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LETTEN - HELL HOLE OF SWITZERLAND

There is hardly a person left in Switzerland who has not heard the word "LETTEN", the name of a quiet little, now disused, railway station by the Limmat in the heart of Zurich.

Letten has become synonymous with the worst drug scene Switzerland has ever had to deal with, a situation which has put a whole neighbourhood under siege and created havoc with local businesses and innocent people's lives. How did this ever come about?

It all started a few years ago when the staid and down to earth Zurich City Fathers realised that there was an increasing underground drug problem rampant in the city. In their wisdom, they decided to bring it into the open so that it could be controlled. They thought to provide the Zurich drug addicts with a controlled environment where not only free drugs and clean syringes would be available, but also where counselling and desintoxication programmes would be given to the people concerned. Thus the City Council thought that the drug scene could be kept under control and that this move would also curb the spreading of Aids. So the Platzspitze, just behind the main railway station, was selected for this purpose.

Unfortunately, this project turned into a total fiasco. What the Zurich City Fathers did not realise was that words such as "free drugs" act like a magnet on any drug addicts wherever they might be. The news spread rapidly and soon

hundreds of addicts from all over Switzerland and Europe converged on to the Platzspitze. So what originally was supposed to be a simple programme to assist the local drug addicts of Zurich, suddenly became an uncontrollable European drug scene. Worse, it also attracted international drug dealers who openly peddled their ware at the Platzspitze. This of course totally jeopardised the efforts of the Zurich City Council who had thought of supplying the addicts only with a measured amount of drugs with the hope of getting them off the habit altogether in the long run through its rehabilitation programmes.

By the time the Zurich City Council realised the situation was out of control and decided to call off the experiment and close down the Platzspitze, it was far too late. Both the addicts and the drug dealers were far too entrenched in the area to simply give up and disappear. The drug scene spread out from the Platzspitze to the surrounding area (see our article in the December 1992 Helvetia magazine) to finally settle on the disused Letten railway station.

Over the past 3 years, life in that area of Zurich has become a nightmare. Letten has become some sort of ghetto where the police seldom ventures. Local residents, with nowhere else to go, live practically under siege. They have to barricade themselves in their homes, seldom venturing out after dark. They try to ignore the nightly fights,

the beatings up, the screams of the victims, the shootings, the occasional murders and deaths of addicts due to overdoses of drugs. A kindergarten looks more like a concentration camp with children playing behind a high wire fence topped with spikes and barbed wire to keep the junkies out who used the playing grounds as their public toilets, also leaving behind dirty, discarded syringes all over the place.

During the day, the local residents are pestered by drug dealers who peddle their ware openly in the streets. Business on the Limmatplatz, once a popular shopping area, has slumped very badly as drug dealers, patrolling the pavement and often blocking shop entrances, are shying the unsuspecting customers away. Shopkeepers are powerless to shift the dealers away from their front doors as fewer and fewer customers venture into the area.

The local people in and around the Letten keep asking themselves and the authorities, how this whole situation was ever allowed to happen and worse, why has it been allowed to last for so long without any real action being taken. The police only makes occasional raids to arrest a few dealers, but never tried earnestly to put an end to the scandal. Drug dealers, most of them foreigners, brazenly go about their trade in broad daylight. They openly break the law by selling illegal drugs and carrying weapons which they often use to threaten anyone who dares to interfere with their business.

People claim that there is one law for the ordinary citizens and a different law for the drug dealers, whose open threatening behaviour clearly indicates that they must enjoy some sort of protection. The ominous question is of course: who protects them. Like in all such situations, rumours run wild. Are some of the City Fathers involved in this trade of death and therefore have an interest in keeping it going, or are they under threat themselves by some sinister organisation like the Mafia or the "Medellin cartel", or worse are some of them even members of such organisations themselves? Is there corruption at the highest level of local government or is it simply a lack of will to earnestly do something about it? Everyone in Switzerland has his or her own theory and opinion.

The drug scene in Zurich has become so bad that even the Federal Council has now stepped in, declaring the situation at the Letten as "intolerable" and demanding from the Zurich City Council to clean up the mess. But even so, very little has been done.

There is no doubt that public opinion and public pressure will eventually force the authorities to do something about Letten. But one thing is sure, in Switzerland, for a long time to come, the word LETTEN will remain synonymous with a hell hole the likes the country has never seen before.

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