



SCHWEIZERISCHE VERTRETUNG
REPRÉSENTATION SUISSE

in / à NEW YORK (GK)

| | |
|--------------------------------|---------------|
| Bundesamt für Aussenwirtschaft | |
| No. | USA 842.6 |
| EE | |
| R | 27. JUNI 1990 |
| | 3.7.90 |
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E D A
Finanz- und Wirtschaftsdienst
3003 B e r n

Ihr Zeichen
Votre référence

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/ Victorinox, Ibach 225.5(S)-PR/HZ 26.06.90
Weuges, Delémont ✓ 3.7.90

Gegenstand / Objet

"Swiss Army Knife"

Das Schweizer Offiziersmesser scheint sich nicht nur zu einem Exportschlager, sondern nun auch zu einem Literaturhelden durchgemausert zu haben. Nach dem im "Smithonian-Magazin" im Oktober 1989 erschienenen Artikel "On Everest or in the office, it's the tool to have" der Herren Page und Hoffman hat nun das Magazin "Knife and Fork" in seiner Mai/Juni 1990 Ausgabe den (natürlich wortgleichen) Artikel der genannten Autoren unter dem Titel "A Blade for all Reasons" abgedruckt.

Das Magazin ist brandneu und eine Art "Gratisillustrierte". Es wird zum Beispiel mit der im Magazin integrierten Speise- und Getränkekarte den Kunden in den Restaurants der Kette "Houlihan's" abgegeben, und die Gäste werden aufgefordert, die Publikation mitzunehmen.

Nach Angaben des Herausgebers sehen zirka 1'300'000 Personen die Illustrierte. Sie wird offenbar bereits von 22 Restaurantketten benützt, und in Manhattan allein soll sie von 65 Restaurants aufgelegt werden.

DER SCHWEIZERISCHE GENERALKONSUL
i.A.

(Pircher)

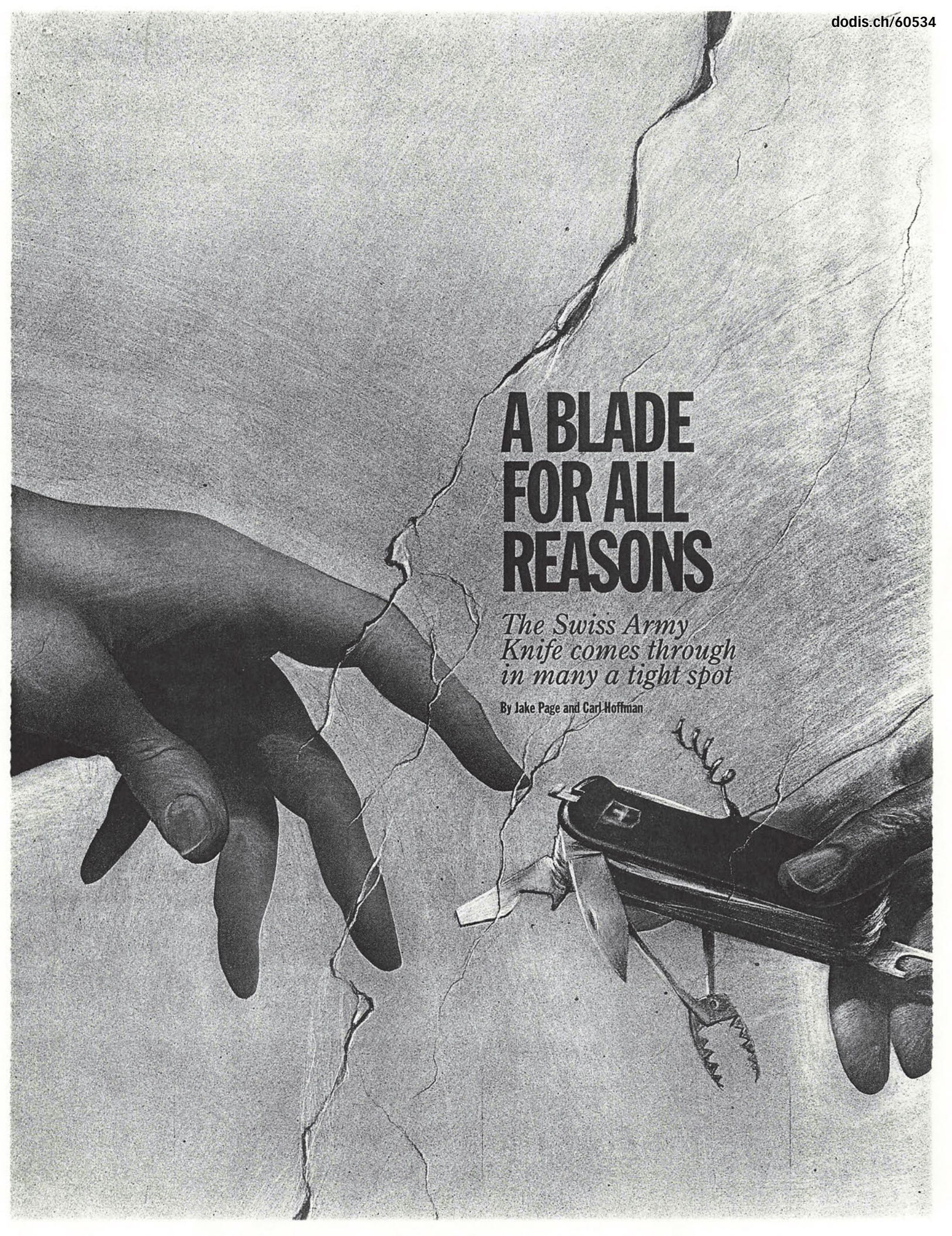
Kopie (mit Beilage): - EVD, BAWI, Nordamerika-Dienst
- EVD, BAWI, Dienst für Exportförderung
(ohne Beilage): - Schweiz. Botschaft Washington
(ad.: 225.5(S)-DH/al vom 31.10.89)



