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Inhaltsverzeichnis

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4 Mailbag

6 Focus
The fierce debate over wireless 5G

10 Report
A summer visit to La Brévine – Switzerland's chilliest village

13 Politics
Should companies be held liable for damage that they cause abroad?

16 Literature
Charles-Albert Cingria – a Swiss poet and his bicycle

News from your region

17 Culture
From cinema to online – Swiss films become more accessible abroad

20 Society
Switzerland confronts its uncomfortable colonialist legacy

23 Sport
Hurdler Léa Sprunger writes sporting history

24 Switzerland in figures

25 OSA news

28 news.admin.ch

30 Books / Sounds

31 Top pick / News



Admittedly, the bronze statue depicting the gentleman on the cover of this magazine is hard to recognise amid the cold spray of a high-pressure water hose. The emergency clean-up was necessary after demonstrators in Neuchâtel smeared the statue with blood-red paint. However, David de Pury (1709–86) – the man on the plinth – will never quite regain his former lustre. De Pury bequeathed his home city of Neuchâtel an immense amount of wealth after making a massive fortune with his business ventures abroad. He was a financial Goliath, hence the statue. However, since the public have become aware that de Pury made much of his wealth through the slave trade, the city's relationship with its favourite son has cooled noticeably. Cue the paint bombs.

De Pury was one of a group of entrepreneurs who, for a while, helped Switzerland to enjoy the spoils of 'colonialism without colonies'. This is old news if truth be told, yet the global Black Lives Matter movement has brought this chapter in Swiss history into sharp relief, as we will explain later in this issue (page 20).

Switzerland's image takes yet another beating, I hear you cry. But this is good medicine. Any society that can recognise past mistakes without being crushed is a progressive society. And for a modern-day Switzerland that prizes and thrives on the virtues of balance and compromise, being reminded of the errors and blood-spilling of bygone days ought to be a salutary experience.

De Pury and his peers also remind us that we were never an island in the first place. "Switzerland's story has always been about more than what happens in Switzerland and in Europe alone," says historian Bernhard C. Schär. Switzerland belongs to the global village, in good times and bad – as the Swiss Abroad know only too well.

The Responsible Business Initiative, due to be put to the electorate on 29 November 2020 (see page 13), proves how relevant the global village continues to be. Should Swiss companies be liable for human rights or environmental violations that they cause in other countries?

This voting question is not much different to the issue of whether David de Pury earned his fortune in a morally defensible manner. But, unlike de Pury back then, today's multinationals are under the close scrutiny of civil society.

MARC LETTAU, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Cover photo:

The statue of Neuchâtel slave trader David de Pury is cleaned following a paint attack. Photo: Keystone

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