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|---------------------|---|
| 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: | - (1984) |
| Heft: | 1811 |
| Artikel: | Abolish 1984, and call this year one! |
| Autor: | Farmer, Colin |
| DOI: | https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-687109 |

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Abolish 1984, and call this Year One!

A CAMPAIGN has been launched in Switzerland calling for the Orwellian year of 1984 to be abolished.

More than 700 citizens here have signed a petition to the government, urging an amendment to the federal constitution which would permit Switzerland to divide up the Christian era into periods of 1983 years.

This would have meant January 1 this year

becoming the first day of year one instead.

The Swiss literary review *Notiz*, which backed the petition, said the campaign was intended "to effectively prevent Orwellian conditions in Switzerland".

But the move has little more than symbolic significance. A government spokesman confirmed receipt of the petition, but said the organisers had launched their campaign "a

little on the late side".

He said the group had originally planned to seek a nationwide referendum on the issue by collecting the required 100,000 signatures. But even then, he told them, it would have taken until 1989 at the earliest for the proposed amendment to be put to a federal vote.

According to a recent public opinion poll here, the Swiss in fact have little fear of 1984. Only 14 per cent of those questioned thought that state control of the individual was on the increase.

★ ★ ★

Switzerland's leading arms manufacturer, working with blueprints which mysteriously reached the west, is building a Russian rocket intended to maintain Swiss supremacy – in the exclusive sport of bobsledding.

The cigar-shaped two-man Soviet bobsleds registered sensational times when they made their debut at recent international trials in West Germany, alarming the Swiss who have

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Colin Farmer

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won more gold medals in the sport than any other nation.

Erwin Brazerol, president of the Swiss Bobsled Federation, said he had obtained blueprints of the Soviet model – promptly dubbed “rocket” in the press – in the hope of finding a manufacturer to copy it. He declined to say how he got the plans.

The sled, rumoured to have been designed at a Soviet space centre, features what Brazerol terms “revolutionary aerodynamics” with a hood much thinner than those of conventional sleds and with runners protruding to make them conform to international standards.

Contraves, a subdivision of the Swiss Oerlikon-Buehrle concern best known for its anti-aircraft systems, agreed to build two or three sleds at cost price and even found volunteers to do the job during a recent holiday period when the plant usually shuts.

The Swiss were hoping to have the new sleds ready for the Sarajevo Winter Olympics.

But there were also less enthusiastic comments on the new sled. The Swiss weekly **Sport** claimed the crew was ‘virtually un-

protected’ in a crash. ‘If the bob topples, the full weight is on the athletes’ heads,’ it said.

Four years ago, a West German ‘wonder weapon’ created a similar stir among bobsledders. It was a super-long four-man job designed by Opel, a subsidiary of General Motors, and co-financed by the Bonn government.

After some excellent times in early tests, it failed in actual races and West Germany’s leading bobsledder even refused to drive it, saying it was ‘too dangerous’.

★ ★ ★

THE Swiss Medical Federation has warned doctors that under Swiss law it is illegal to perform female circumcision operations.

The Federation’s statement describes these ‘ritual sexual mutilations’ as ‘degrading and cruel’. But it said doctors and hospitals in Switzerland and elsewhere in Europe are increasingly being asked to carry out these operations on the request of foreign parents who wished to continue with the customs of their native country.

The Federation said such customs might be acceptable in a different culture but they

were ‘in violent contravention of basic human rights’, especially as they are usually inflicted on minors.

The Federation’s medical ethics committee concluded it was ethically inadmissible that they should be tolerated in Switzerland.

The practice was common in East Africa and regions south of the Sahara, said a Federation spokesman.

★ ★ ★

SWISS deep sea explorer Jacques Piccard hopes to lead an expedition this spring to raise a British-built torpedo boat which sank on Italy’s Lake Maggiore nearly 90 years ago.

The “Locusta” was used by Italian customs men to patrol the lake (which straddles the frontier with Switzerland) against smugglers.

The 13.5-tonne boat, one of several hundred built by Britain’s Thornycroft shipyard, went down in a storm in 1896 with its full compliment of four police officers and eight sailors.

