

The New York Times

Expect the World[®]

THE NEW YORK TIMES INTERNATIONAL THURSDAY, JANUARY 20, 2011

GSTAAD JOURNAL

Swiss Weigh Future Role Of Bunkers In the Alps

By CHRISTOPHER SOLOMON

GSTAAD, Switzerland — The mountain didn't look quite right. Up close, its rock face was the giveaway, with its fading makeup of camouflage paint that seemed not to have been retouched since the cold war. The guard seemed out of place, too, standing sentry in his black uniform over a quiet clearing near this Swiss ski resort better known for its free-range billionaires.

The oddness was just beginning. The guard punched a few buttons, and a weathered hatch in the mountain opened. Inside, at the end of a narrow cavern of a hallway, there was a second thick door that led to yet another door, this one three and a half tons and looking as if it should be guarding a bank vault.

"If you put your hand here you can feel some out-streaming air," said Christoph Oswald, laying his palm over a seam in the closed hatch, "so any gas attack or anything is not possible."

Mr. Oswald was giving a tour of what he called the Swiss Fort Knox, one of two former military bunkers in the bowels of the Alps that companies run by Mr. Oswald and his business partner, Hanspeter Baumann, have leased from the Swiss military. Where officers once prepared to defend their country, Mr. Oswald and Mr. Baumann now claim to operate some of the world's most secure computer server farms, protecting the terabytes of multinational corporations and individuals alike.

If only the military could find more tenants like Mr. Oswald.

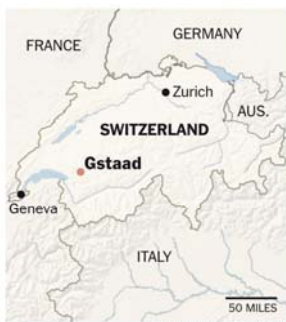
At a cost of tens of millions of dollars annually it maintains a system of about 26,000 bunkers and fortifications throughout the Swiss Alps meant to deter attacking armies. But today, as a neutral country with no immediate threats to its borders, Switzerland is undergoing a prolonged soul-searching over the role of its military, including the need for the bunker system. Last fall, Defense Minister Ueli Maurer raised a storm by suggesting that it was time to have an "an honest debate" about closing most of the bunkers or converting them to other uses.

"Our position is that as long as Switzerland is engaged outside the country, it's out of the question to weaken the defense sys-



NICOLE TUNG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A guard, at left, stood sentry at the peeling entrance to a former military bunker in Gstaad that now houses computer servers.



Fortifications in Gstaad were meant to help deter attackers.

tem for our country," said Ulrich Schlüer, a member of Parliament's standing committee for security policy from the right-wing Swiss People's Party.

That might seem eccentric, but the bunkers and other fortresses occupy a special place in Swiss history. The first one was started in 1885 at the strategic St. Gotthard Pass to discourage invading armies from using the new railway route across the Alps, said Jürg Stüssi-Lauterburg, a Swiss historian.

In World War II, with Switzerland fearful of an invasion by Nazi Germany, Switzerland developed the Réduit, or redoubt, strategy: Swiss forces fortified themselves in the mountains and squatted on the two rail connections to the south, which were crucial to the Nazis' passing coal

and steel to their Italian allies. The message was simple, Mr. Stüssi-Lauterburg said: "The day you attack us, the lines will be cut, then you will have to fight for them, and we will defend them, and in the end we will destroy them."

The deterrent helped, he added. Though the Nazis drew up invasion plans for Switzerland in 1940 and 1943, they never acted on them.

During the cold war, the bunkers, containing everything from anti-aircraft guns to command posts, were maintained and modernized, and still more were built, often with extraordinary efforts at concealment. Today, a visitor can hardly go for a hike without passing a curious door in a mountainside that looks like access to the Batcave, or a faux chalet with trompe l'oeil shutters.

But times have changed. "They're useless," Christian Catrina, head of security policy for the federal Department of Defense, Civil Protection and Sport, said in an interview. "They're useless and need money."

In fact, the government has been mothballing bunkers for several years; today, former bunkers house things like museums and a "zero-star hotel" in the town of Sevelen. But now the military hopes to speed the process.

"You'd rather get rid of them today than tomorrow; in most cases we'd be glad if someone

would take them off our hands for no price," Mr. Catrina said. "But that's impossible because of environmental regulations. You can't just close the door and throw away the key."

Closing them down is expensive — \$1 billion or more, Mr. Maurer estimated — which far surpasses the millions needed annually to maintain them.

For many conservatives and many older Swiss, the bunkers are a symbol of their nation's determination to remain independent and neutral. "The fortifications are psychologically very important," said Kurt Spillmann, an expert in Swiss security policy at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich.

Back under the mountains of Gstaad, Mr. Oswald, a dapper 54-year-old former air force special forces officer, led a visitor on a tour of the kind of recycling the defense minister might embrace: an underground nuclear blast-resistant bunker that Mr. Oswald's companies have spent millions upgrading to serve as a hardened server farm. It opened in 1996.

His companies have also leased part of a second bunker that he said was completely protected from the electromagnetic impulses that could play havoc with servers. It opened in 2003, but because it is still owned by the Swiss military it remains off limits to, among others, note-taking journalists.

Mr. Oswald pointed out the

network of insulated pipes that tapped a subterranean pool of glacial water to provide crucial cooling to the servers. He stopped in a room with a huge machine that filtered incoming air. "This here is a big version of a gas mask — atomic, biological, chemical," he said.

As the tour progressed, the echoes of Mr. Oswald's footfalls in the chilly stone hallways could have been the soundtrack of the cold war itself. "A lot of people, they say that it feels like a James Bond movie," he said.

In still another room behind a locked door sat four hulking safes. In one of them — "I'm not going to tell you which one," he said — rested the "digital genome," a sort of Rosetta Stone created by several European academics so that future generations would be able to read data stored on obsolete formats like floppy disks.

And, of course, behind still more locked doors stood rows of computer servers, blinking silently.

Do a bunch of ones and zeros really warrant the protection of a spare nuclear bunker?

"Information — data — is everything today," replied Mr. Oswald, and not just for companies. One married billionaire keeps his electronic "little black book" on the servers at Swiss Fort Knox, Mr. Oswald said. If someone were to get her hands on that book, he pointed out, it could cost him millions.