



Article scientifique

Article

2016

Published version

Open Access

This is the published version of the publication, made available in accordance with the publisher's policy.

---

Mattmark, 30 August 1965: A catastrophe that changed Switzerland's  
perception of Italian migrants

---

Ricciardi, Toni

**How to cite**

RICCIARDI, Toni. Mattmark, 30 August 1965: A catastrophe that changed Switzerland's perception of Italian migrants. In: Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Geschichte, 2016, vol. 66, n° 3, p. 401–419.

This publication URL: <https://archive-ouverte.unige.ch/unige:91827>

## Mattmark, 30 August 1965: A catastrophe that changed Switzerland's perception of Italian migrants

Toni Ricciardi

---

### **Mattmark, 30 August 1965: A catastrophe that changed Switzerland's perception of Italian migrants**

The Mattmark tragedy of August 30th, 1965 fuelled the debate in Switzerland, which had already been going on for a few years, regarding the country's largely uncontrolled economic development. This development required ever more foreign labour – especially for big infrastructural projects – including low-skilled labour, which had been abandoned by the Swiss. For the Italian community in Switzerland, the tragedy represented an opportunity to reflect on the meaning of their presence in a country in which they were not accepted and were not well integrated. Using the Mattmark tragedy as a case study, this paper demonstrates how the identitarian construction of Switzerland as a whole, and its relationship with foreigners, is strongly linked to the identitarian construction of the Canton of Valais, where the tragedy occurred. Mattmark represents a major turning point in Switzerland's long and tormented relationship with foreigners: it changed Switzerland's perception of foreigners and of the Swiss themselves and resulted in significant social, media-related and political changes, especially regarding the subject of safety at work.

---

The Saas Valley is known in Italy by the lucky ones who go skiing in Switzerland, by those who go there to play golf, those who travel abroad by car in summer, regularly stay at big hotels or own villas in the spruce forest. But in Cosenza, Avellino, Forli and Belluno, the names of Saas, Allalinhorn, Saas-Fee, Saas-Almagell, Saas-Balen and Saas-Grund are meaningless.

[...] Emigration is a story that consumes you but can also take you far and uplift you. A Season? A year? Five years? Your whole life? Even the poorest and humblest unskilled worker, who did not even finish primary school, while getting on a train or a bus, thinks of those who have returned rich, who con-

---

Toni Ricciardi, Département de Sociologie, Université de Genève, toni.ricciardi@unige.ch

quered the Americas, who became powerful and famous. [...] What does it matter if at the base of so many conquests sprawl cemeteries as far as the eye can see? Wealth, glory, great opportunity await across the border. Here it is, alas, the glory, wretched youth. The newspapers' front pages, the radio and TV broadcasts, they are for you. These headlines about you are bigger than those for Sofia Loren and the astronauts. Your names printed in big letters, telegrams from heads of state, prayers from bishops, cardinals and the Pope, brigades deployed, airplanes and helicopters flying back and forth.<sup>1</sup>

On 30 August 1965, in the Canton of Valais, on the hillside of the Allalin Glacier, the greatest catastrophe of construction industry in Swiss history, and the last big tragedy of Italian emigration, occurred. Near the village of Mattmark, one of the most important infrastructure projects in Europe was being constructed – an enormous dam that would take 15 years to complete.<sup>2</sup>

Over the preceding days, there were signs, which the management company responsible for the construction ignored, that the Allalin Glacier had started to shift. At 5:15 p.m. that Monday, near the end of their 11-hour shift, workers at the site felt a cold gust of wind. Sensing that something was about to happen, they began running towards the construction sheds. Just moments later, part of the glacier collapsed and buried those same sheds under more than 50 metres of ice, gravel and rocks.<sup>3</sup> Eighty-eight people died.

Fifty-six of the victims were Italian, 23 were Swiss, four Spanish, two Austrian, two were German and one stateless. Two were women, although nobody ever mentioned them in media reports that followed. Thirty-eight were unmarried and 50 were married; they left 85 children behind.<sup>4</sup> The rescue operations were complex and emotionally moving,

- 1 The bitter tale is the title Dino Buzzati gave to the opinion article from which this quotation is taken in the 1 September 1965 issue of *Corriere della Sera*.
- 2 This paper is one of the results of the project Mattmark, 50 ans après. Une analyse socio-historique – Swiss National Science Foundation [100011\_149554/1 – 2013/2016], led by Sandro Cattacin, University of Geneva. The main publications of the project include: Toni Ricciardi, Sandro Cattacin (ed.), *Studi Emigrazione/Migration Studies LI* (2014); Toni Ricciardi, *Morire a Mattmark. L'ultima tragedia dell'emigrazione italiana*, Roma 2015; Toni Ricciardi, Sandro Cattacin, Rémi Baudouï, *Mattmark*, 30. August 1965. *Die Katastrophe*, Zürich/Genf 2015; Toni Ricciardi, Sandro Cattacin, Rémi Baudouï, *Mattmark*, 30 août 1965. *La catastrophe*, Zurich/Genève 2015; Sandro Cattacin, Toni Ricciardi, Irina Radu (éd.), *La catastrophe de Mattmark dans la presse. Analyse de la presse écrite*, Sociograph – Sociological Research Studies 20, Université de Genève, 2015; Sandro Cattacin, Toni Ricciardi, Irina Radu (éd.), *La catastrophe de Mattmark. Aspects sociologiques*, Sociograph – Sociological Research Studies 21, Université de Genève 2015.
- 3 Unia, *Non dimentichiamo Mattmark. Mattmark nie vergessen. Ne jamais oublier Mattmark*, Berne 2005, p. 15.
- 4 Archives de l'Etat du Valais (AEV) 3580-1993/7, 1, Note concernant la «Fondation Suisse de Mattmark», 29 août 1985.

as the co-workers themselves were the first, together with the army, to retrieve the bodies – or what remained of them.

The Mattmark catastrophe resonated at least as deeply as the one in Marcinelle, Belgium, in 1956, in which 262 miners were killed.<sup>5</sup> As in Marcinelle – where for the first time in history television and radio followed the tragic moments of the waiting and the grieving live – over two hundred journalists and correspondents came to the site of the tragedy. The images of sheds buried under over 2 million cubic metres of ice and debris were shown all over the globe.