A BLADE FOR ALL REASONS

*The Swiss Army
Knife comes through
in many a tight spot*

By Jake Page and Carl Hoffman



In full array, it looks like a huge, dreamland insect. It is so well thought-out that the Museum of Modern Art in New York has one in its permanent Design Collection. It is carried routinely by astronauts, Everest conquerors, and polar explorers. In 1960, the Russians gleefully displayed one among other "CIA equipment" found in Gary Powers's downed U-2.

More, perhaps, than sheltered bank accounts and fine wristwatches, chocolates and cuckoo clocks, it says "Switzerland." It is, of course, the Swiss Army Knife, the most various and famous of jackknives, epitomized in top-of-the-line models with nineteen tools and up to thirty-two separate functions, all packed into a body less than four inches long.

Separately, such a collection of tools weighs several pounds: corkscrew, can opener, bottle opener, two screwdrivers, wire stripper, leather punch, scissors, Phillips screwdriver, magnifying glass, wood saw, fish scaler, hook disgorging, ruler, nail file and nail cleaner, metal file, pliers, wrench, compass, key ring, tweezers, toothpick, and pen. Throw in a good, stain-

less-steel jackknife with two blades and you'd need a chest to carry it all. But such a complete tool kit, encased in two strips of red plastic and inlaid with the white cross of Switzerland, weighs eight ounces or less.

Testimonials to the knife's performance in extraordinary situations are legion. "I've used a Swiss Army Knife nonstop since I was sixteen," says Sir Ranulph Fiennes, whom the *Guinness Book of World Records* once called "the world's greatest living explorer." Among other exploits, he is the only man to have ever traveled overland to both the North and South poles. In 1968, Fiennes remembers, "I was in Oman laying an ambush for some terrorists when the magazine on my automatic assault rifle jammed. It was empty and I couldn't get it off." Fiennes pried off the magazine with his Swiss Army Knife. "The only reason I could use it was because it had a particular shape of tin opener on it," he says.

