

# Gimme shelter

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 21, 2001](#) issue

The Martin Martys of Chicago are friends with the Martin Martys of Zurich, Switzerland. Decades ago the Chicago Martys had the Zurich Martys as house guests. That meant, Swiss hospitality style, that we were invited back to visit them. Over the years we've been back to see them again.

I collect "Martin Martys," of whom there are numbers in Switzerland. One came to America a century and a half ago, was called "the Angel of the West" for his pioneering work among the Sioux, became bishop of St. Cloud, and was offered up to me as a subject to write about by the late Colman Barry, O.S.B. [Order of St. Benedict], who foresaw a good interfaith market for a book "Martin Marty, O.S.B., by Martin Marty, S.O.B." But I digress.

On both visits to the Marty home near Zurich we were impressed that, like all newish houses, it had—it had to have—a bomb shelter. Thick-walled, secure, unobtrusive, windowless (of course) capable of inducing claustrophobia, it represented the Swiss quest for security.

The bomb shelter struck us as irrelevant. For what could it be used? Of course, the U.S. then had not yet spent \$60 billion or \$200 billion on Strategic Defense Initiative protection, so we Americans might have had reason to feel insecure without bomb shelters. Now the U.S. is getting ready again to entertain the idea of spending that kind of money to try to make such shelters irrelevant.

But the one belonging to the Martys of Zurich was not irrelevant. By our second trip it had become the room where ear-plugged son Philippe practiced percussion. He banged away as loudly as the young do, or must. Yet one could not hear him in the kitchen above.

All this came to mind as I read the *Wall Street Journal* (January 17) headline: "Bomb Shelters Away: The Swiss Rethink a Cold-War Oddity: As Nuke Threat Recedes, Those Home Bunkers Feel Dated; Wine Cellars as an Option." Roger Thurow reports that "there are 261,418 bomb shelters in Switzerland," one of them his. Newer

luxury houses have bomb shelters with bunk beds, dry toilets, motorized air-filtration systems and so forth. Along comes a company that will adapt bomb shelters to other uses for \$1,200 to \$2,000.

Philippe needed no adapter. All his room needed was four thick walls. But Thurow wanted suggestions for what to do with his shelter. Wine cellar. Good. But “the euphoria for this business isn’t so great anymore,” one adapter told him. The old law, “For every Swiss, a shelter” is dated. Said another adapter of shelters, “For the last 30 to 40 years, morning to night, we worked hard . . . and it’s disappointing now to be laughed at. But if a threat comes, we’ll be heroes again.”

We learn from Thurow that the bomb shelters of large buildings have become pool halls and bowling alleys. “Use your imagination,” he urges.

Imagine the options for churches which had such shelters. They could use them as places where people could hide to duck stewardship sermons. To avoid being noticed when it was time to volunteer for anything. Or as places where monotonic kids could rehearse Christmas pageants. Where a faction in a factionalized congregation could take refuge. Where we could isolate the percussion that now drowns out praise songs. Where . . .

Yes, use your imagination. Or put your trust in the new missile defense shields, for which you’ll pay in the years ahead. It was disappointing to be laughed at during the last round of work on the Strategic Defense Initiative. This time we can enrage our allies, waiting for our moment to “be heroes again.”