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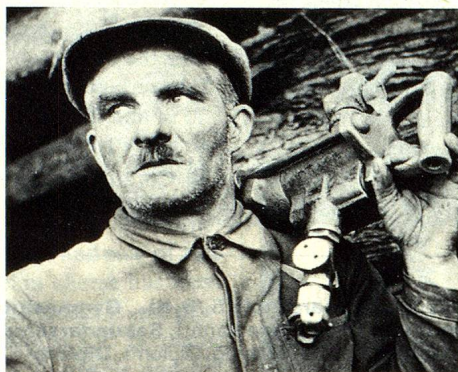
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Mining in Switzerland

«Switzerland is rich in poor mines»: this familiar saying will certainly crop up if you talk about Swiss mining to a geologist. It means that although many different mineral resources are to be found in our country, they are mostly in such small quantities as to be hardly worth while working. Here, an account of our underground riches.

Coal is found in one form or another in almost all parts of the country: anthracite in the Valais, lignite in the Bernese Oberland, bituminous coal along the northern edge of the Alps and slate coal in the border area between Berne and Lucerne (Gondiswil-Zell) as well as in eastern Switzerland. Coal mining was stopped in 1951 although there are still substantial deposits, mainly in the Valais. Iron ore was mined at Gonzen, near Sargans, until 1966 and in the Aargau Fricktal, at Herznach, until 1967. And during the two world wars, mines at Mont Chemin near Martigny (Valais) and near Delsberg were also in operation.

Switzerland is particularly «rich in poor mines» of metals such as lead, zinc or copper, of which, again, small deposits were worked throughout the entire Alpine area over the last few centuries. Today, however, above Goppenstein, near the southern end of the Lötschberg tunnel, the workings of the lead-zinc mine, for example, are falling into decay since they were given up in 1952. Gold is special stuff. It used to be won from drifts and galleries near Gondo on the Simplon, at Calanda (the «Golden Sun» mine) not far from Chur, above Salanfe in the Lower Valais and near Astano in the Ticino; incidentally, here in southern Switzerland,



Miner, Valais, 1947.

the revival of mining is being studied by a foreign enterprise.

Twenty years ago, Switzerland, too, was seized by uranium fever. Attractive, but (at prices then ruling) certainly unrewarding deposits of uranium were to be found east of Martigny in the Lower Valais, in the upper reaches of the Rhine valley near Trun and on the Mürtschenalp, south of the Walensee.

The search for oil and natural gas was blessed with greater success. In 1980, after 30 fruitless drillings, the prospectors at last struck gas at a depth of 17,400 ft at Finsterwald in the Entlebuch region of Canton Lucerne. The deposit here is still being exploited. Next year, preparations for planned further drilling in the Bernese Oberland should be getting under way.

A salt mine was in operation near Bex (Canton of Vaud) in the Rhône valley until only a few years ago. Here, even the «gracious Gentlemen» of the old Berne, under Albrecht von Haller, were already extracting the vital raw material; today the salt is washed out of the rock by water under high pressure, a method also being used in the Rhine valley near Basle. Incidentally, as far as consumption of salt is concerned, Switzerland is completely self-supporting.

The old salt mine of Bex is now open to tourists. After making the round of the galleries and tunnels, visitors refresh themselves in the underground restaurant over cheese *fondue* and white wine. Likewise, the Gonzen iron-ore workings are enjoying a nostalgia-mine tourism. And soon the asphalt mines in Val de Travers are to be opened to the public.

Thus Switzerland is certainly not so poor in raw materials as it is always made out to be. That, because of the inevitable damage to the environment, mining in the grand style is



Sorting coal, Valais, 1947.

not worth while in this country – at least, not in times of peace – need not be regarded as any kind of misfortune. Finally, we must not forget the energetic extraction of raw materials for the construction industry: sand, gravel, gypsum and stone. Indeed this trade could even carry on the mining tradition; the below-ground gypsum quarry of Felsenau in the canton of Aargau is also something of a mine. And there is enough gypsum there for quite a while.

Franz Auf der Maur

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