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Switzerland's Drug Addiction Scene

Its misery makes action imperative

The idyllic picture of Switzerland held in many countries as a land of chocolate and holiday resorts has become tarnished of late, resulting in unusual headlines in the press. The scandals connected with the laundering of suspect money, the publicity accorded to the overt goings-on in the Platzspitz park in Zurich and in many other Swiss cities, and a widely supported campaign for liberalisation of our policy in relation to drug abuse have attracted considerable international attention. Is this once again something special for Switzerland?

A survey of the situation related to drug abuse does in fact force one to draw the conclusion that Switzerland is in many respects hit especially hard by its drug problems. On the one hand, as an important centre for international transport and financial operations, and as a country that for many years has had a flourishing trade in foreign bank notes, Switzerland attracts some business men of dubious integrity. And on the other hand, although the boom in drug consumption and traffic lagged in Switzerland behind what was happening elsewhere during the 1960's, it reached us with all the even greater intensity in the 1970's.

Public opinion, alarmed by horrifying legends about hashish of the "protesters", and other "culturally obscurant" narcotics, clamoured for more energetic police action. Thus the number of individuals charged with narcotics offences rose from 123 in 1968 to 521 in the following year. By 1970, the figure had already risen to 2,313. The Federal Supreme Court therefore declared,

in view of this trend in basic mood, the acquisition and even the consumption of illegal drugs to be punishable criminal offences. This signified that Swiss administration of justice had abandoned the very liberal course that it had until then followed in connection with drugs.

A policy of deterrence

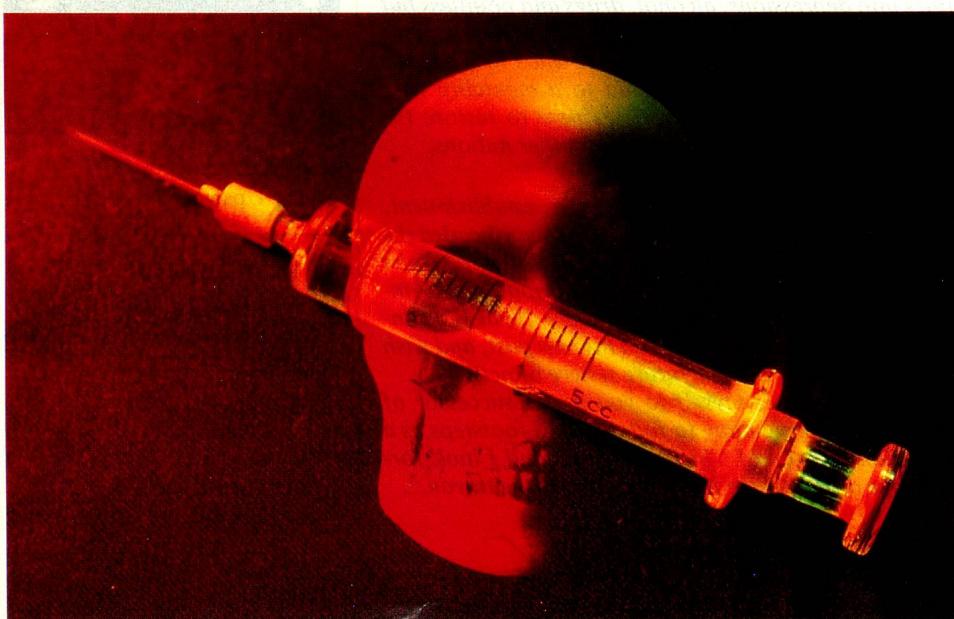
When in 1975 the Federal Councils debated the latest revision of the law on narcotics, they gave their approval to this repressive course, so that the mere *consumption* of drugs was also banned in the new law. At the same time, the range of penalties for trading in drugs was raised to from 1 to 20 years' imprisonment, combined with a fine of up to one million francs. By these measures it was hoped to achieve a deterrent effect, and via the consumers (the "fixers"), to reach the wire-pullers and organisers of the traffic. Some voices were raised to warn against the consequences of special legislation to penalise sufferers from diseases resulting from addiction, which would

prove inappropriate and lead to proliferation of crime, but these critics were few in number. Subsequent developments have however shown that they were right. The deterrent effect on consumers and dealers was virtually non-existent, and did nothing to curb the number of charges brought. The "counter-culture" with its romantic overtones, inspired originally by hash-smoking hippies, gave rise to a variegated drug scene, invaded by the so-called "hard" drugs such as heroin, cocaine and certain medical preparations.