The catastrophe elicited a strong reaction throughout Europe, and it remains the worst industrial accident in Swiss history.<sup>6</sup> The Swiss public was profoundly shocked by the tragedy, as it was the first time that Swiss citizens and foreigners died side by side in an industrial accident. Although the Mattmark tragedy, perhaps even more than that in Marcinelle, received enormous attention from the media and the public, it has disappeared from collective memory. The oblivion into which this tragic chapter of Italian emigration, and of recent Swiss history more generally, has led us to refer to Mattmark as the «Forgotten Marcinelle».<sup>7</sup>

By examining the tragedy, this paper demonstrates how Mattmark and 1965 represent a major turning point in the long and tormented presence of foreigners in Switzerland on different levels: society, media, political, and work safety. The year is symbolic for three other reasons as well: first of all, in 1965 Switzerland concluded its second labour-recruitment agreement with Italy, in the same year Switzerland's first xenophobic referendum was proposed (even if it was withdrawn and never came to the ballots) and, most importantly, seasonal foreign workers began to settle in the country for the first time.<sup>8</sup> How did Mattmark change Switzerland's perception of foreigners and of the Swiss themselves? What social, media-related and political changes resulted from the tragedy, especially regarding the subject of work safety? The catastrophe opened

5 On 8 August 1956, in the Belgian city of Marcinelle, in the mining district of Charleroi, the first great tragedy of post-Second World War Italian emigration occurred. Of the 262 miners who were killed, 136 were Italian. See, Anne Morelli, *L'appel à la main d'œuvre italienne pour les charbonnages et sa prise en charge à son arrivée en Belgique dans l'immédiat après-guerre*, in: *Revue belge d'histoire contemporaine*, XIX/n° 1–2 (1988), pp. 83–130; Anne Morelli, *La communauté italienne de Belgique de 1890 à nos jours*, in: *Cahiers de clio* 71 (1982), pp. 67–73; Alain Forti, *Da Roma a Marcinelle*, Marcinelle 2004; Julie Urbain, Marie-Louise De Roeck, Paul Lootens, *Tutti cadaveri. Le procès de la catastrophe du Bois du Cazier à Marcinelle*, Bruxelles 2006; Toni Ricciardi, *Marcinelle 1956. Quando la vita valeva meno del carbone*, Roma 2016.

6 Unia, *Non dimentichiamo Mattmark*, p. 16.

7 Toni Ricciardi, *Associazionismo ed emigrazione. Storia delle Colonie Libere e degli italiani in Svizzera*, Roma, Bari 2013, p. 193.

8 Ricciardi, *Morire a Mattmark*, p. 108.

the way for subsequent discussions regarding migrant labour: after Mattmark, migrants became human beings who worked and risked their lives in Switzerland. Also media changed and raised awareness of the risks associated with the accelerated exploitation of natural resources. From the political point of view, the debate between the institutions of the two countries was very heated, and for more than a decade (1965–1975) Swiss politics would be characterised by issues related to labour and its protection. As far as work safety is concerned, Mattmark would be crucial for the revamping of work-safety standards in infrastructure construction (internationally referred to as the «Mattmark model») and would open the debate on civil protection in disasters, with the creation of a permanent specialised international body.<sup>9</sup>

### Development of an identity issue

Hydroelectric energy, to this day Switzerland's main source of electricity, is the second-last source of electricity to have been developed in the country – the last one being nuclear energy – and it was not developed significantly until the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> Thanks to this source of energy, the country's industrial sector grew and its process of modernisation accelerated. The Mattmark tragedy occurred just when the Canton of Valais – in which two-thirds of Switzerland's glaciers are located and historically one of the most peculiar Swiss «individualities»<sup>11</sup> – was undergoing a transition to the so-called «new politics of industrialisation».<sup>12</sup>

To understand the importance of the Mattmark tragedy, we need to refer briefly to the process through which Switzerland's identity construction occurred, and to how that identity construction is linked to the Canton of Valais and, therefore, to the development of the production of energy. An authentic national identity can only be constructed by establishing a continuity with that nation's past. The alpine landscape and its small villages have played a central role in the construction of Switzerland's national identity, which occurred at the end of the eighteenth cen-

9 Toni Ricciardi, Sandro Cattacin, Introduzione, in: Studi Emigrazione / Migration Studies LI (2014), pp. 547–555.

10 For further information on modernization, electrification, industrialization of Switzerland see, David Gugerli, Redeströme. Zur Elektrifizierung der Schweiz 1880–1914, Zürich 1996.

11 Pierre Gabert, Paul Guichonnet, Les Alpes et les Etats alpins, Paris 1965, p. 154.

12 Beat Kaufmann, Die Entwicklung des Wallis vom Agrar- zum Industriekanton, Winterthur 1965, p. 189.

ture with the concept of «nationalised nature».<sup>13</sup> In the nineteenth century, Switzerland understood itself as a country steeped in the political values of freedom and democracy, which were blended with a mythical history, in particular with the folk hero William Tell. This representation, which corresponded to those of other nations as well, helped integrate the Confederation into the new world order, allowing it at the same time to preserve its sovereignty and to be included, from 1914, among the great industrialised nations.<sup>14</sup> However, as in the rest of Continental Europe, economic growth, based on a blind faith in technological progress, was confronted with serious anti-liberal criticism: economic development and modernisation were gradually dissolving the existing Swiss identity.<sup>15</sup> The landscape's features, idyllic till then, were changing visually and materially, as were the nation's centuries-old traditions.<sup>16</sup>

Unsettled by the advent of nationalism in neighbouring states, perplexed about the high number of foreigners settling in the country and disoriented by the social transformations they perceived as symptoms of degeneration, numerous Swiss intellectuals at the beginning of the twentieth century questioned themselves about a national identity that was difficult to define.<sup>17</sup> The 1910 census, recording a slight increase in immigration, placed the matter of foreigners at the core of public debate.<sup>18</sup> «Überfremdung» (overforeignisation), it was widely believed, threatened the independence and national identity of the country by introducing «non-Swiss» values.<sup>19</sup> But foreigners did not only come for economic reasons or as political exiles. They were also attracted by tourism, which had

13 See, in particular: François Walter, *Les Suisses et l'environnement. Une histoire du rapport à la nature du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle à nos jours*, Genève 1990, p. 59; Oliver Zimmer, *In Search of Natural Identity. Alpine Landscape and the Reconstruction of the Swiss Nation*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History. An International Quarterly* XL/n° 1 (1998), p. 643; Ernst Bovet, *Nationalité*, in: *Wissen und Leben* V, 1. Oktober 1909 – 15. März 1910, p. 441.

