

THE CATASTROPHIC AVALANCHES IN 1965 NEAR OBERTAUERN AND THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE AUSTRIAN BOARD OF ALPINE SAFETY

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ABSTRACT: Two catastrophic avalanche events in 1965 initiated the founding of the Austrian Board for Alpine Safety (Österreichisches Kuratorium für Alpine Sicherheit – KURASI). This paper describes the two accidents and their consequences as well as the efforts to establish an independent organization with the objective of prevention from mountainous hazards; the KURASI was founded on Aug. 5, 1968 and celebrates its 50th anniversary this year.

KEYWORDS: avalanche history, avalanche accidents, avalanche fatalities, alpine safety

1. INTRODUCTION

During the last 70 years (1946/47 - 2015/16), approximately 2000 persons have been killed by avalanches in Austria, which corresponds to an average of about 30 fatalities per year. Over the entire period 77% of the deaths occurred in the backcountry (tourist avalanches) while 27% of the fatalities were caused by catastrophic avalanches (Höller, 2017). However, in the first half of the designated period (1946/47 - 1980/81) the rate of catastrophic avalanches was considerably higher and amounted 41% (versus 9% in the period 1981/82 to 2015/16) (Höller, 2017).

2. THE VILLAGE OF OBERTAUERN

The Radstädter Tauern pass (1738 m) is an ancient traffic route in the heart of Austria (federal state of Salzburg). Around 200 A.D. the Romans built this north-south axis in the Eastern Alps. At the end of the 15th century high customs duties were charged to cross the Radstädter Tauern; subsequently, trading avoided the pass and used the Brenner route.

However, 400 years later (with the beginning of modern tourism) the Tauern route became more important again and the village Obertauern expanded to an outstanding winter sports region.

3. THE ACCIDENT OF JANUARY 3, 1965

The accident occurred in the evening of Jan. 3, 1965 (8:15 PM) on the road between the summit and the Hotel Scheidberg when a group of 21 Dutch teenagers was on the way back to their accommodation. At that time the so-called Judenlahn-avalanche released and overflowed

the road where 12 persons of the group were caught; five persons were able to extricate themselves, four were rescued from other group members; however, three teenagers lost their lives. The road was covered with snow up to 8 m in height.

Although no meteorological data are available from Obertauern, it can be assumed that new snow was crucial for the release of the avalanche. On the Schmittenhöhe (80 km away from Obertauern, but situated in a comparable altitude) the amount of new snow within the last 36 hours prior to the accident was nearly 40 cm. Even though this is not an outstanding value, it probably might have been sufficient (combined with wind) to release the avalanche.

The only available photograph (Fig. 1) shows the closed road with a traffic sign regarding avalanche danger.



Figure 1: Traffic sign with an additional panel regarding avalanche danger; the pathway of the main road can roughly be assumed by the snow poles along the road (Photo: László Vuray).

4. THE ACCIDENT OF MARCH 2, 1965

Two months later (March 2, 1965, 4:45 PM) another avalanche accident occurred in the close vicinity of the first. The accident took place on the

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northern access road to Obertauern, when the so-called Weißlahn-avalanche hit a bus with 37 passengers (mainly tourists from Finland and Sweden). The bus (on the way from Obertauern to Altenmarkt) was moved 50 m over a slope. The accident claimed three severely injured and 20 slightly injured persons, 14 passengers have been killed. Major cause for the avalanche might have been a strong increase of temperature. (Höller, 2015). Fig. 2 shows the bus which was caught by the avalanche and completely damaged.



Figure 2: The damaged bus which was moved by the Weißlahn-avalanche 50 m over a slope (Stadtarchiv Radstadt).

5. CONSEQUENCES

While the first accident did not have any consequences (since the teenagers have left the hotel despite an interdiction), the second accident resulted in criminal investigations against the chair and further members of the avalanche commission. However, the provincial government of Salzburg submitted an application for abolition to the Austrian Federal President. The Federal President approved the application just after the financial claims of the relatives have been resolved (Kanduth and Kindl, 2017).

Besides, a comprehensive protection program was initiated. The Weißlahn-avalanche gallery was completed in 1966; supporting structures in the release area of the Judenlahn-avalanche were implemented and additional snow sheds on the access road to Obertauern were established.

As a result of these accidents the Chamber of Labour in Salzburg indicated a 10-point-program including measures to enhance the safety of people in mountainous regions; 1966 the Chamber of Labour published the book 'Sicherung vor

Bergefahren' and one year later (in consequence of the success of the book) the first Kapruner Gespräch (a conference with about 100 renowned experts) was organized. The proposal from V. Czepl (deputy director of the Chamber of Labour in Salzburg) to initiate an institution which should promote analytic accident research was approved by the participants of the conference. In spring 1968 an expert committee compiled by-laws for the proposed association, which finally was founded on August 5, 1968, now known as Austrian Board for Alpine Safety (Österreichisches Kuratorium für Alpine Sicherheit – KURASI) (Truxa, 1968).

6. THE KURASI

The KURASI is a governing body, which associates numerous alpine organizations. It analyses all kinds of alpine accidents (with special regard to avalanche accidents) and gives recommendations how to prevent those accidents. Particular attention will be given to avalanche prevention, avalanche rescue and avalanche documentation. Main task of the KURASI is to reduce alpine accidents, to encourage the personal responsibility in mountain sports and to improve the information flow within the alpine community. A contract with the ministry of internal affairs (Austrian Alpine Police) enables the KURASI to have direct access to all recorded alpine accidents, which favored the building of a database which is now one of the most comprehensive data sets on avalanche accidents.

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