The number of deaths resulting from drug abuse rose from 13 in 1974 to 84 in 1977. This trend caused great consternation to extensive sectors of the population. Apart from a colourful movement in favour of liberalisation of the legislation, mainly in connection with decontrol of hemp products (e.g., cannabis), an increasing number of experts, politicians and lawyers began to plead for the adoption of a more liberal drugs policy on the pattern of what has been done in the Netherlands. The authorities continued however to stick to their policy of prohibition, and thereby could count on the support of a great majority of the population.

AIDS leads to a turning point

In the eighties, the situation worsened however. The number of persons heavily addicted to, and dependent on, drugs continued to rise, amounting by 1985 – as in other comparable countries such as Denmark – to about two per mille of the total population (in our case, to about 13,000). The jails were filled to one third of capacity with drug addicts, the illegal "black market" became more professional but more violent, the living conditions for the heroin fixers worse and worse. Squeezed in between the stress involved in acquiring the drugs (the most expensive in the entire world: pure heroin costs 25 times as much here as it does in Amsterdam), in avoiding pursuit by the police and in enduring



Drugs, the fatal way out (photos: KeyColor)

ostracism by society, the addicts have tended to drift off into even worse misery. It was however not as much human sympathy and pity that made a turning point in the debate about drug abuse, as the problem of AIDS and the money laundering affair.

In an extensive campaign of enlightenment about AIDS, the Federal Health Office started to recommend that syringes and condoms should be given to fixers, in order to slow down the spread of the deadly virus by exchange of syringes and by prostitution for getting the wherewithal for buying drugs. Since then, the authorities have refrained from closing down notorious meeting places for addicts; instead special cafés have been installed so that individuals suffering from drug abuse are enabled to "consume" their "stuff" and "junk" in hygienic surroundings under medical supervision.

At the same time, the programmes for provision of Methadon have been further extended. (Methadon is an "ersatz" drug to take the place of heroin – it may be taken only under medical supervision and control). The fixers who were hitherto to be persecuted as criminals are coming to be increasingly accepted as fellow-humans who are ill, and to whom, through unbusinesslike help, a chance of survival has to be offered.

Renowned scientists have pointed out in

highly respected publications that it is precisely the criminalisation of drug addiction which actually creates the circumstances (a profitable black market, crime for getting supplies of the drugs, social ostracisation) which force the addicts to go to the bad and become demoralised, while enabling the dealers to make hair-raising profits.

Bankruptcy of our anti-drug policy

Finally, the various scandals in connection with the laundering of "dirty" money, which culminated in the resignation of Federal Councillor Elisabeth Kopp in December 1988, left public opinion in considerable doubt about the suitability and even the sincerity of the anti-drug "drag-net" operations of the police. The steadily rising numbers of prosecutions for drug offences – they amounted to 18,739 in 1988 – relate regularly only to consumers in two thirds of the cases. Dealers and smugglers represent only some 5% of the total, and of them very few can be regarded as important behind-the-scenes masterminds.

The policies adopted hitherto in relation to the drug scene have proved to be rather ineffective in the war against organised crime. Inadequacy of personnel, the lack of anti-laundering prohibition measures, and the obstruction and aggravation inherent in the hindrance to criminal proceedings constituted by the burden of proof of the

Some statistics about drugs

In the stranglehold of addiction

In Switzerland at present it is estimated that there are some 15,000 heroin addicted fixers, who make increasing use of heroin in combination with cocaine, medicaments and alcohol. The region most seriously affected is that of Greater Zurich, where the addicts are estimated to number about 4,000. Of these some 300 are regarded as no longer integrated into society, and 80% of them are infected with the AIDS virus. Of the total number of AIDS sufferers registered with the authorities, 29% are drug addicts. Some 4,000 patients are currently getting treatment with the heroin substitute Methadon.

The number of deaths directly resulting from drugs rose from 13 in 1974 to 210 in 1988. This implies that Switzerland at present "leads the field" among European countries: it is however expected that the trend in the countries which are our immediate neighbours will this year

approach the same proportion as here. It is estimated that the annual turnover of the illegal narcotics market amounts in Switzerland to about 1,000–2,000 million francs (world turnover: 500,000 million US dollars). A seriously affected addict here in Switzerland is reckoned to need up to 1,800 francs per day for his or her purchases of heroin.