14 Hans Ulrich Jost, *La culture politique du petit Etat dans l'ombre des grandes puissances*, in: D. Kosári (dir.), *Les «petits Etats» face aux changements culturels, politiques et économiques de 1750 à 1914*, Lausanne 1985, p. 27; Ruffieux, Roland, *La Suisse des radicaux (1848–1914)*, in: Jean-Claude Favez (dir.), *Nouvelle Histoire de la Suisse et des Suisses*, Lausanne 1986, p. 613.

15 Karl Ditt, *Nature Conservation in England and Germany, 1900–1970. Forerunner of Environmental Protection?*, in: *Contemporary European History* V (1996), p. 4.

16 See, Anne-Marie Thiesse, *La création des identités nationales. Europe XVIII<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris 1999; Gérard Noiriel, *Etat, Nation et Immigration*, Paris 2001; Georg Kreis, *La question de l'identité nationale*, in: Paul Huber (dir.), *Les Suisses. Modes de vie, traditions, mentalités*, Lausanne 1992, pp. 781–800; Zimmer, *In Search of Natural Identity*.

17 Alain Clavien, *Les Helvétistes. Intellectuels et politiques en Suisse romande au début du siècle*, Lausanne 1993, p. 7.

18 Gérald Arlettaz, *Démographie et identité nationale (1850–1914). La Suisse et la question des étrangers*, in: *Etudes et Sources* 11 (1985), p. 115.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 125.

begun during the *Belle Epoque*, thanks especially to the construction of the great road tunnels. Traces of this particular identity still persist, especially in the Canton of Valais, even despite the significant changes that have occurred in the canton in the twentieth century, changes that are exemplified by the fact that, almost 50 years after Mattmark, it submitted «Italianità», or Italian cultural heritage, as an intangible good to be acknowledged by UNESCO.<sup>20</sup>

### **Hydroelectricity as a factor of industrialisation**

Switzerland, being poor in coal, concentrated on hydroelectricity. From the beginning, it was clear that Valais was the ideal location for hydroelectricity. Already in 1891, it signed an agreement to grant the use of the waters of the Rhône River for hydroelectric production, and new industries gradually transformed the territory and its local communities.<sup>21</sup> While there were no more than a dozen factories in the canton in 1890, the number had more than doubled by the beginning of the twentieth century and had reached 82 by the end of the Great War.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, by 1910, more than 50 per cent of the canton's exports consisted of manufactured goods.<sup>23</sup> From then on, the presence of factories, concentrated close to the railroad (Monthey, Martigny, Brig), was characteristic of the secondary sector. During the two world wars, the same factories were major exporters in the sectors of strategic products and explosives.<sup>24</sup> The emblem of the change was the construction of the Dixence Dam (1929–1936).

Despite the increasing importance of industry, two-thirds of the canton's economy remained agricultural until after the end of the Second World War, when Switzerland reopened its borders and started to import food from neighbouring Italy, which cost a tenth as much as local prod-

20 In 2008, Switzerland ratified the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, which has made it possible for Switzerland to submit a limited number of items of intangible cultural heritage as candidates for protection, and to contribute to the valorisation and protection of tradition at an international level. It is in this context that the Canton of Valais has submitted the «Italianità» as one of its intangible goods.

21 Kaufmann, *Die Entwicklung des Wallis*, p. 33.

22 Dorit Unnasch, *Der Auftakt zur Industrialisierung im Wallis. Die kleineren und mittleren Unternehmen zwischen 1880 und 1914*, in: Werner Bellwald, Sandro Guzzi-Hebb (Hg.), *Ein industriefeindliches Volk. Fabriken und Arbeiter in den Walliser Bergen*, Baden 2006, pp. 179–181.

23 Myriam Evéquoz-Dayen, *Secteur secondaire*, in: DHS, <http://www.hls-dhs-dss.ch/textes/f/I7396.php> (30.8.2013).

24 *Ibid.*

ucts.<sup>25</sup> The move away from agriculture was hastened by the agricultural crisis of 1948–1950, itself partly a product of the flood in 1949 and the drought the following year. It became necessary to continue industrialising.

From the end of the 1940s until the mid-1970s oil crisis, Valais underwent its Second Industrial Revolution, an unprecedented economic transformation that was focused on the most valuable element for industry: energy.<sup>26</sup> The fact that 62 per cent of all Swiss glaciers were located in Valais consolidated its position as the prime provider of electricity for the entire Confederation.<sup>27</sup> In 1946, there were already 16 projects to increase the canton's hydroelectric production, projects that would transform the canton into a huge construction site until the end of the 1960s.<sup>28</sup> In 1947, concessions were granted for the Mauvoisin Dam, under the supervision of Elektro-Watt of Zurich, and the planning and construction of the biggest dam in Valais, the Grande Dixence (1950–1964), which replaced the Dixence buttress dam (1929–1935), began thereafter.<sup>29</sup>

For the realisation of these construction projects, the same two elements as for the earlier construction of the tunnels were necessary: communications infrastructure (railways and mainly roads) and a foreign workforce. Hydroelectricity and the construction it required, tourism and, to a smaller extent, the metallurgical and agricultural sectors, needed cheap labour, and seasonal workers, as in the rest of the country, were used to fill this need. Between the two world wars, the population employed in industry – in particular in the construction sector – was 9 per cent. In the 1950s, there was significant shortage of workers, due mainly to the simultaneous construction of two hydroelectric sites. By 1955, the construction sector employed more than 30 per cent of the active population in the canton, and more than 45 per cent in some districts.<sup>30</sup> The boom in foreigners occurred in the mid-1960s: in the three years between 1963 and 1965, the construction sector in Valais alone em-

25 Kaufmann, *Die Entwicklung des Wallis*, p. 94.

26 Myriam Évéquoz-Dayen, *Le Valais et les étrangers depuis 1945*, in: Groupe Valaisan de Sciences Humaines (dir.), *Le Valais et les Etrangers XIX<sup>e</sup>–XX<sup>e</sup>*, Sion 1992, p. 128.

