

# The Bloody Eye of Needle-Park Stag



A Reading Sample

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Remembering people  
plagues and the  
drug war.

Originally, the coppery green stag was a noble fountain ornament in the well-tended, peaceful *Platzspitz*<sup>1</sup> park behind Zurich's main train station. As the appalling nightmare of drugs, mainlining and AIDS approached its horrific climax, the life-size elk stood abandoned among darkling bushes, their leaves concealing an abyss of human misery.

Someone had given the *Platzspitz* stag a bloody eye. Blindly dripping red paint, its seeing eye looked out from obscurity, bearing silent witness to the park's drug scene. Was this bloody eye on the *Platzspitz* stag an evil omen, a monolith or perhaps a guardian angel?

### It could have been much worse

Drugs and war can have an exhilarating effect on people. On the other hand, hardly anyone gets enthusiastic and charged up about a drug war. Grueling and bone-grinding it is, murderous *en masse*, as perfidious and bestial as addiction. And although no one seems addicted to drug wars, they are evidently unstoppable, worldwide.

War and pestilence are often evil siblings. Drug wars explode here, prowl there, openly violent or murdering in stealth, in many places around the world for over a century.

It seems we have surmounted war and plagues, or they are far off, leaving us untouched. In the eighties and nineties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, Zurich and all of Switzerland was the balled fist of a drug war and the HIV pandemic.

More than anywhere else in Europe, problems with heroin and AIDS culminated here, becoming the number one cause of death among

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<sup>1</sup> In the course of events recounted here, the park's original name, *Platzspitz*, was changed to *Needle Park* - Translator's note (Ramey Rieger)

middle-aged Swiss. In our tiny country, thousands of young people died drug-related deaths each year. The drug scene was an open, festering wound in the city of Zurich, and the greatest concern of her people.

Our future looked grim indeed. For a while, the drug war and its pestilence were a horror story here, too, terrorizing the city. Fortunately, it had a happy end.

Ten times, no, fifteen times fewer drug-related and AIDS deaths occur today than during the mid-nineties. We have nearly eradicated drug crimes and hardly anyone takes up heroin these days.

How could our city and country fall prey to such a dreadful catastrophe? How in the world could we surmount such difficulties? Why and how did thousands of heroin addicts fundamentally and enduringly alter their self-destructive, socially damaging behavior?

I may not be able to give a satisfying account of the entire Zurich drug story, but I have several individual stories to tell. I was there from the very beginning.

For forty years, I practiced medicine in Zurich – as an emergency doctor, as a general practitioner in my own practice and as director of both the Methadone Polyclinic *ZokL1* and the Heroin Distribution Center *ZokL2*. During consultation hours, I got to know more than thirty thousand people and personally treated over thirty thousand heroin consumers – nearly half of all opioid addicts in Zurich. Some of which I attended to over many years in the course of my medical career.

## Baby

Until 1951, the drug war driven by Great Britain and the U.S.A. had already raged throughout the world for half a century, with many bloody battles fought. Swiss commercial interests withdrew from and resisted international pressure. Heroin and cocaine were legally available medications, including their export. But then, Switzerland was forced to capitulate. A new narcotics regulation cracked down on mandatory prescriptions for opioids and cocaine, limiting trade.

Heroin was no longer available. Still opioid-dependent physicians and other medical personnel could easily prescribe morphine for themselves. A few dozen other *morphinists* lived and supplied themselves in the less savory haunts of Zurich's *Niederdorf*, a bohemian demimonde.

Baby was a friend of my parents. For several months she was our shepherdess, nanny, nursemaid. A woman with a wildly mussed, salt and pepper pageboy, small, shriveled breasts hanging limply beneath her shabby camisole. I felt her thin warmth one night as she held me on her knee. I also sensed her softness, although Baby was quite gaunt. At that age, I was too light to sink beneath her minor thigh muscles and touch the bony base. I had had a nightmare and woke screaming in my bed. My wet pajama-bottoms removed, I sat on Baby's lap in my pajama-top.

Baby and I drank sweet, warm milk from the same brown Caquelon with white dots. Baby and I loved sweet things. The kitchen was cold at night, the tiled walls and floor seeping condensation. We lived in a 600-year-old house in Niederdorf. Rummaging through Baby's purse I found a powder box, lacy underwear from the next-door *dessous* shop and a steel and glass syringe bedded on cotton. Baby was not only an alcoholic, she was, at least occasionally, a morphinist.

Baby, my Aunt Regina, their shared lover, Palustra, and the whole clique practically lived in the Niederdorf pubs. *Malatesta* and *Select* were their main haunts.

