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“THE WHITE WEEK-END OF DEATH”

Weather News from Switzerland

After a reasonably good summer which, however, brought some bad storms and intense hailstorms (damage for 23m. francs, the highest sum ever paid in the 90 years of hailstorm insurance), the autumn weather was generally fine. Valais had the first snow in September, and the cattle on the alpine pastures were taken by surprise, but October was a beautiful month and ideal for the grape harvest. In fact, it was the warmest October ever recorded since weather statistics were started over 200 years ago.

Early in November, a quick change came. It turned very cold, and snow necessitated the closing of several passes. Yet above Locarno, the highest temperature (20° centigrade) since 1935 was registered. And early in December, 2,000kg. of red Vaudois Gamay grapes were harvested in a vineyard where the harvest had seemingly been completed six weeks before!

On 7th December, winter came in earnest. Fourteen passes were closed within hours, and 40cm of snow lay on Jura roads. La Brévine, Swiss Siberia, registered minus 37.5° centigrade, Basle -16 and even the Ticino -6. Christmas was mainly dull and rainy.

Early in January, heavy snowfalls came and snowstorms caused damage, blocked roads and made life difficult, even in some towns where wind velocity reached 100km. per hour. There were accidents, and winter sports events had to be cancelled in several resorts. Geneva, the Grisons and the Saentis district had hurricane-like gales. Electricity cuts, obstructions at Kloten Airport and the first avalanches were reported. 400 ski tourists were cut off in the Flumserberge by snowstorms. Trees were uprooted, and the first serious damage by avalanches was registered, in the Titlis region, the Grisons, the Valais, the Canton of Vaud and Central Switzerland. In the Valais, several villages were without bread, and 99 people had to be evacuated more than once from Truns. On the Great St. Bernard Pass, there were 5 m. of snow on 10th January, and towns like Geneva, St. Gall, Zurich and others were snowed up. Many railway lines were blocked by drifts, fallen trees and avalanches. The “Lotlawine” disrupted the new road in the Loetschental, and hundreds of people were cut off and cars buried in the snow. At Ebligen on the Lake of Brienz, an avalanche destroyed the station building.

The bad weather continued. In towns, like Chur and La Chaux-de-Fonds, all parking had to be prohibited on account of the snow. Basle had the second biggest snowfall since regular snow statistics were started in 1891. Trains were delayed and traffic slowed down. The snow clearing work in Zurich cost 120,000 francs daily.

By 13th January, it was icy cold nearly everywhere from Basle to Geneva, from St. Gall to the South. New snow and a sudden thaw, and nothing could have been more disastrous, for in towns snow slid from roofs and caused accidents. Pipes burst and gutters overflowed, and the rivers and streams rose and rose. Roads became streams. Higher up, more snow fell, and avalanches fell more numerous, interrupting road, rail and air traffic. The road of Noirvaux in the Neuchâtel Jura was obstructed by earth subsidance, uprooted trees and boulders. Five families in the Upper Kloental (Glarus) were cut off for several weeks, and bread was taken to them by ski patrols.

The worst situation was reported from Uri where whole valleys were cut off. Homes had to be evacuated,

and avalanches thundered down the mountainsides. The “Entschigtal” avalanche buried part of the Gottard route for the second time on 11th January.

But in the Ticino — spring with the first oranges harvested at Locarno-Monti and flowering camellias between Ascona and Brissago!

Later in the month, the news became even worse, when new snowfalls and warmer air caused renewed danger of falling avalanches. Above Walenstadt, the infamous “Schattenbachlawine” came down further than ever, cutting off the Sanatorium which could be reached only by patrols carrying food. In the Toggenburg, stables and cattle were destroyed, and the railway service in the Canton of Glarus was badly hampered by new snow. Several Glarus valleys were cut off completely, and help had to be taken there by Army and alpine rescue helicopters. Hay and straw bales were transported for the otherwise starving cattle.

The Kleine Scheidegg, Muerren, and other parts in the Bernese Oberland were cut off, roads in the Vaud impassable, and railways cut either by snowfall or avalanches. The people's canteen at Travennes collapsed — this time not unhappily as it had been scheduled for demolition. In the Valais (Blatten) over half a dozen holiday chalets were destroyed by avalanches, and in the Grisons more and more avalanches were reported, not to forget the troublespots in Central Switzerland. The school Children of Siebnen (Schwyz) were mobilised to feed the starving deer in the Waeggital.

And then came the week-end of death which will go down in the history of the *Landschaft* Davos and the Urnerland as one of tragedy when a total of 23 people lost their lives in avalanche disasters. Near Silenen in the Reusstal, the “Wylerlauri” fell, burying a farm and stables and killing a mother with five children and a man. In other parts, homes and cattle were lost, though no lives.

The Gotthard traffic had to be diverted via the Valais, and day and night work was carried out feverishly to clear roads and rails. The participants of a course on training avalanche dogs on the Stoos were sent to disaster sites, and thanks to immediate help and extensive preparations which had been made before the winter, even worse disasters could be prevented and a number of lives saved. The whole of Central Switzerland was in deep mourning, and all carnival dances were postponed. On the whole, the population faced the danger with stoic calm. The farmers on isolated homesteads remained confident in the face of danger as long as their homes had electricity. Only when power and light supplies failed, did they get tense and frightened, and that is why all electricity failures were put right with the utmost speed.

The other area where people were killed is near Davos where several avalanches caused extensive damage to livestock and homes, and killed 12 people. Pass roads and many subsidiaries were closed, and rail traffic interrupted. Snow clearing apparatus was in use day and night. Traffic blocks made things worse in the lower regions, for many motorists arrived in the Grisons in spite of warnings.

School boys, members of the fire brigade and army rescue teams helped in the efforts to clear the snow from roads, parking places and railway lines, whilst Army helicopters took aid to the upper regions and evacuated men and animals. Once again, the Swiss radio organised a Lucky Chain campaign in aid of the avalanche victims. Ski patrols of the Army assisted the postal services in taking mail to isolated homes and villages. The Red Cross co-operated both on the spot and by collecting monetary

gifts. The alpine rescue service was on continuous duty and contributed invaluable help by transporting food and evacuating people, some to hospital for medical treatment. They also mined a number of avalanches in order to make avalanches fall at the "right" time. Several organisations started collections, and the "Bundesfeierspende" allocated Fr.100,000.— to relief for the victims. The Swiss population has shown great readiness to help in many ways in this, the worst catastrophe for 17 years.

What were the causes of the devastating disaster? Experts consider the so-called "snow fall intensity" as primary cause. Snow collected loosely, and as it showed only slight friction density, the gale-like winds could easily get hold of it. Up to 130km. was the force of the winds, and most avalanches started at an altitude of 2,200 to 2,700 metres.

(Compiled from news received by courtesy of Agence Télégraphique Suisse.)

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