27 Gabert, Guichonnet, *Les Alpes*, p. 156.

28 Évéquoz-Dayen, *Le Valais*, p. 128.

29 The Grande Dixence, 285 metres high, is the highest gravity dam in the world, with a reservoir capacity of 400 million cubic metres (Dix Lake), and includes a hydrogeological basin of 600 square kilometres. See, Camille Dayer, *Le Millénaire de la Dixence*, Martigny 1981; Elisabeth Logean, *Du berger au mineur. La construction du barrage de la Grande Dixence (1951–1962) entre paix sociale et crise d'identité*, Sierre 2000.

30 Évéquoz-Dayen, *Le Valais*, p. 131.

ployed more than 15,000 foreigners.<sup>31</sup> Another characteristic that distinguished Valais in this period was that, while other areas of Switzerland «industrialised themselves», Valais Canton «was industrialised»;<sup>32</sup> that is, foreigners contributed to its development. And the Mattmark construction site would mark yet another turning point:

The construction of the Mattmark hydroelectric plant will create remarkable advantages for the population. [...] Taking into account that the preliminary work will start shortly, [...] the taxes and water rights that the municipalities will receive allow us to understand the importance of this project and the advantages it will bring to the population of these valleys, including its workers who have already participated in similar construction projects.<sup>33</sup>

In the spring of 1954, these were the hopes nurtured by the project that would result, 15 years later, in the completion of the largest earth-fill dam in Europe at the time. In these few words of local news, we find all the elements of the new ideological matrix of the industrialisation of Valais. Instead, however, Mattmark would become one of the grimmest episodes in recent Swiss history.

Elektro-Watt, the company that obtained the contract for this major work, despite strong competition from two other companies (Grande Dixence and especially Lonza SA), in 1954 presented a preliminary project plan that largely corresponds to the finished work.<sup>34</sup> The importance of obtaining this contract was linked to the right to the use of the energy produced. Competition between hydroelectric companies was eliminated in 1959 with the foundation of the Kraftwerke Mattmark AG (Mattmark Hydroelectric Company), a state-controlled corporation<sup>35</sup> in which these companies were involved. These companies, together with Elektro-Watt, shared the right to the use of the energy produced, to the detriment of local communities,<sup>36</sup> and it took two years of negotiations (1954–1956) between local communities and Elektro-Watt to find a solution to the issue.<sup>37</sup> The city councils, compelled to grant the right to the use of the

31 *Ibid.*

32 Kaufmann, *Die Entwicklung des Wallis*, p. 150.

33 *Nouvelliste Valaisan*, 27 mai 1954.

34 Céline Burgener, *Die Katastrophe von Mattmark*, in: *Wir Walser* 51/2 (2013), p. 37.

35 Kraftwerke Mattmark AG was established on 19 March 1959. See, *Elektro-Watt & Suisselectra, Kraftwerke Mattmark AG, Schlussbericht über den Bau und die Inbetriebnahme der Anlagen der Kraftwerke Mattmark AG 1954–1969*, Zürich 1969, p. 8.

36 Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv (BAR), E4110A 1968/197\_190, *Elektro-Watt, Beschwerde gegen Staatsrat Wallis betr. Verteilung de Wassers des Saas- und Nicolaitales; Elektro-Watt, Note sur l'utilisation des eaux de la rive droite de la Vallée de Zermatt*, 15.11.1954; AEV, 6030\_628, *Aménagement des forces hydrauliques valaisannes sur la rive gauche du Rhône*, 28 juillet 1954.

37 In these two years, Elektro-Watt obtained the concession from the local authorities. See, *Elektro-Watt & Suisselectra, Kraftwerke Mattmark AG, Schlussbericht*, p. 1.

electricity produced, in exchange obtained, after enough political pressure, infrastructure – roads that facilitated a way out from isolation, but which were also widely used to reach the construction site. But the strategic importance of the Mattmark Dam can be understood best through numbers.

### **Mattmark in numbers**

Mattmark's electrical production – deriving from a basin of 1.76 km<sup>2</sup>, with a reservoir that can contain 100 million of m<sup>3</sup> of water a year – is 650 GWh today, roughly corresponding to the energy demand of about 150,000 families.<sup>38</sup> It took 15 years to complete the project (the preliminary project began in 1954, and the dam was completed in 1969). It required 97,000 tonnes of concrete, 2,800 of steel, 1,500 of explosives, 81 million kWh of energy, 51 km of tunnels to convey the waters and, above all, 14 million hours of work.<sup>39</sup> The maximum number of people employed was reached in the five-year period between 1961 and 1965 (minimum 700, maximum 1,400), with a peak in 1963. After the catastrophe, the average number of workers was 200. The number of companies involved in the works, directly and indirectly, including contractors, sub-contractors and suppliers, was 89.<sup>40</sup>

The total cost of the operation was 490 million Swiss francs, 110 million more than the estimated initial cost of 380 million. The extra costs were a result of the following: 56 million due to the catastrophe, 21 million for fiscal readjustments and an increase in the tax rate over the years and 33 million for salary adjustments.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, by 1964, one year before the tragedy, there were already cost overruns of 40 million Swiss francs. That year, during the annual general meeting of the Swiss Society for Soil Mechanics and Foundation Works, the cost overruns, caused by the incentives given to labour, were the most highlighted issue.<sup>42</sup>

38 Vincent Monnet, Anton Vos, Quand les Barrages devront se serrer la ceinture, in: Campus. Le magazine scientifique de l'Université de Genève 115 (2014), p. 32.

39 Elektro-Watt & Suisselectra, Kraftwerke Mattmark AG, Schlussbericht, p. 8.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 11–15.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

42 Wilfred Eng, Einige Gedanken zur Mechanisierung auf grossen Tiefbaustellen, in: SGBF (dir.), Staudamm Mattmark. Vorträge, gehalten anlässlich der Herbsttagung der Schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Bodenmechanik und Fundamentstechnik in Brig am 2./3. Oktober 1964, Brig 1965, pp. 5–6.