It now lies at a depth of 120 feet partly covered in mud, but appears to have been perfectly preserved. The expedition will try to raise the “Locusta” using a submarine with an

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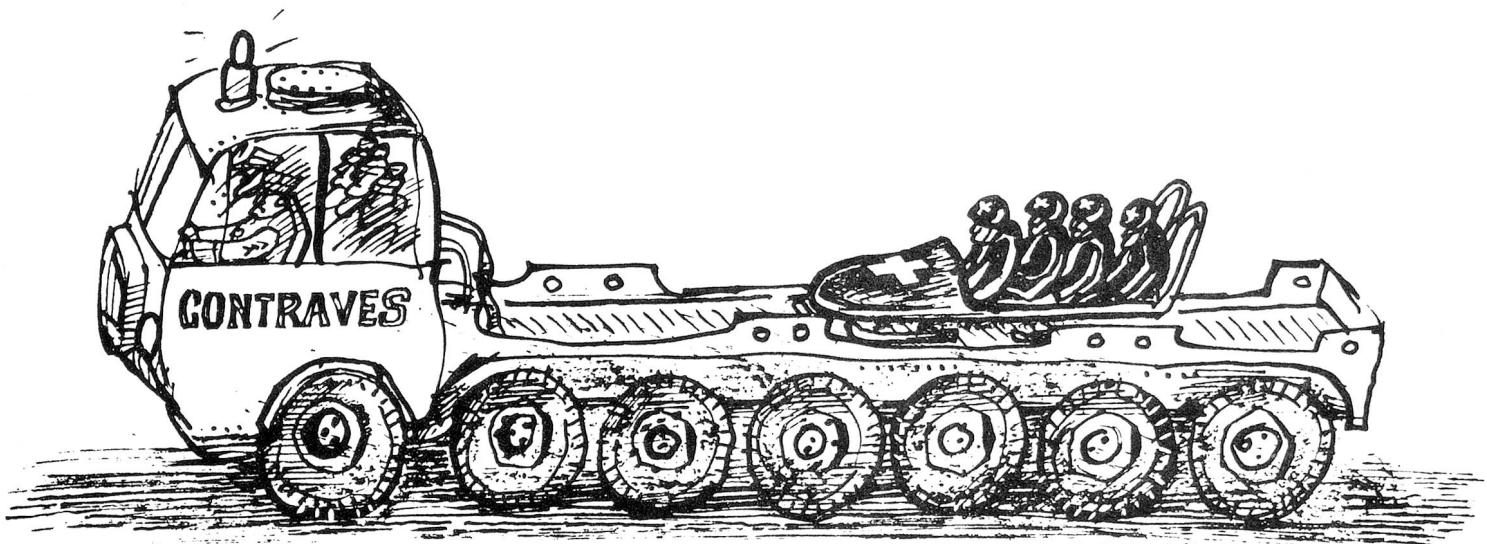
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observation chamber slung beneath it.

Piccard, who is 61, is the son of deep-sea diver and record-breaking balloonist Auguste Piccard who died in 1962 and whose birth centenary is being celebrated this year.

★ ★ ★

SWISS skier Sylvain Saudan, who specialises in achieving the "impossible", has announced plans here for his next death-defying descent - down Mount Everest.

Saudan - who comes from one of Switzerland's most mountainous cantons, the Valais - said he had applied to Nepalese authorities for permission to tackle Everest, at 29,028ft the world's highest peak.

He hopes to make the ascent on foot, and

the descent on skis - without having to carry an oxygen supply. Saudan is also planning a similar conquest of the 28,250ft K2 peak in Kashmir, the world's second highest mountain.

He has already skied down the 26,810ft Dhaulagiri in Nepal, the 20,320ft Mount McKinley in Alaska, as well as Mont Blanc and other European peaks.

★ ★ ★

A SWISS newspaper reader has complained that the media in his country devotes too much coverage to Britain's Royal Family and not enough to the world's problems.

In a letter to the *Berner Zeitung* the reader writes: "The UN Secretary General confirmed

this week that five million children starve to death in Africa every year - equal to almost the entire population of Switzerland.

"But the media here dismissed these terrible figures in just a few words or did not even mention them at all. They gave more coverage instead to such topics as Lady Di's hairstyles".

★ ★ ★

Switzerland's football league programme resumed on February 25 (as this issue of the *Swiss Observer* was being printed) following the traditional winter break. Latest league tables were published in January's edition.

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