiced by geologists and glaciologists over the dangers ice-slides as a consequence of the general withdrawal of Swiss glaciers had apparently not made their effect on the planners and constructors of the dam. When Professor D. H. Annaheim from Basle, following an excursion to Mattmark, warned the management of the site of the very serious dangers of a glacier-break, he was told very frankly that the builders of the dam knew what they had to do.

Thirdly: Following the findings of the three professors, the labour management at Mattmark had in 1961 renounced erecting living-quarters on the construction site, but following economic considerations, this had been finally done. The report is formal in that the concentration of barracks and work-posts in the direct danger zone of the glacier would have been avoided had the "possibility of a catastrophe been imagined."

To bring an action there were, and still are, many people who refer to the mountain rules of the Swiss Army, which forbid crossing glacier breaking-zones or camping on such places. The reference work published in 1945 entitled "The available water-power resources of Switzerland" advise against

Telegrams and Cables : TRANCOSMOS LONDON

TELEX 24777

Telephone : HOP 4433 (8 Lines)

# COSMOS FREIGHTWAYS AGENCY LIMITED.

## INTERNATIONAL FREIGHT FORWARDERS

By Road, Rail, Sea and Air

1, CATHEDRAL STREET,  
LONDON BRIDGE, LONDON, S.E.1.

REGULAR GROUPAGE SERVICES WITH

# SWITZERLAND

ANGLO-SWISS CUSTOMS EXPERTS.

Agents : WELTIFURRER INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT CO. Ltd., Zurich, Basle, Buchs, Schaffhausen, Geneva, St. Gall.

ALSO AT  
LIVERPOOL, MANCHESTER  
NEWCASTLE-ON-TYNE,  
HULL, BRISTOL, CARDIFF,  
SWANSEA, NEWPORT, Mon.  
GLASGOW.

CONNECTED  
THROUGHOUT  
THE WORLD

OFFICIAL FREIGHT AND  
PASSENGER AGENTS FOR  
SWISSAIR AND ALL AIR LINES  
TO SWITZERLAND AND ALL  
PARTS OF THE WORLD

erecting a dam at Mattmark because of the danger of a rupture of the glacier. These and numerous other unresolved points give ground to the "Schweizerischer Beobachter's" demand for a serious inquest on the responsibilities of the disaster: "Under all circumstances must an action now be brought forward, so that the question of possible guilt be clearly laid out. 88 people have died. It is not for the information media to find out whether they have been the victims of an unforeseeable natural catastrophe, or of a legally punishable negligence."

### THE OBSOLETE LEGAL SYSTEM OF THE VALAIS

Whatever happens, the "information media" will have to be involved in this affair. The judge of enquiry is equally judge of first instance. Such a cumulated responsibility of gathering evidence and passing judgement is a curiosity of the Valais legal system. In the eyes of many a legal expert, this is directly inherited from the past and distinctly outdated. The judge of enquiry has to touch on everything within his jurisdiction (the next instance being cantonal) he has to deal with a vast range of cases, both criminal and civil, and is well known to be overburdened. Due to these exaggerated duties, a supplementary judge of enquiry had to be commissioned to deal with the Mattmark disaster. How long the Valais' judiciary will still be bent on the case, — that is a question to which not even those directly involved have an answer. (Basler Nachrichten)

### A GAME-KEEPER FIRES AT TWO POACHERS

Two inhabitants of the village of Praz-le-Fort in Valais, one in his twenties and the other in his thirties, were caught in the act of poaching. In the middle of the night, they shot down a stag in a forbidden-game zone, two hundred yards away from two game-keepers, who promptly barred their way. The two men stopped their car for a moment and then "charged" the two game-keepers who were thrown to the ground and wounded. One of them had time to take out his pistol and shoot at the tyres of the fleeing car. One of his bullets burst the rear window, whose glass debris wounded one of the poachers slightly. The two men covered two kilometres before abandoning their vehicle and were very soon arrested by the cantonal police, who brought them to the jail of Martigny.

### AN EVENTUAL INTERCANTONAL POLICE FORCE

After the Council of state of Solothurn had presented a motion to the Great Council concerning the Canton's participation to an eventual intercantonal police force, M. Josef Jeger, councillor of state, has informed the press on the effects the creation of such a mobile police force would have.