Almost 80 per cent of the material used for the construction came from the lateral moraines of the Schwarzenberg and Allalin Glaciers,<sup>43</sup> which was a significant cost factor:

[...] usually, the quarry work was the most expensive element. Recent times have seen a preoccupying increase in the difficulties in hiring seasonal workers, which should live on 1,500 to 1,700 hours of work per year. They increasingly demand a permanent yearly occupation [...] as a result of which there is a real risk that high-mountain work [...] will be burdened by high and unproductive salaries.<sup>44</sup>

The difficulties in finding a labour force proved to be a problem, as clearly illustrated by the increase in the number of foreigners employed at the construction site. While for the Göschenen Dam (inaugurated in 1963) foreign workers did not reach 60 per cent of the total workforce, in Mattmark they accounted for more than 73 per cent, and they came from nine different countries.<sup>45</sup> Only foreigners were willing to accept the backbreaking work conditions, the long hours and the terrible housing conditions.

### Sheds and Work

The Mattmark construction site was active 24 hours a day, six days a week. In total, the teams worked 110 hours a week, distributed in day and night shifts, with an average of eleven hours per day, overtime excluded. The typical work week ranged from 55 hours for the night shift to 59 hours for the day shift.<sup>46</sup>

The cantonal labour inspectorate made several inspections of the site and scrutinised two things in particular: the working hours and the housing conditions. Regarding the working hours, some companies significantly exceeded the 59 weekly hours for the day shift, and the cantonal inspectorate, cautious of colliding with the companies, merely suggested that they comply with the statutory rules.<sup>47</sup> Regarding housing, however, non-compliance with minimum standards was handled with greater severity: what mainly concerned the cantonal authorities were the low hygienic and sanitary conditions:

43 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 7.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

46 AEV, 3580-1993, Autorisation de travailler de nuit et en équipes, 9 juin 1961.

47 AEV, 3580-1993/7, 7.1.1, Schreiben des Sozialamts für Arbeiterschutz an ein Subunternehmen, 18. April 1962.

[...] the accommodation is very basic, and we appeal to you to do everything necessary to provide the men with adequate housing as soon as possible [...]. The toilets have not been installed yet. Moreover, you have provided your personnel with cold water, but you have not supplied them with any protection against the cold weather. Therefore, we ask you to improve, in the shortest time possible, this situation, which we can no longer tolerate [...].<sup>48</sup>

While the technicians and the specialised workers were housed further away from the construction site and in safe and hygienic conditions, the workers' sheds were placed «irregularly»,<sup>49</sup> without «taking into account the peril represented by the ice mass hanging over workers' heads».<sup>50</sup>

The houses were placed beneath the glacier despite the fact that, only five years earlier, and only 100 metres from the exact point where the tragic event of August 1965 occurred, a slide had killed 10 people. Furthermore, bulkheads against snow slides had already been built in 1929 in the same area by companies that had been subcontracted during the construction of the Mattmark Dam.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the precarious conditions of the glacier and the lake, the scene of numerous accidents between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, were well known.<sup>52</sup> From the analysis of technical documents and, sadly, from what happened, it appears that the project managers had prioritised the safety of the construction project over the safety of those who built it. As a result of the disaster, however, work safety standards in Switzerland would change.

### After the catastrophe

«No noises. Only a terrible wind, and my workmates who were further down were flying like butterflies. Then there was a big roar, and the end. Lorries and bulldozer flung away.»<sup>53</sup>

This is what Mario Vieleli, a worker from Belluno, recounted some hours after the slide to the reporter from *La Stampa* from Turin. It was

48 AEV, 3580-1993, Schreiben des Sozialamts für Arbeiterschutz an ein Subunternehmen, 13. September 1960.

49 Dario Robbiani, Cinkali, in: *L'Avvenire dei Lavoratori CVII/3-4* (2005), p. 111.

50 *L'Avanti!*, 2 septembre 1965.

51 BAR, E3270A 1967/30\_286, Projekt 197: Mattmark, Gemeinde Saas-Almagell.

52 Between 1589 and 1808, more than 20 serious floods were recorded. In 1834, the first tunnel through the glacier was completed to facilitate the flow of the lake's water. In 1925-1926, an attempt was made to reduce the damage caused by floods with the construction of a 500-metre tunnel to facilitate the water's flow. The cost at that time: 400,000 francs (Burgener, *Die Katastrophe*, pp. 35-37). For a technical analysis of the Allalin Glacier before 1965, see, François-Alphonse Forel, *Les variations périodiques des glaciers*, Genève 1895, and Otto Lütschg, *Über Niederschlag und Abfluß im Hochgebirge*. Sonderdarstellung des Mattmarkgebietes, Zürich 1926.

53 *La Stampa*, 1° settembre 1965.

clear to all, a few hours later, that it was «pointless to hope»<sup>54</sup> to find anybody alive. The disaster happened about one hour before the end of the day shift. Had it happened around lunch time, «the fatalities would have been 600».<sup>55</sup>

In the aftermath, the main difficulties, apart from recovering the bodies, were quantifying and identifying the victims. There were different lists, which changed hourly, as people were counted in the various accommodations. It took until 3 p.m. on 31 August to determine the precise number of missing persons and identify them and their company affiliation: 51 from ASM (a building consortium), 32 from Swissboring (responsible for the scans and the injections of concrete), two from Kummler & Matter, one from Schmalz and one from the Zurich-based Pneu-Matti.<sup>56</sup> By 1 September, only seven bodies had been retrieved, of which five had been identified. A month later, 61 continued to lie beneath the ice.<sup>57</sup> It took more than two years to retrieve the remains of the last victim.<sup>58</sup>

Within 48 hours, once the scale of the disaster had been understood, the Chancellor's office in Bern started receiving what would end up being a total of 60 telegrams and letters of condolence from all over the world.<sup>59</sup> These messages were followed by many others, testifying to how the catastrophe had reached a dimension that today we would consider global. Even Pope Paul VI, in sending a considerable sum of money to the apostolic nuncio in Bern, Monsignor Alfredo Pacini, in favour of the survivors and the victims' relatives, expressed his «paternal condolences».<sup>60</sup>

54 This is what the Italian consul of Briga, Edoardo Masini, declared. *Corriere della Sera*, 1° settembre 1965.

55 Testimony of Mario Rapassi see, Robbiani, Cinkali, p. 113. According to Elektro-Watt's official records, the number would have been 700. See, Elektro-Watt & Suiselctra, *Kraftwerke Mattmark AG, Schlussbericht*, p. 8.