The 100,000 regular users and the 400,000 occasional users of hemp do not give rise to any special problems from the standpoint of national health policy. The quantity of hemp utilised every year is reckoned to be to the order of 20–30 tons: the proportion of this which is home-grown is on the increase.

It is however the *legal* drugs, alcohol and nicotine, which continue, as for many years past, to give rise to what are by far the most serious health hazards and social and economic problems: they cause about 5,000 deaths a year nowadays.



Pictures of the past. Zurich drug scene centres, from the AJZ (Autonomous Youth Centre), to the 'Riviera' (Zurich's Limmatquai) – before and after the police raid, and the waiting room at Bellevue square (from top to bottom)

criminal origin of suspect funds being laid on the State - all these factors have on the contrary allowed Switzerland to become a "playground" for shady businessmen.

Admittedly, our authorities have reacted very promptly to the scandals and abuses which have attracted international attention. The resources of the anti-drug section of the Federal judiciary have been substantially expanded, and it is likely that a prohibition of laundering of dirty money will take effect in 1990. But in the search for a new policy on narcotics, these changes will undoubtedly represent only subsidiary aspects of the problem. There is a consensus of opinion as to the need for reinforcement

of the resources required for prevention, for the provision of therapeutic measures, and for the fight against crime.

Repression or liberality?

Public discussion is concentrated primarily on the central issue as to what policy will be most rapidly effective in helping sufferers from drug addiction out of their misery. Those in favour of a repressive procedure are in principle opposed to the de-criminalisation of drug consumption and demand a strengthening of the police presence. Furthermore, for drug addicts who are unwilling to undergo treatment for combating their addiction, supporters of this

view would like to see "precautionary deprivation of liberty" enforced. They likewise strongly oppose the state-controlled supply of drugs under medical supervision. In their opinion, liberalisation would only result in the drug scene growing even more. Completely different arguments are voiced by those in favour of a liberal drugs policy. Total prohibition has here - as in all similar past cases - proved a failure, and has added to the problems of addiction. With an undifferentiated criminalisation of narcotics abuse, the State has created a counter-productive judicial form of wastage, from which only the narcotics Mafia can profit. The care of those addicts suffering illness resulting from drug abuse should in the view of these persons be entrusted again to institutions in the field of social medicine, so that the police could concentrate their activities on the drug wholesalers and "laundurers" of dirty money. Within the field of scientific experiments, the State should have the right to administer drugs to persons seriously ill from narcotics abuse. In this manner, it is thought that the living conditions for persons suffering from drug-induced illness would be improved, the stress on them to obtain supplies would be lessened, and the possibilities for the traders to make gigantic profits would be drastically reduced.

The most important drugs

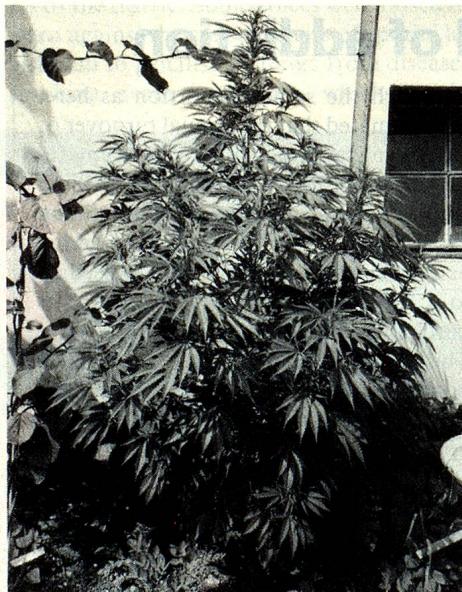
Morphine and **heroin** are opiates derived from the juices of a type of poppy (the **opium** poppy) which is cultivated mainly in many regions between the Balkans and the Far East. Heroin in particular has an overwhelming effect on persons who take it for the first time. They get feelings of exaltation, and also of weightlessness and freedom from pain. After it has been used for a short while, the human organism becomes dependent on the substance, and the doses have to be increased. In the stage of addiction, the feelings of exaltation die out, and in the absence of supplies of the drug severe physical withdrawal symptoms develop.