Our fairy princess, Aunt Regina was a delicate, tiny dream-keeper. She told us she had been a tightrope dancer in a gypsy circus in France and had fallen from the wire from a height of six meters. No one believed her. Aunt Regina was an incredibly gifted story-teller. Her prince charming in France was a diminutive, rich Japanese of the Suzuki family. Aunt Regina didn't drink alcohol. She smoked as much as she could and drank her coffee black with lots of sugar. I don't know if she occasionally took drugs.

Opioid receptors in the hypothalamus regulate the desire for sugar. All opioid addicts love sweets. Two or three spoonful's or several cubes, all of my methadone patients took sugar in their coffee.

## Moische

Moische, my Grandfather, was Aunt Regina's father. He also told stories, sitting in his room that stank of cigarette smoke. But Moische's stories were true. It was he who taught me that *truth* in Russian was *Pravda*.

My Grandfather knew Siberia. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, during the Russian-Japanese war, he deserted the Czar's army, fleeing over the frozen Amur River. Many of his comrades froze to death. "The cold isn't cold, but only if you're strong and keep moving. You have to run!"

He and his dwindling group of comrades ran. They ran the entire way from Russia across all of China to Shanghai. "And when you turned to look behind you, a man had fallen. Dead. And when you turned to other side, a man had fallen. Dead."

The synagogue in Shanghai had been there forever. And it was there he found help. From Shanghai he travelled to Hamburg and from Hamburg to Switzerland. Here, he started a family.

Moses Seidenberg lived ninety-two years. He died on the night of December 28, 1968, a night of Siberian fridity. Grandfather sat on a bench in the rondelle Bellevue, a shelter for those waiting for the tram. It was a round, elegantly arching open canopy, reminiscent of Art Deco architecture. A wall of glass circled between back-to-back wooden benches, offering meager shelter from wind, rain and snow to those sitting on the inside.

Grandfather Moische was a cloth merchant. *Good wares from England*. He had been a proud man, always perfectly groomed in a three-piece suit with dress handkerchief, a pocket-watch buttoned to a gold chain and an elegant cane. He had made his way across the vastness of China to establish a life in Switzerland. Now, after coming so far, he was

exhausted, his strength had left him. Dressed only in a loose, shabby shirt, spattered with snot and in baggy pants, he leaned his head on the glass behind him, drooping on the hard bench. His breath came weakly through his open, toothless mouth, a tiny smile on his lips when he saw me coming.

I wanted to help him to his feet.

“Go away! I’m dying.”

I felt as if he had catapulted me away from him. I was on the most intense, overdosed LSD trip of my life. Completely out of control. I was young, I was invincible. I took off my clothes. Only in my rubber boots, I ran and danced through the icy night. I didn’t feel the cold. Like Grandfather said, “You have to run, you have to run.”

The police picked me up eventually. I bit one of the officers in the thumb when he took me in a headlock and arrested me. They threw me into a pitch-dark cell. I died a thousand deaths that night. I was gassed, again and again. The heating and air vents echoed with dull thuds, announcing the next death by suffocation, “Zy-klon B, Zy-klon B, bum, bam, bum.”

Before the next day dawned, I was put in handcuffs and transported to the *Burghölzli* Psychiatric University Clinic.

Restless rustling and whispering wafted through the psychiatric ward dormitory. “Hey, they brought in a new one.” All that was visible in the wan light from high, barred windows was silhouettes of institutional beds. “Do you think he has to figure out who he is, too?”

The flashback of my dying Grandfather hit me hard and hyper-real. I felt the coldness of this beard stubbly skin on my ear. He sent me away with his last, whispered breath, and yet, it flung me away with unspeakable power. I saw myself fall to the ground on my back, nearly

paralyzed with shock, crawling in the dusty filth from rondelle Bellevue. Forth, forth, forth from my dying Grandfather.

Suddenly I was back in the psychiatry dorm. The night doctor came. He questioned me. I told him I had taken LSD. It was obvious he hadn't a clue. "Check in your books. They'll tell you to give me a shot of 25 milligram largactil. Please don't. I don't need a neuroleptic. The effects have nearly worn off anyway."

My dying Grandfather and the murderous ghosts of my horror trip in the police cell gas chamber ambushed me many times afterwards, silently, slyly. The attendants came, four of them, and one jammed a needle into my flesh. I hate neuroleptics, they're oppressive and make you rigid. Worse than deadly strychnine, the stiffness invades you at the neck and courses down over your shoulders, through the backbone to your thighs. Later, I encountered that idiotic night doctor several times again, as a colleague.

