

Schweizerhalle, 1 November 1986

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The night of 1 November 1986 marks the most serious environmental disaster in the history of the Basel chemical industry. Shortly after midnight, a fire broke out in warehouse 956 of the Sandoz company at Schweizerhalle, in the commune of Muttenz in Basel-Landschaft. The warehouse contained more than a thousand tonnes of chemicals, among them insecticides, fungicides, herbicides and organic mercury compounds. The fire brigades fought the blaze through the night with large quantities of water, which carried an estimated twenty to thirty tonnes of toxic substances into the Rhine.¹ When a siren alert woke the population of the region in the early morning, the inhabitants of Basel were told to stay indoors and close their windows because of the foul-smelling smoke that covered the city.

The consequences for the river were dramatic. The water turned red from the dyes released with the firefighting water. The pollution wave travelled downstream through Germany, France and the Netherlands and killed fish, in particular the eel population, over a distance of several hundred kilometres. Drinking water plants along the river closed their intakes, while the governments of the riparian states demanded explanations and compensation. Coming a few months after the nuclear accident at Chernobyl, the event became a symbol of the risks of industrial society and a turning point in the environmental consciousness of Switzerland.² Investigations later found that other chemical discharges had occurred in the same days, including one by Ciba-Geigy, which reinforced the impression that the industry had treated the river as a sewer, as Part D has described.

The investigation into the causes of the fire led to no conviction. The most probable cause identified by the investigators was the smouldering of a product during the packaging of goods with a shrink-wrapping device, although other hypotheses were discussed in the public debate. Sandoz

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accepted responsibility for the damage and paid compensation to fishermen, to public authorities and to the riparian states, while financing studies and restoration measures on the Rhine.³

1 Notes

1. On the fire at the Sandoz warehouse 956 at Schweizerhalle on 1 November 1986, the quantities of chemicals stored (about 1,350 tonnes) and the estimated quantities released into the Rhine, see the reports of the federal and cantonal authorities of 1986/1987 and HLS, article "Schweizerhalle". Figures to be verified. ↩
2. On the ecological consequences of the Schweizerhalle disaster, in particular the death of eels over several hundred kilometres of the Rhine, and on the public reaction in Switzerland and the riparian states, see the reports of the International Commission for the Protection of the Rhine (ICPR) and the contemporary press. To be verified. ↩
3. On the investigation of the cause of the fire and the compensation paid by Sandoz to claimants in Switzerland, Germany, France and the Netherlands, see the reports of the authorities and of Sandoz from 1987 onwards and the literature on the Schweizerhalle disaster. To be verified. ↩

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