56 List of missing people at 3 p.m. on 31 August 1965, only circulated to the press a few days later. See, BAR, J2.15 1987/138, *Liste der vermissten Personen – Arbeitsgemeinschaft Staudamm Mattmark. Schweizerisches Rotes Kreuz (SRK); AEV, 6030\_636, Kraftwerke Mattmark AG, 24. Quartalbericht über die Projektierungs- und Bauarbeiten, Elektro-Watt & Suiselctra, 3. Quartal, Zürich/Basel 1965*, p. 1.

57 Burgener, *Die Katastrophe*, pp. 42–45.

58 Officially, all the historical documents consulted in the archives referred to a period of about 6 months for the recovery of corpses. However, in October 2015, during the presentation of the volume: Ricciardi, *Morire a Mattmark*, in: Sagron-Mis (TN – Italy), the town of origin of a victim, I received a document certifying the restitution of the corpse on August 21, 1967. Archivio Comune di Sagron-Mis, *Telespresso* n. 518, RENON Costante. *Trasmissione atto di decesso*, 18 settembre 1967.

59 BAR, E3801 1975/8\_266, *Liste des messages de condoléances reçus à l'occasion de la catastrophe de Mattmark*.

60 *Corriere degli Italiani*, 2 settembre 1965. Archivio Missioni Cattoliche Italiane in Svizzera (AMCI), f. *Corriere degli Italiani*.

Milan was among the first to send help to the families of the victims. The newspaper *La Stampa* of Turin also began a subscription. In Switzerland, the Fiel (Swiss Federation of Wood and Construction Workers) and the SOS (Swiss Workers' Rescue) were very active, often in cooperation with the federation of Italian trade unions. Even migrants' organisations in Switzerland were on the front lines during the most critical stages of the humanitarian emergency.<sup>61</sup> The greatest contribution was provided by the MCI (Missioni Cattoliche Italiane) and the CLI (*Colonia Libere Italiane*, Free Italian Colonies).

Together with aid from smaller entities – including the Swiss Radio and Television Broadcasting Company, the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions, Mattmark AG, the Council of Elektro-Watt AG Engineers and the Italian Embassy – the Canton of Valais and the Swiss Red Cross founded the Mattmark Foundation on 29 October 1965.<sup>62</sup> The aim was to «provide aid to the victims' families [...] by equally and fairly distributing the available resources; and by encouraging the professional training of the victims' sons by providing scholarships».<sup>63</sup> In 28 years of activity, from 1965 to 1992,<sup>64</sup> the Foundation distributed over 4.5 million Swiss francs to 48 widows, 85 children and 107 other people, including parents and siblings of the victims.<sup>65</sup>

Mattmark also contributed to changing Italian journalism. Many correspondents had already had the opportunity to adopt a new journalistic style during the 1956 Marcinelle and the 1963 Vajont tragedies. Until then, Italian journalism had been somewhat influenced by the Anglo-American tradition, but it had never formally distinguished between normal daily news and the special and/or extraordinary event.<sup>66</sup> The boundary between news and features had always been blurry, especially

61 No European country has witnessed as widespread a diffusion of Italian migrants' organisations as Switzerland. See, Ricciardi, *Associazionismo*; Sandro Cattacin, Dagmar Domenig, *Inseln transnationaler Mobilität. Freiwilliges Engagement in Vereinen mobiler Menschen in der Schweiz*, Zürich 2012.

62 BAR, J2.15, 1987/138, Statuts de la Fondation Suisse de Mattmark, 29 octobre 1965.

63 A savings account with 10,000 francs was opened for each child at the Banque Cantonale du Valais. See, AEV, 3580-1993/7, 1, Note concernant la Fondation Suisse de Mattmark, 29 août 1985.

64 AEV, 3580-1993, 71, Rapport à l'intention du Conseil d'Etat du canton du Valais concernant dissolution de la fondation Mattmark, création d'une association valaisanne d'aide victimes d'accidents de chantier.

65 AEV, 3580-1993/7, 1, Note concernant la Fondation Suisse de Mattmark, 29 août 1985.

66 On the distinction between *news* and *features* in the Anglo-American tradition see, David Spark, Geoffrey Harris, *Practical Newspaper Reporting*, Oxford 1966. On this distinction in Italian journalism see, Alberto Papuzzi, *Professione giornalista. Tecniche e regole di un mestiere*, Roma 1998. Both approaches to the catastrophes have been summarised in Generoso Picone, *Le tragedie raccontate dai giornali. Dal Corriere della Sera e da Il Mattino*, in: *Studi Emigrazione/Migration Studies LI* (2014), pp. 631–642.

because of Italian journalism's literary pretensions. Very often in daily news reporting, there was a tendency to show versatility and writing ability, sometimes at the expense of in-depth analysis. With the Swiss tragedy, however, a different writing style was employed: journalists offered a historical account that demonstrated the interconnections between people and places, in this case Italians and Italy on the one hand and Swiss and Switzerland on the other.<sup>67</sup>

### **The investigation and the trial**

The Mattmark tragedy and its long and tormented aftermath also changed diplomatic relations between Switzerland and Italy. Initially, Swiss and Italian newspapers referred to a «natural disaster»<sup>68</sup> and «destiny, death and destruction».<sup>69</sup> Shortly afterwards, however, they began considering the effectiveness of the safety measures that had been adopted at the construction site. Also the Swiss Federation of Trade Unions wrote: «We should ask ourselves whether all the necessary measures were taken.»<sup>70</sup>

The criticisms grew in the Helvetic press, and in Italy in particular. The *Corriere della Sera* published a series of articles on the tragedy and the painful problem of emigration, while the main left-wing newspapers, *l'Avanti!* and *l'Unità*, were far more outspoken regarding the causes of the tragedy, pointing to the poor safety measures employed at the construction site.

