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The open drug scene in Zurich

Long tale of woe leads to Letten

For many years Switzerland was best known abroad for the beauty of its scenery and its geranium-clad chalets. Then came the banks. But now we have become notorious for the open drug scene at the abandoned Letten railway station in Zurich.

Today hundreds of young people gather under Zurich's Kornhaus bridge and inject themselves with heroin they get from an army of organised drug dealers, mostly from ex-Yugoslavia and the Middle East. The

Giuseppe Rusconi

police watch the whole process and occasionally intervene. But the open drug scene – which is incompatible with the rule of law – continues to thrive in all its squalor. «How can this be?» ask many outraged citizens. «Has the rich city of Zurich really no means of breaking up the racket? Or is there no will to do so?»

The Letten drug scene has a long history. During the events of '68 drug-

taking in Zurich, particularly hashish and LSD, increased sharply. In those days it meant rejection of society. In 1972 Zurich saw its first deaths from drug abuse. At the same time the first rather mild drug scene developed on the «Riviera» along the Limmat. Heroin gradually became the most used drug, and other small scenes grew up in the city centre, particularly at the Hirschenplatz. The police cracked down massively. In 1979 as many as 29 drug addicts died from overdoses, and in the same year the first drug clinic was opened.

During the early '80s the number of drug users increased further. Following fights with the police, the whole drug scene shifted to the centre of the city,

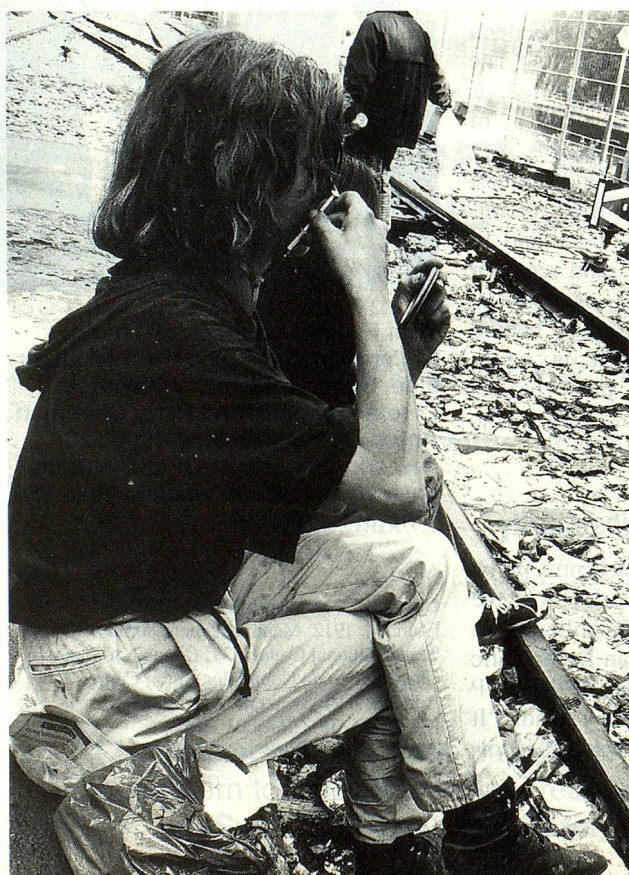
and by the end of 1987 it had become concentrated in the Platzspitz, a public park behind the main railway station. This area remained occupied by drug addicts and dealers until February 1992. Throughout this period fear about the spread of AIDS was growing, and the city council started to provide social and medical assistance. In 1990 voters agreed to continue these measures but rejected the establishment of special «fix» areas. A short time after the city council set them up anyway.

The policy of tolerating the Platzspitz exasperated the police, and at the end of 1991 the Zurich Police Department finally forced the council to clear the park. But the scene merely shifted to the neighbouring fifth district. Since the winter of 1992/93 the authorities have tolerated the same inferno at Letten. Shootouts have now become commonplace. It has been noticed that those who frequent Letten are more and more often people who live outside the city of Zurich or even outside the canton. They come because they are attracted to the open drug scene.

Why is Letten too not cleared? This is demanded particularly by those living in the fifth district. They have banded together in an «Action Group of Involved Inhabitants» and are facing the council with an ultimatum: «Get rid of Letten by the end of the year, or we will do it ourselves». Some parliamentarians, mainly French and Italian speakers, think Zurich city council is not applying the anti-drug law correctly and that Letten is an expression of lax policy. The council – which previously appealed to all the cantons for help – replies that before the drug scene can be cleaned up effectively enough rehabilitation centres for drug addicts and new prisons for dealers must be built. In addition, the council wants to extend the scheme of handing out heroin to drug addicts on the damage limitation principle.

The Federal Council has met Zurich's request to some extent through an ordinance increasing the number of addicts participating from 250 to 1,000. But here too opinions differ: some members of the National Council accuse the government of capitulating to drugs and turning the state itself into a drug dealer.

As we go to press, it is uncertain whether and how the sad story of the open drug scene at Letten will end. But one thing is sure: this is not so much a matter of social breakdown or penal legislation as of the authorities' will to act. ■



A typical day for Zurich's open drug scene: indescribable squalor at the abandoned railway station.
(Photo: Keystone)