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HOME NEWS

BANKRUPT BANKERS TRIED IN BASLE

A Basle court sentenced American ex-banker Paul Erdman and other former leading officials of the United California Bank (UCB) in Basle to prison terms ranging from two-and-a-quarter to nine years.

The bank, a Swiss subsidiary of the UCB in Los Angeles, collapsed in 1970 after losing about 200 million Swiss francs (about £17 million sterling at prevailing exchange rates).

The crash, biggest in Swiss history, was blamed on speculative dealings in cocoa and silver futures.

The Basle correctional court sentenced Mr. Erdman in his absence to nine years imprisonment, ordered him to pay a fine of 20,000 francs (about £2,500 sterling) and barred him from entering Switzerland for 15 years.

Mr. Erdman, who was vice-president of the bank, did not appear when the trial began last October, and lost his bail money of 400,000 francs (about £50,000 sterling).

The accused were found guilty of repeated fraud, forgery, fraudulent acquisition of falsified certificates, dishonest management and giving false information on commercial companies.

Sentences for the other directors and deputy directors, all of them Swiss, were as follows:

Mr. Alfred Kaltenbach — five years imprisonment and 20,000 franc fine.

Mr. Beat Schweizer — three years imprisonment and 10,000 franc (about £1,250 sterling) fine.

Mr. Bernhard Kuemmerli — five years and eight months imprisonment plus 20,000 franc fine.

Mr. Helmuth Brutschi — two years and three months imprisonment plus 15,000 franc (about £2,000 sterling) fine.

Huge explosion in Basle

A resounding explosion rocked the Schweizerhalle area of Basle when a steel tank containing a nitrobenzol-based chemical blew up in a Ciba-Geigy workshop, wounding 23 persons and shattering windows in the neighbourhood. The thrust of the explosion disintegrated the tank completely and projected parts of it through a concrete floor to the workshop below. Damages to the building were estimated at several hundred thousand francs.

COMMENT

1974 MAY BE THE YEAR OF THE JURA

The Jura may come to the forefront of Swiss news this year. A plebiscite is planned for late June which will give the people of the Jura an opportunity to state their position on the separation issue. But this operation seems doomed from the outset because the Separatists have asked their members to deprive it of all meaning by voting with the anti-separatists while the third force, known as *Mouvement pour l'Unité du Jura*, has asked its members either to vote against Separation or cast a blank vote.

The past three years have not seen the slightest progress towards a solution to the Jura problem. Three years ago the Commission of Four Wise Men chaired by Mr. Max Petitpierre, former President of the Confederation and Switzerland's leading post-war statesman, came out with proposals for the future of the Jura. Briefly, the people of the French-speaking areas of Canton Berne were offered the choice between the status quo, total independence from Berne and autonomy within the Canton. The three solutions are defended by as many movements.

The Separatists naturally want to create a new canton but reject the political steps recommended to achieve this by the Mediatory Commission. The reasons for this also explain their planned attitude at the June plebiscite. They claim that people who have lived only three months in the Jura should not be allowed to vote on the future of the area, as provided for by a 1970 Amendment to the Bernese Constitution. Secondly, they claim that the thousands of citizens of Jurassien origin living across Switzerland should be allowed to vote on the Separation Issue. This is forbidden by the Federal Constitution which only allows one to vote on matters relating to one's canton or commune of residence.

The Separatists are therefore not prepared to take part in any form of vote or democratic procedure to determine the future of their province barring an amendment of the Bernese and Federal Constitutions, because they stand to lose at any plebiscite asking Jurassians to choose between separation and continued membership to Berne. They

lost in a similar vote during the middle fifties. Far from considering themselves a minority, the Separatists claimed that the outcome of that vote was due to a strong "imported" German-speaking element. The German-Swiss who have settled in the Jura — particularly in the areas above Biel — are naturally content to live under the aegis of Berne. Their French-speaking opponents deny them the right of "true Jurassians". Allowing them to vote on the Jura would be like bringing white colonists and black natives together to vote together on the issue of independence, they claim.

The Third Force, on which many hopes have been placed, has never had a serious impact on Jurassien opinion and has suffered severe defeat in the Cantonal Parliament in its efforts to increase Jurassien parliamentary representation in Berne. The Third Force believes that an independent Jura including both the Separatist and anti-Separatist areas would soon disintegrate and would be content with a special status within Berne. This demand is sneered at by the Separatists and ignored by the anti-Separatists, whose leadership, *l'Union des Patriotes Jurassiens*, is strongly committed to a continuance of the actual structure.

In its effort to respect the country's federal traditions, the Federal Government has steered clear of the Jura affair although it has had discussions with the parties concerned and members of the Mediatory Commission. For the past 25 years, the Jura problem has been considered primarily as a Bernese affair. The Separatists and Third Force are now calling for federal intervention, though not for the same reasons. What such an intervention can hope to achieve is not clear since the attitude of the Separatists and the "Old Canton" have not changed. Berne has gone some way in allowing the Jura to determine its own future, but this is considered as insufficient by the *Rassemblement Jurassien*.

The great body of Swiss opinion has condemned the Separatists and their various demonstrations in the capital and elsewhere. It is difficult to say whether their position has gained ground in the Jura. It is more likely that the various regionally and religiously-rooted tendencies have not spread out from their geographical confines, but hardened and increased the danger of a split of the Jura.

P.M.B.