On 17 September 1965, the official inquiry into the disaster began, and on 22 September the first appraisals were assigned to a commission of international experts,<sup>71</sup> which laid the responsibility on Elektro-Watt and Swissboring,<sup>72</sup> on SUVA, the institution for compulsory national accident insurance, and on the Valais authorities that had approved the construction.

67 More detailed analyse of how newspapers describe Mattmark: Cattacin, Ricciardi, Radu, La catastrophe de Mattmark dans la presse; Carlo Capozzi, La catastrophe de Mattmark par la presse, regards croisés transalpins, mémoire de master, Université de Franche-Comté, Sierre 2011.

68 Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 1. September 1965.

69 Corriere della Sera, 1° settembre 1965.

70 Unia, Non dimentichiamo Mattmark, p. 16.

71 The international experts delivered their report in the summer of 1967, but the Commission of Inquiry only concluded its work on 13 January 1970. Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv Zürich (SSZ), Gewerkschaft Bau und Industrie (GBI), 04A-0074, Dossier Mattmark n. 2; Karl Aeschbach, Bericht zur Mattmark Katastrophe, August 1972, p. 35.

72 See, the report of the inspection carried by Ezio Canonica at the site of the tragedy from 1 to 4 September 1965. SSZ, GBI, 04A-0074, Dossier Mattmark, A proposito di Mattmark. La macabra speculazione continua [sd].

For the first time in Helvetic history, a trade union (Flel), despite the «social peace»,<sup>73</sup> raised critical points against Elektro-Watt, but at the same time did not make hurried accusations against the company. Also for the first time, the Italian government, probably mindful of the tragedies of Marcinelle and Vajont, intervened quickly and pragmatically. The parliamentary question, the uproar caused by the tragedy and pressure from the Italian community in Switzerland facilitated the passing of a special law, no. 1231 of 29 October 1965, to grant an allowance to the families of the Italian workers who had died in the tragedy.<sup>74</sup>

However, although the results of the International Committee of Experts were already known in the summer of 1967, the duration of the penal inquiry was very long. Only on 22 February 1972, six and a half years after the tragedy, was a first hearing held in the District Court of Visp. Seventeen people were accused of culpable homicide, among them site managers, engineers and two SUVA officials. Although the technical surveys revealed a series of breaches of the safety protocol, the court handed down sentences that consisted only of fines of between 1,000 and 2,000 Swiss francs. All the accused were acquitted of the charge of culpable homicide on the basis that the catastrophe was not predictable: the landslide was considered «too remote a possibility to be reasonably taken into consideration».<sup>75</sup>

Public opinion, incredulous, greeted the news with staunch criticism, in Switzerland as much as in Italy. The Italian press expressed unanimous indignation over the sentence and triggered an intense debate in the Italian Parliament. These, for example, are some newspapers' headlines: «Mattmark: Nobody will pay for the death of 88 workers»;<sup>76</sup> «Indignation over the despicable sentence on Mattmark»;<sup>77</sup> «Mattmark: All acquitted».<sup>78</sup>

In Switzerland, the toughest position was taken by the president of Flel, Ezio Canonica, who, in a report presented to the Swiss Federal Council, commented on the sentence, stating that «too often it is the so-called 'second class' workers who suffer from injuries at the work-

73 Agreement signed in 1937 between trade unions and the Swiss Association of Owners, which recognised the trade union as the main representative of labour and obliged it to keep the social peace. The right to strike was not constitutionally guaranteed, but only partially and discretionarily recognised. See, Art. 28, paragraph 4, of the Swiss Federal Constitution.

74 *Gazzetta Ufficiale*, n. 285, 15 novembre 1965.

75 Wallis Kantonsgericht, Urteil des Kantonsgerichtes Wallis vom 2./3.10.1972, in: *Zeitschrift für Walliser Rechtsprechung* (1972).

76 *Il Mattino*, 3 marzo 1972.

77 *L'Unità*, 3 marzo 1972.

78 *Corriere della Sera*, 3 marzo 1972.

place».<sup>79</sup> Moreover, Canonica vehemently accused SUVA of preferring inadequate safety measures, to the detriment of workers' lives, in order to keep insurance premiums low. The Federal Council's response was in line with the sentence of the Valais Tribunal. The indignation in the days to follow mounted to the point that, on 18 March 1972, a large number of intellectuals and trade unions joined thousands of migrant workers in the streets of Geneva to seek justice for the victims of Mattmark and demand improved work-safety standards.

A few months later, in August, the secretary of Flel, Karl Aeschbach, published a detailed report on the causes of the catastrophe and drew the conclusion that the engineers involved, given their singular specialisation, did not possess the necessary knowledge to identify the real risks.<sup>80</sup> The tragedy, Aeschbach concluded, was caused by a series of omissions, including the lack of a photogrammetric inspection of the glacier. Aeschbach, however, went further, accusing in particular Elektro-Watt's profit strategy, which pushed the company to try to complete the dam before the winter arrived. It was not only Elektro-Watt that should have been put on trial, but also greed, faith in science and an entire epoch's delirium of omnipotence.

Meanwhile, the lawyers of the victims' families appealed the judgment of the court of first instance to the Cantonal Tribunal of Sion, but this court also accepted that the catastrophe was unforeseeable and ascribed 50 per cent of the costs of the legal proceedings to the victims' families. As expected, the ruling provoked even more indignation in Italy, while the Helvetic press paid less attention to the event. The appeal ruling also triggered a series of considerations and accusations at the European Community, as demonstrated by the words of the Vice-President of the European Commission at the time, Lionello Levi Sandri:

[...] faced by a pronouncement like the one of the Cantonal Tribunal of Sion, we cannot help but feel perplexed and dismayed. This tribunal in fact completely acquitted the accused, despite the fact that numerous depositions had attested that, in the days preceding the catastrophe, several unequivocal signs should have alerted the site managers and supervisors to the hazards at the construction site. If the passiveness before such an event does not constitute negligence, I don't know where it is possible to find negligence. But what leaves us, I don't say perplexed, but dismayed, is having gone as far as to require the heirs of the victims to pay part of the costs of the proceedings. [...] Undoubtedly Switzerland, if it one day wants to join the European Community, will have to profoundly modify its legislation in the area of work-related

79 Interpellation Canonica, Procès de Mattmark du 8 mars 1972, in: Bulletin officiel de l'Assemblée fédérale, I (1973), Séance 11, n. d'ob. 11227, pp. 366–370.