When they released me, my Grandfather was already under the Earth.

## Gröbli and Schöbli

War and pestilence were thought to be nearly extinct. And still, when they came, their shape was other than we had imagined. The war was a drug war and the pestilence, addiction and AIDS.

It was only fifty years ago that Switzerland entered the world war against the drug market. In the twenty-five years leading up to closing the open drug scenes at *Platzspitz* and at the former *Letten* train station, the police force expanded a hundred-fold and was armed to the teeth in their efforts to repress drug use. Until the mid-nineties, the drug problem nurtured the governmental cudgel.

In this part of the world, the risk of a premature death was many times higher than it is today. Europe had been living nearly fifty years under the very real, daily threat of atomic war. The Cold War was ingested piping hot. The fifties, sixties and seventies were incomparably more violent than our times.

In my youth, barroom brawls ending in death were no rarity. Newspapers reported casually of such casualties, a mere side-note. Today, a single case makes headlines for days and the media can draw that out for weeks, if it promises sales, clicks or TV ratings. Exploding automobile traffic took thousands of Swiss lives. Everyone knew someone who had died in an accident. Back then, during the Cold War, even terrorism took a higher toll of deaths in Europe and Switzerland, especially in Switzerland. Excessive police violence resulting in death is no longer daily fare. In those days, they were the norm.

Penitentiaries for children and teenagers were still called by that name. Corporal punishment was still commonplace at regular schools as well. In some places, so-called *Verdingkinder*, contracted child labor, were still treated like slaves.

If you were a young man who dared to grow your hair long, you got a beating at home or were jeered at on the street, “Get a job! Go to work! Nothing comes from nothing!”

Women in mini-skirts were not only stared at, they were groped. Swiss women still didn't have the right to vote and were less than second-class citizens. You couldn't be raped by your husband. It was his legitimate, conjugal right to take what was his. With force, if need be. Anyone unwilling to bow down and conform was subject to the punitive wrath of the powers that be, and what's more, to the pure desperate rage of the powerless. “If everyone did that. We all have to. Where will it all end?” Liberal tolerance was tightly reined in, propriety and righteousness could only be reached by rigorously, yes, sadistically, coercing oneself and others. Doubts in the doctrine only gradually began to make themselves heard.

The battle against drug use was a battle against drug users. Drug users were enemies of established society. Quite often, drug users saw themselves as such and styled themselves to fit the image.

The massive repression was wholly disproportional to the drug problem. The drugs most commonly consumed were cannabis and LSD. There were still only a few heroin addicts in Zurich and problems with other drugs were hardly noticed.

The first officially recorded drug death in Zurich was in 1972. He died of respiratory arrest following an unusually high dose of heroin. I knew him in passing. Three years later, according to 1975 police statistics, two hundred and fifty people had died of an overdose.

Rebellious young people were sweepingly accused of the most dreadful acts – they were communist terrorists controlled by the East – and were suspected of taking drugs. It's true, you would occasionally see the police confiscate a few grams of cannabis from long-hairs on the streets

of Zurich. Drugs became the banner of justification for repression and extensive policing.

At the end of the sixties, only two Zurich policemen were assigned to drug offenses: Robert Schönbächler and Arthur Grob.

The Zurich riviera lies below the Quai Bridge where the Limmat River flows from Lake Zurich. Long, hewn ashlar blocks with red, verrucano pockets form a hundred-meter-wide stair on the right bank. Eleven steps lead to the water where swans, ducks and black coots await feeding, jostling loudly for their share. As early as the fifties, you could walk over a narrow pier to a large raft on the lake offering rowboats and paddleboats for an afternoon's pleasure. You can still see today the black, heavy iron rings embedded in the rock stairs where freight ships once moored at the city's harbor.

The summer of 1968 found us sitting on these steps. We squinted in the sun or at the girls, sometimes toking up on our lunch break. We brought music instruments with us, those being the days of handmade music. Sure, there were portable radios and transistors, but not a single station played music worth listening to. All that summer, the sun shone. At least, that's how I remember it.

A group picture shows us at the Riviera. The photo must have been shot from a boat. Did we really pose for it? You can see us all, all of us are there: Sängler, Michael, Daniel, Tienäli, Ambar, David, Hirsch with his port-wine stain in his face, Elefäntchen, Renate, Helen, Pieter and others. We were the coming generation. apprentices, high schoolers and drop-outs. We flaunted our colors with harem pants, vests and blouses, loud sweaters or Indian skirts with flowers or headbands in our hair and homemade jewelry in our ears and around our wrists, necks and ankles. For myself, I had my two pairs of jeans, one to wash and dry while I wore the other. Maybe I had a solid-color pullover, two t-shirts and a

pair of sneakers. I wasn't aware of how carefully many of us dandified themselves. With their hand-made clothing and ornaments, they were *in*, more *hot* than *cool*. It wasn't until later that *cool* became *in*.