The British North Pole Expedition of 1978

tery night and temperatures of thirty below. There was a handful of small, wind-blasted trees on this rocky little island and, with the saw on his Swiss Army Knife, the only available tool, Oftedal managed to cut some branches and get a fire going. Huddled around it, the team lasted until morning and a timely rescue.

The makers of this miniature tool kit estimate that there are 150 million people around the world prepared to meet such exigencies. According to Xaver Ehrler, export manager of Victorinox, one of the two privately held firms exclusively licensed to produce this miraculous object, the Swiss Army Knife owes much of its popularity to American G.I.'s who "discovered" it during and after World War II, and brought it home to what would soon become the knife's largest market.

But production had been going on for a half-

**EUGENE KNOSP
CUT HIMSELF OUT
OF THE BURNING
WRECKAGE OF HIS
PLANE. "I OWE MY
LIFE TO A SWISS
ARMY KNIFE," HE
LATER TESTIFIED.**

used
the knife to de-ice
their sled runners, and "when one member of the ice group fell through the ice, to cut his clothes off him." When Eugene Knosp, a West German businessman, crashed his small airplane, he cut himself out of the burning wreckage. "I owe my life to a Swiss Army Knife," he later testified.

So does the Smithsonian's Olav Oftedal, a nutrition specialist at the National Zoo. A few years ago, he was starting a study of hooded seal lactation on the crumbling Canadian ice pack when a helicopter flying him and his team off the coast of Newfoundland had to make an emergency landing, stranding the scientists on a lonely rock in the sea. They confronted a blus-

century by then. In 1884 Karl Elsener, a German-speaking Swiss, began making razors and surgical instruments in his hometown of Ibach. He hadn't been at it long when he discovered that the official knives supplied to Swiss Army recruits were made in Germany. In 1891 Elsener formed the Association of Swiss Master Cutlers to accomplish what no single cutler had been able to do: develop a pocketknife made in Switzerland for the Swiss Army. Later that same year Elsener delivered a wooden-handled pocketknife containing a blade, a screwdriver, a can opener and a punch: the Soldier's Knife.

VINCE LA CAVA

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In 1897 he made a critical breakthrough: he figured out how to place blades on the back of a knife that would operate from the same springs as the blades on the front, thus making it possible to add more utensils without increasing the size of the handle. He replaced the original wooden handle of the Soldier's Knife with red fiber, and added a small blade and a corkscrew, creating the first knife with six blades operating from two springs. The Officer's Knife was patented on June 12, 1897.

Elsener's mother, Victoria, died in 1909 and her name became the company trademark. In 1921, not long after stainless steel was developed, Carl Elsener II began using it in all of his knives and added the international designation for stainless steel, INOX, to the firm's name.

Just before the turn of the century, an unlikely competitor appeared. The Rev. Theodore Wenger, a one-time master cutler, merged a number of small cutlers around the town of Delemont in a French-speaking part of Switzerland known as the Jura. Taking advantage of an obscure customs war between France and Germany, Wenger began exporting large numbers of his carving knives to France. Business boomed and in 1908 he began making pocketknives. That year the ever-neutral Swiss Army began buying half of its knives from the French region's Wenger and half from Victorinox in the German-speaking region.

Today Victorinox and Wenger remain the only two companies officially allowed to make real Swiss Army Knives and place Switzerland's white cross on the handles. Their rivalry is intense. Victorinox calls its product the "original" Swiss Army Knife; Wenger boasts that it is the "genuine" Swiss Army Knife. Victorinox produces 4.4 million a year in ninety-eight different combinations. Number two and trying harder, Wenger produces 2.5 million in an astonishing range of two hundred varieties, including a line of ten models machined for left-handers. Wenger likes to point out that it originated magnifiers in the knives, that its scissors have a patented spring that doesn't fall out, and that its models are more compact, by three-sixteenths of an inch. Still, Victorinox is Hertz to Wenger's Avis.

