

Wild hordes on the Bahnhofstrasse

Autor(en): **Keller, Gottfried**

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Police water cannon on the Limmatquai

image is bad for business".

Which is why the Swiss authorities have begun 'leaning' on TV to give 'proper' coverage of the riots. And why a leading newspaper held a meeting of all staff to inform them that Zurich stores and finance houses were threatening to withdraw advertising if too much 'sympathy' was shown to the rioters.

Yesterday the trial began in Zurich of Baader-Meinhof gangster Rolf Wagner, behind a cordon of machine guns.

Zurich scarcely needed this reminder of the spectre that haunts them.

Furst said: "Ask me how many militant brick-throwers and I say 200. Ask me how many more will come to the streets and shout... maybe 10,000. But ask me how many people feel as they do... frustrated by a society that thinks only of making money, and I tell you it's fifty thousand. Or maybe ten times that".

That is the real fear, that this crass dispute over a piece of decayed Zurich real estate will escalate into a national youth upheaval just when the Swiss were thanking their gods they had gone unscathed through the decades that had brought savage student disorder from Japan to France, Holland to Italy, Scandinavia to the US.

It would be a savage and ironic price to pay simply for not listening.

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ZÜRICH'S Bahnhofstrasse, the street leading from the main railway station to the shores of the lake, has long been famous for the beauty and elegance of its shop-window displays. It has, rightly or wrongly, often been called the most beautiful shopping street in Europe.

Today however, the Bahnhofstrasse and the neighbouring Limmatquai are a sad sight. Dozens of shop windows are boarded up and shuttered, and many of them look like so many London shops looked after an air blitz during the last war.

During the last two months or so Zürich has been the scene of unrest, destruction, looting and repeatedly of fierce fighting between groups of young hooligans and the police.

The latter have been using water hoses, tear gas and rubber bullets, and the former have usually started their demonstrations by smashing shop windows and car windscreens, followed by emptying rubbish bins into the road and setting the contents alight with so-called Molotov cocktails.

The mess thus created, as well as the smell, is hard to describe. On top of the actual damage done, practically all the traffic in and around the affected districts came to a complete standstill.

So far the damage done during the last two months by destruction and by looting of extremely valuable goods runs into millions of francs. One does not, at the moment of writing, see how all this is going to end. But it is a sad fact that no one can safely go into downtown Zürich any more on a

Wild hordes on the Bahnhofstrasse

By Gottfried Keller

Saturday evening without the risk of being caught up in one of those street battles.

It all started by a group of youngsters — hippies, outcasts, drug addicts and others — protesting against a delay on the part of the authorities in handing over to them a nearly derelict house as an "Autonomous Youth Centre".

When the town council finally agreed to hand over the house, on condition that a political party should act as the responsible supervising authority — a condition which the Social Democratic Party accepted — the youngsters escalated their demands, this time by asking for a very substantial sum of money to restore and run the house.

Again the town council gave way and voted a credit of Sfr. 140,000, but the next move on the part of the youngsters was to demand double this sum.

The council thereupon started to blow hot and cold, occasionally instructing the police not to interfere with any demonstration and then again instructing them to stop demonstrations with "all the means at

their disposal". The council has obviously lost its nerve and does not know any more what to do next.

Now recently the police, acting on information received, raided the Youth Centre at dawn and arrested, provisionally for identification, some 40 youngsters, 14 of whom were kept because arrest warrants were in force against them.

In the centre the police found drugs, weapons and ammunition, as well as stolen and looted goods. On the orders of the town council the centre is now closed, against which decision the youngsters once again decided to demonstrate.

While their intention to demonstrate is by some people considered as a more or less legitimate means of protesting against delaying actions on the part of the authorities, it is a sad fact that hundreds of youngsters have joined in the last (the so far last) street battle out of sheer lust to destroy something.

It goes without saying that the public is deeply worried and there has even been talk of the necessity of forming a kind of citizens defence corps against Zürich's wild hordes.

● Gottfried Keller's monthly Letter from Switzerland will be resumed in the next Swiss Observer.