The Confederation bears all the costs required by the training and

equipment of a corps of 600 men. The Canton would receive complete compensation in costs and salaries for the 8 to 10 men it would contribute to this force. The intercantonal mobile police would comprise a general staff detachment and three companies, one of them formed of contingents from Central Switzerland. In the main, the consequences of the mobile force on the personal and financial plane would be very small. Mr. Jeger thought the set-up was an excellent way of testing intercantonal cooperation. (A.T.S.)

### DIPLOMATIC RESIDENCES

In its opening Autumn session, the Council of State has voted, with fairly good grace, 11.3 million francs of credits already spent on buildings for the diplomatic missions in Geneva, Madrid, Copenhagen, New York, Mexico and Bruxelles. Mr. M. Luder (radical socialist) complained at the urgency that had been put forward to elude the normal procedure of budgetary credit allocation with pre-consultation of the financial delegation. Federal Councillor Spühler replied by deploring the fact that conditions in property market abroad called for very quick action and that this precluded the possibility of abiding to normal procedures.

### THE ASSOCIATION OF EMPLOYERS AGAINST THE ANTI-FOREIGNISATION INITIATIVE

Following its latest reunion, the committee of the central union of Swiss employers' associations has made the following communiqué:

"As regards foreign man-power policy, the committee unanimously approves an energetic struggle to defeat, in the interest of the country, the xenophobe initiative launched by national councillor Schwarzenbach. The majority of the population is in any case becoming more aware of the very serious consequences the adoption of such an initiative would have. As they have already proclaimed in the past, employers rally without reservation to the federal policy of stabilising foreign labour effectives in the best national interest. They are willing to cooperate in devising adequate regulations. The employers will back every effort made in view of improving mutual understanding and contacts with foreign workers, so that tension and misunderstanding may be reduced". (A.T.S.)

### THE SOCIALIST GROUP OF THE FEDERAL CHAMBERS IN FAVOUR OF SWISS ADHESION TO THE U.N.

The socialist group in the Federal chambers, gathered in Berne under the presidency of the national councillor from Vaud, Pierre Graber, has ex-

pressed the wish that Switzerland may soon be an acting member of the United Nations.

Just as the commission for foreign affairs of the National Council, the socialist group declares itself in favour of Swiss adhesion to the U.N. and will shortly be making proposals to this end. (A.T.S.)

### 304,000 SWISS ABROAD

Following information received from our 229 consular districts in 135 countries, the total population of "5th Switzerland" was 304,516 at the beginning of the year, 7,014 or 2.4% more than at the corresponding time the year before. To this figure must be added an estimated 3,850 Swiss nationals undeclared at the consulates.

Almost 30% of this population resides in France, where 92,700 Swiss have their domicile. Then comes North America, with approximately 34,200, Germany with 34,000, Italy and Canada each with 18,450 and Britain, with 14,250 compatriots. In 1950, 30% of the Swiss abroad were double nationals. Today, this proportion has more than doubled to 46%. Swiss population has increased the strongest in the United States, where its effectives have risen by 4,133 or 13.7% since 1950. Next comes Australia, with a 9% increase, Algeria with 7.6%, Canada with 6.4%. The sharpest decrease in Swiss population during that period is found in the Congo, —5.5%, and then Chile, —3.6%. While the Swiss population abroad has increased by 2.4%, the number of citizens who are Swiss only has decreased in 56 countries, remained constant in seven and increased in 72 others.

On emigration from Switzerland, the only figures available concern exclusively Swiss citizens. 17,732 left the country in 1968 and applied at consulates abroad. 54% of them went to European countries, 26% to America, 10% to Africa, 5% to Asia and 4% to Australia and New-Zealand. Against those 17,732 out-goers, 14,667 Swiss returned home, so that the emigrant balance is 3,065, a figure 1,100 smaller than the year before. 11,140 left for professional reasons, and 72% were men. In turn, 20% were either students or in highly qualified professions, 26.6% in industry and 22.7% in banking, commerce and insurance. In the first group, specialists in the exact sciences—engineers, technicians, chemists etc.—were the most strongly represented. Out of 1,013 persons in that category, 252 looked for work in the U.S. and 106 in Canada. The emigrants with responsible jobs in trade preferred the European countries. 1,705 purely Swiss members of 5th Switzerland have died last year against 1,068 births. This means that the increase in the strength of the Swiss population abroad is solely due to emigration from the motherland. (Basler Nachrichten)