In all, 80 percent of the knives are exported, with American sales being by far the greatest—25 percent of Victorinox's output and 50 percent of Wenger's. After America, the biggest customers are West Germany, Canada, Great Britain, and Japan. But the original military purpose continues. Each company supplies 25,000 Soldier's knives a year to new Swiss recruits.

Because of the rising number and increasing quality of imitation Swiss Army Knives produced in Japan, China, Taiwan, and the United States, Wenger and Victorinox are secretive about the details

of how their knives are made. But gone are the days when they were crafted by hand; most of the operation is automated, many of the machines designed on the premises. Long rolls of French and German steel are fed into machines that stamp out the blades. Then they are ground to the correct thickness (with a tolerance of .02 millimeters), straightened, hardened, polished, assembled and inspected: 20,000 finished knives

emerge daily from the Victorinox factory.

The Swiss Army Knife's popularity seems to have little to do with explorers or astronauts or art curators, and much to do with the knife's value in defeating the mundane terrors of everyday life. Not long ago a San Diego woman, Jan Wall, got a cactus spine stuck in her lip while gardening. Her husband, Rick, a schoolteacher, saved the day by pulling it out with his knife's tweezers. Not that he didn't have a perfectly good set of "real" tweezers in the medicine cabinet. "Just using my knife seems to make the job go better," he says.

Rick Wall is no common user of the Swiss Army Knife. He is the founder and president of the Swiss Army Knife Society (motto: *Semper Versatilis*).

Wall's mailbox is inundated with the kind of tales that have made the knives so dear to so many hearts. "Hi, my name is 'Bear,'" wrote Harry (Bear) Bair. "I don't like to see strings hanging from attractive women's clothing so I say 'Hi, Do you mind if I clip this unsightly thread?' Usually they are pleased."

Greg Harabedian summarized the knife's appeal: "I've found that when most people find out you carry one, they usually start out teasing you and laughing, but they don't laugh so hard when they end

up asking you if they can use it for one reason or other."

The ultimate Swiss Army Knife fan might just be Fred Pickler, a law-enforcement products salesman from Hunt Valley, Maryland. He has collected more than 400 of them.

Pickler carries a Victorinox Swiss Champ wherever he goes. On the day we talked to him he had used it twice: to pick up a small screw that had fallen in a crack (he used the magnetic fishhook disgorgger) and to read the small print on a contract (he used the magnifying glass).

Pickler claims that part of the mystique of the Swiss Army Knife is its legendary quality. "You can abuse it and neglect it for a long time and it apologizes for you," is the way he puts it.

Both Victorinox and Wenger guarantee all their knives for life; if any part breaks they will repair it free. That is, providing "Victorinox, Switzerland," "Stainless Rostfrei" or "Wenger, Delemont, Switzerland, Stainless" is stamped on the largest blade's shank. The number returned to Wenger is "less than two per ten thousand," according to John Bergeron, who handles American imports. Of those returned to Victorinox, Ehrler says, "most are from people who attach great sentimental value to their constant companion, which they kept in their pocket for years. If we tell them, 'It's much cheaper for us to send you a new knife,' then they say, 'Well, thank you, but we would very much like the broken part repaired.' For us it's a waste of money. But what can you do?"

Perhaps owners' loyalty is inspired by the drama of how their knife broke.

On Easter Day 1982, for instance, Ranulph Fiennes had reached the North Pole during a three-year, 35,000-mile, sea-and-land circumnavigation of the Earth via the poles. "I was trying to put in a flag and it wouldn't stick because it was solid ice. We thought, because we were getting very, very cold, that we must get it in there to take a photograph before we could move on. So I took out my Swiss Army Knife to try and make a little slit between two ice boulders so we could jam the flagpole inside before we froze to death." At that historic moment the knife blade snapped. "That," says the world's greatest living explorer, "was the first time and the last time I've ever snapped a Swiss Army Knife."

Jake Page carries a Swiss Army Knife everywhere. Carl Hoffman, his son-in-law, fell in love while camping, when he used one to trim the bangs of his future wife.

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OUT YOU CARRY ONE,
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