Sänger is in the center of the photo, grinning directly into the observer's eyes beneath his broad, dark wreath of hair. In his right hand, he holds a sitar like scepter, his left hand braced on his knee. All the girls look up at him. Even Ambar seems smitten. Pieter is wearing a black top-hat and handlebar moustache to belie his timid nature. Elefäntchen, the musician, whose blonde, curly mane would make any baroque wig-maker green with envy, seems to have discovered something interesting in the distance. Who were the others? I can't remember right now. Sänger, the sitar player and I did some busking in front of restaurants and I must admit, the money wasn't half bad.

We were either broke or kept our finances to ourselves. Some of us spent the entire day hanging out at the Riviera. Maybe they had escaped some institution or half-way house or were sort of AWOL, like Tienäli. She introduced herself to me with this special pseudonym. I don't know her real name anymore, even though she later became one of my patients.

Tienäli wore a white blouse of cotton crepe with blue and red embroidery. She had thick lips, long eyelashes, blue eyes, and crooked protruding teeth. Her breasts were small handfuls I would have enjoyed getting to know better. She was on the prowl for high school seniors. For fifty Swiss francs she would accompany them to a party, what we called a *fez* in those days. When she looked into my eyes, she said she would even allow herself to be kissed – for another fifty. I don't know if I had the presence of mind to give her a witty response. But I certainly didn't say anything offensive, since each time we met she smiled, looked me over lasciviously and ran her tongue over her teeth. Even

years later, when she came to my practice for the first time, she did exactly that.

Behind the green, wooden, women's river bathhouse, from the Art Deco tax building, Gröbli and Schöbli gazed over the river, their eyes glued to binoculars. Grob and Schönbächler, the first, back then only, narcs in Zurich had taken up their post behind the oval window in the highest cockloft of the verdigris onion-helmet dome with its oriental flair.

“Yoo-hoo!” Sängler waved merrily to the two cops.

One-armed Michael passed a joint to Sängler and took a swig from the bottle. Amber and Tienäli were giggling and tittering as they worked on producing the next big doobies, a flyer spread over their four adjacent knees.

“Yoo-hoo!” Now all of us were waving and bellowing.

The student Tienäli had picked up and dragged along was, of course, a mama's boy. Still, he noticed those must be *Schmierlappen*<sup>2</sup> “Yeah, that's Gröbli and Schöbli, *Schmier* and *Schroter*, that only makes it funnier. No biggie.”

A lot gets lost in translation when we Swiss write in German. Swiss German, our mother tongue, is an oral language, not a written one and so very different than the German of the Germans. Should I write *prison* when we speak of a *crate* they lock us up in? And how do I describe *the curve*, when we escape from an institution or prison? And the *Schmier*. The *Schmier* aren't really the *fuzz*. *The fuzz* is television vocabulary and penetrated street slang later than the time of this account. In the years I speak of, we spent much less time in front of the tube than kids do today. And the *Schmier* is not simply the police. I always hoped a *Schmier* would bring charges against me for saying or writing *Schmier*. I have

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<sup>2</sup> In this context, *Schmierlappen*, *Schmier* and *Schroter* are Swiss slang for fuzz, pigs, etc. Derogatory terms for the police. – Translator's note

my comeback ready. I could accuse the *Schmier* of being an anti-Semite, since *Schmier* comes from the Yiddish word *Schmirah*, which means *sentinel* or *guardsman*. So, it goes to follow, a Swiss cop taking umbrage when called a *Schmier* can only be offended because *Schmier* is a filthy Yiddish expression which, in turn, can only be filthy because it's Yiddish. By the way, *Schroter* and *Schroterei* are also Yiddish, meaning police officer and police as a whole.

The two cops didn't seem to notice our greeting. Ambar laughed, saying the two stone figures on either side of the top balcony were waving back bashfully, their heads bowed. "Can't you see them discreetly laughing at those lurking cops?"

More and more hippies hanging out on the hundred-meter wide stairs began gesticulating and caterwauling across the river. A gala wedding party celebrating in front of Town Hall thought the salute was meant for them and a few ladies waved back cheerfully. Their men, however suspected ridicule and scorn and waved back. With their fists. Especially when David showed them his bare ass. No one knew who he was mooning, the police or the wedding party.