80 SSZ, GBI, 04A-0074; Karl Aeschbach, Bericht zur Mattmark Katastrophe, August 1972.

injuries and the responsibilities of the relatives of those who are injured at work. And it will also have to modify its approach when the parties involved are workers, in particular non-Swiss workers, or their survivors.<sup>81</sup>

This declaration raised a number of issues – including European integration, international labour law, foreign versus domestic workers – that Switzerland had until then largely ignored, but which it could no longer neglect. The symbolic effect was devastating: in the collective imagination, Switzerland became an arrogant and cruel country.<sup>82</sup> In the Italian Parliament, parliamentarians read the appeal court's ruling as a demonstration of Helvetic prejudice against Italian workers, who were employed at more than a thousand Swiss construction sites in the 1960s. To confirm the inadequacy of Swiss safety measures, the International Labour Organization demonstrated that they were among the lowest in the OECD during the entire decade of the 1960s.<sup>83</sup> Moreover, although the Italian government declared that it was willing to be responsible for the costs of the proceedings through the Consulate's legal-protection fund, established at the Italian Embassy in Bern, the justice system in the Canton of Valais insisted that it was the victims' families that had to pay those costs.

As it had in Belgium after the Marcinelle disaster, international pressure had an effect in Switzerland as well, leading to the creation of a Swiss-Italian Committee for the Prevention of Injuries in the Construction Industry. Moreover, for the first time, the Helvetic authorities communicated directly with Italian trade unions and the network of migrants' organisations on matters of work safety and social welfare.<sup>84</sup> The Mattmark tragedy had an impact on modifying the approach to and modus operandi of work safety.

## Conclusions

Mattmark represents a turning point in the presence of foreigners in Switzerland. When the tragedy occurred, Switzerland was in the midst of unprecedented economic growth: it was at the apex of the Fordist system of production, characterised by finding cheap energy and building major infrastructure, within the broader context of European integration through the European Economic Community – which would increasingly affect migration patterns, although until 1976, Switzerland was the

81 Corriere della Sera, 7 ottobre 1972.

82 Unia, Non dimentichiamo Mattmark, p. 25.

83 Ricciardi, Associazionismo, p. 203.

84 Unia, Non dimentichiamo Mattmark, p. 28.

main target of Italian post-war emigration within Europe – and the Cold War. This event is crucial to understanding many subsequent changes, in both Switzerland and Italy, in their societies, media, politics and work safety.

Mattmark was part of an era in which Switzerland's migration and work policies underwent fundamental change. The two bilateral agreements on labour recruitment between Switzerland and Italy (1948, 1964) were followed by concerns over overforeignisation (*Überfremdung*)<sup>85</sup> which would lead to the first two referenda on foreigners (1965, 1969). Switzerland moved from having an open-border policy with very limited internal mobility for foreigners to a rather restrictive immigration policy with much greater internal-mobility rights for migrants. The earlier phase ended definitively with the 1973 oil crisis, more broadly understood as a crisis of the Fordist model of production,<sup>86</sup> and the new Swiss policy is closely connected to the country's strong economic position as an export country.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, the process through which the interests linked to immigration were articulated was characteristic of a neo-corporatist management model.<sup>88</sup> Mattmark is a good example of the slow and gradual transition from an industrial society, in which the logic of wealth production prevails over the logic of risk management, to one of «risk», where such a relationship is reversed.

In conclusion, politicians, economists, intellectuals and common people found in the Mattmark tragedy a further incentive to consider the

85 *Überfremdung* was already present as a concept at the beginning of the twentieth century, but from the mid-1960s through to the end of the 1970s, panic over foreign invasion was at the centre of Swiss political and intellectual debate. Max Frisch, one of the most famous Swiss writers, in 1966 unequivocally clarified the meaning of the word *Überfremdung*, see, Ricciardi, *Associazionismo*, p. 180. See also, Hermann-M. Haggmann, *Les travailleurs étrangers. Chance et tourment de la Suisse, Lausanne 1966*; Giorgio Dhima, *Politische Ökonomie der schweizerischen Ausländerregelung*, Chur 1991; Roland Misteli, Andreas Gisler, *Überfremdung – Karriere und Diffusion eines fremdenfeindlichen Deutungsmusters von 1960–1970*, Zürich 1995; Martina M. Frigerio, S. Merhar, *Und es kamen Menschen. Die Schweiz der Italiener*, Zürich 2004; Hans Mahnig (dir.), *Histoire de la politique de migration, d'asile et d'intégration en Suisse depuis 1948*, Zurich 2005; Damir Skenderovic, *The radical right in Switzerland. Continuity and change, 1945–2000*, New York 2009; Damir Skenderovic, Gianni D'Amato, *Mit dem Fremden politisieren. Rechtspopulistische Parteien und Migrationspolitik in der Schweiz seit den 1960er Jahren*, Zürich 2008; Etienne Piguet, *L'immigration en Suisse. Soixante ans d'entrouverture*, Lausanne 2009; Toni Ricciardi, *I figli degli stagionali. Bambini clandestini*, in: *Studi Emigrazione/Migration Studies XLVI/180* (2010), pp. 872–886.

86 Sandro Cattacin, *Fordist Society and the Person*, in: *Studi Emigrazione/Migration Studies LI* (2014), pp. 557–576.

87 Peter J. Katzenstein, *Small states and small states revisited*, in: *New political economy* 8/1 (2003), pp. 9–30.

88 Sandro Cattacin, *Neokorporatismus in der Schweiz. Die Fremdarbeiterpolitik*, Zürich 1987, pp. 59–64.

meaning of largely uncontrolled economic development that required ever more foreign labour, and especially the low-skilled labour that the Swiss had abandoned, particularly for large infrastructural projects. For the Italian community in Switzerland, the tragedy represented an opportunity to consider the meaning of their own presence in a country in which, although they were an active and even crucial part of the country's prosperity, they did not feel accepted and were not well integrated.