

The Vorstadt catastrophe of 1887

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On 5 July 1887, the lake claimed part of the town of Zug for the second time. Work on a new quay along the lakeshore, undertaken by a railway company, had destabilised the ground of the Vorstadt quarter, which was built on soft lake marl. Houses began to collapse in the afternoon, before a larger section of the shore slid into the lake in the evening, at around seven o'clock. Eleven people died, thirty-five houses were destroyed and some 650 people lost their homes. A bay about 150 metres long and 70 metres deep formed along the shore.¹

The catastrophe had been foreseen. In 1884, the engineers Albert Heim and Robert Moser had questioned the quay project in a report. The construction nonetheless went ahead, under the influence of the president of the building authority, Clemens Henggeler.² In the aftermath, when the surrounding houses were demolished for safety, a memorial stone with a poem by Isabelle Kaiser was erected in 1887. Robert Moser designed the Rigiplatz, completed in 1891. The site of the disaster is known as the Katastrophenbucht, the catastrophe bay. Within days, the disaster attracted tourists, who paid forty centimes for a boat trip to view the scene.³

The catastrophe weighed on the mood of the town, coming as it did a year after the failure of the Email- und Metallwarenfabrik and the private bank that had financed it.⁴ It also prompted the town to plan its expansion on firmer ground and on a larger scale.⁵ For the historian of the business location, the Vorstadt catastrophe carries a lesson about the relationship between expert warning and political decision. Although the risk was known and the warning was given, the project proceeded because the interests behind it were stronger than the caution of the engineers. The pattern is familiar from later financial and regulatory history, including the history of Zug's own industries.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (German), "Vorstadtkatastrophe", accessed September 2026: collapse on 5 July 1887 in two stages, the major one around 7 p.m.; Vorstadt built on unstable lake marl; quay construction by the Ost-West-Bahn-Gesellschaft destabilised the shoreline; 11 dead, 35 houses destroyed, about 650 homeless; a bay roughly 150 metres long and 70 metres deep; HLS, "Zug (Gemeinde)": two rows of houses slid into the lake, eleven people died. ↩
2. Wikipedia (German), "Vorstadtkatastrophe": warnings in an 1884 report by the engineers Albert Heim and Robert Moser; construction continued under the influence of the building president Clemens Henggeler. ↩
3. Wikipedia (German), "Vorstadtkatastrophe": memorial stone with a poem by Isabelle Kaiser (1887); Rigiplatz by Robert Moser (1891); demolition of surrounding houses and creation of the Rössliwiese; Katastrophenbucht; disaster tourism with boat tours at 40 centimes. ↩
4. Zug in der Welt, "Zugs zweite Industrialisierung 1880–1913": the Vorstadtkatastrophe of 1887 with eleven dead and more than 650 homeless triggered negative sentiment. ↩
5. HLS, "Zug (Gemeinde)": immediate expansion of settlement planning following the catastrophe of 1887. ↩

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