Cocaine comes from the leaves of the coca shrub, which is cultivated mainly in the Andean countries of South America. Its consumption transmits feelings of strength and stimulates the urge for physical movement, as well as suppressing hunger. When the effect has worn off, the user feels weakness, and frequent use leads to strong psychic dependence entailing severe damage to health. A form of cocaine which can be smoked is known as "**crack**": it is cheap, and extremely dangerous, but so far has not come into widespread use in Switzerland.

The psychoactive drugs known as **hallucinogens** include synthetic **LSD** (Lysergic acid), **mescaline** (derived from the Mexican peyote cactus) and **psilocybin** (derived from fungi), and violently reinforce the sensory perception of the user, producing fantastic hallucinations. Deeply-rooted memories can by means of them be made to rise from the inmost recesses of the subconsciousness. Their use can lead to psychic dependence and addiction, as well as to changes in character and personality.

Cannabis is the generic name given to products derived from the **hemp plant**, which is cultivated in countries all over the world. The resin of this plant is known as **hashish**, and is three times stronger than its leaves, which are called **marijuana**.

"**Hash oil**" is an extract derived from both leaves and resin. Cannabis reinforces the mood of the user and increases his or her sensory perception. By very excessive consumption it can produce hallucinations, and in the case of unstable youngsters, prolonged use may result in psychic dependence and seriously delay the achievement of maturity.



The soft drug cannabis has its own special status in the discussion of drug problems. Our picture shows cannabis planted for the grower's own use, and was taken in Switzerland. (Photo: Thomas Kessler)

A special position for hemp

Hemp has a special position in the discussions about the drug scene, as it is widely regarded as a "soft" drug. Twenty years ago, it still shocked the population under the exotic names of Hashish (hemp resin) and Marijuana (hemp leaves), but in a few years' time it had established itself everywhere as the best-known luxury stimulant for the younger generation. Here in Switzerland, some 20% of persons in the age bracket of 16-45 years have had personal experience of hemp, and about 100,000 use it regularly. In spite of its having been widely integrated into society, hemp is still subject to the same legislative rules as heroin or cocaine, so that about 60% of all offences recorded by the police concern hemp. Even in the view of some supporters of repressive action, this anachronism ought to be corrected, and hemp products should be subjected to special regulations, in a manner similar to what applies in the case of alcohol and nicotine.

The latest proposals

For once, it was the "Ständerat" ("Council of the States"), usually more conservative than the "Nationalrat" ("National Council") which helped to secure a breakthrough for a public discussion at the high-



est Federal level. In March 1988 it unanimously requested the Federal Council to amend the new law on narcotics to bring it into line with the most up-to-date findings of the experts.

The Government and the "Great Council" of the Canton of Berne followed suit in the autumn of 1988, submitting concrete proposals for liberalisation of our narcotics policy, to the Federal Council. Among these proposals were: limiting to an absolute minimum the activities to be regarded as punishable offences, reduction of the standard penalties to be applied, de-criminalisation of consumers, mitigation of the sentences in the case of offenders who are themselves addicts, and finally a study of the question as to whether hemp should not be regarded as a *lawful* narcotic.

It was then the turn of the Governing Council of the Canton of Geneva, on behalf of the entire "Romandie" (French-speaking region), to recommend to the Federal Council that the existing regulations should be seen as adequate, so that *no* revision of them is needed!

Finally, in September 1989 the Council of the Canton of Zurich expressed its adherence to the Berne proposals, but over and above these asked for the general legalisation of hemp.

Meanwhile the Federal Commission on Narcotics had summed up the latest views expressed, in the form of an official paper entitled "Narcotics Report 1989", with its own comments and suggestions. This report has been circulated to all interested organizations for their final reactions.

A high level debate

It seems likely that for the imminent revision of the Narcotics Law, the demands of the advocates of liberalisation and those of repression will in some pragmatic manner be combined.

It must seem strange to observers outside Switzerland that the public discussion about the situation has hardly been affected by the proclamation by President Bush of the "War against Drugs", or the world-wide trend towards more repressive narcotics policies. This could be due to the considerable degree to which the Swiss public has been informed about the various aspects of the problem, and also to the impressively high level of the public debate that has taken place. In many sectors, near and far, there is

a growing consciousness of the need for great circumspection in the formulation of a policy in any liberal society for taking into account socio-cultural phenomena such as drug consumption. *Thomas Kessler*

Thomas Kessler is a qualified engineer for agriculture and for tropical agro-techniques, and is also an outstanding expert on the complex of Switzerland's drug problems. He has published numerous articles dealing with narcotics policy, and since 1982 has been collaborating closely with the Pharmaceutical Institute of the University of Berne in research into the use of hemp (cannabis). Since 1987 he has been a member of the Cantonal Legislative Council as a representative of the Green Party (i.e., of the Movement for Protection of the Environment). He is furthermore a member of the Permanent Commission for the Administration of Justice.

An expert's opinion:

Provide more good reasons for not taking drugs

The question has been put to me time and time again: how to prevent more and more persons from becoming drug addicts? In my opinion, to find a solution, we must first of all get to know more about the causes of addiction, and I believe that there are four different but inter-related factors which are involved.

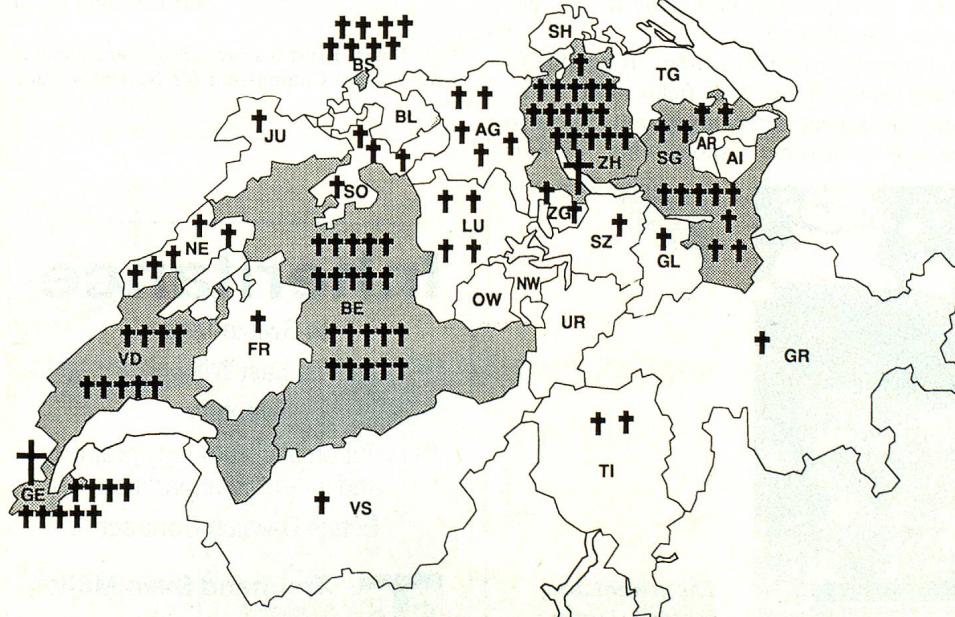
First of all, we must take into account the characteristics of the individual concerned, who with all his or her strong points and weaknesses, is a product of his or her own

personal history. Not every individual can stand up to the same stresses and strains: in some cases, the crisis can come already at a stage which is easily traversed by other persons. And then, in everybody's life there are often "difficult" times, in which the individual is more likely than in others to be susceptible to outside influences, to feel unsteady and vulnerable and thus to be more prone to fall for quick solutions.

Another factor is the environment in which the individual lives. The family, the friends, the situation at school or work-place, living conditions, future prospects, leisure activities and financial situation – all these circumstances can, depending on the individual's age, play an important role. "Is there a 'safety net' of relationships to fall on to if things go badly for me?"

We must moreover take into account the varied range of drugs on offer. Drugs have existed in some form or the other, during the entire history of the human race. They have been used for many different purposes: as medicines and pain-killers, as stimulants, in religious rituals, as means of escape from harsh reality, and for addiction. Thus in themselves drugs cannot be regarded as either good or bad. It depends on what use we make of them. And thereby we are influenced by such factors as their availability, the effect that they have, the manner in which they can be taken, and – for drugs that are legally permitted – the way they are advertised.

The last group of influences contributing to



Drugs have even found their way into rural areas – drug deaths in the first half year of 1989 (large cross: 10 deaths, small cross: 1 death)