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Heroin in the Alps too – report from a social worker

He could not stand the Fear any longer

The “Metropolis of the Bernese Oberland” – Thun – showed its prettiest face when I arrived there two years ago to take up my new job in the “Advisory Bureau for Narcotics in Thun-Oberland”. “There can’t be any drug-addicts here” I thought. “Everything and everybody seem well taken-care of”. Unfortunately, my first impressions soon had to be corrected: every motor car, every bicycle had its allotted place – but not every human being in Thun had a bed or a roof over his or her head. Homelessness is no longer a problem confined to big cities like Paris and New York, or even Zurich and Berne. Homelessness, drug addiction, hard drugs like heroin and cocaine exist more and more inside Switzerland, in provincial towns and rural communities, and also in the mountain villages such as those of the Bernese Oberland. I got to know one of my first “clients” in the remand prison of Thun Castle.

Difficult conditions

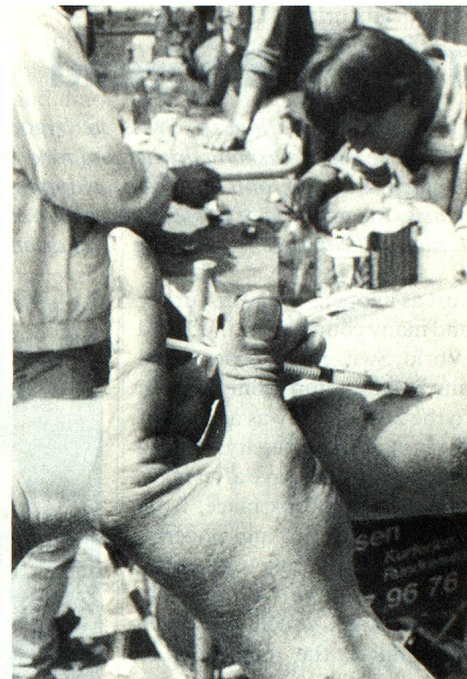
In the rather cramped and poorly lit visitors’ room in the Castle, this 25-year old man told me about his life up to then. The youngest of five children, he grew up with his parents in a country village in the Bernese Oberland. There his parents had a little farm, with four cows, some sheep, chickens, rabbits, pigs, cats and everything else usually found on a farm. His father, apart from working on the farm also had a job with a building firm. His mother did most of the work on the farm, as well as looking after the five children. In spite of what must seem to be idyllic cir-

cumstances, Beat (not his real name, now altered by the writer) did not have many pleasant things to report from his childhood. All he could remember was work, work, work... Early in the morning, before going off to school, he had to tend the animals and take milk to the cheesery. In the warm classroom at school, he could often hardly keep awake. In the evening his mother would be waiting for him to come back from school, and would give him new jobs to be done – making hay, mowing the grass, cutting wood and many more things. For his “homework” from school there was hardly any time left – nor did he have the energy – so his performance at school had to suffer accordingly.

His mother was good to him, said Beat. But in the struggle for existence she had to demand too much from herself and from her children, far too much. His father was also kind to him, very kind in fact when he was sober. He drank a lot however – there was no shortage of alcohol in the home. The “schnapps” was distilled at home – strong and of good quality. But under the influence of alcohol, his father underwent a big change, and would hit his wife, the children and the animals as well.

So those were the childhood memories of Beat – fear, fear and work, work. What he longed for as a boy was not to be afraid for once, to be able for once to sit back with nothing to do, to own a leather jacket some day, to have a moped and time to spend with his friends.

Beat began to drink, like his father. And to



No words (Zurich’s Platzspitz. Photo: ap)

get into fights – usually hitting back in self-defence. After leaving school, he was apprenticed to a joiner’s workshop. Already as an apprentice, he came into contact with drugs, through his friends. Although he knew a lot about the dangers of using hard drugs, he could not resist the temptation to sample them. He thought he would be able to keep the habit under control, and to avoid becoming an addict. With some difficulty he completed his apprenticeship as a joiner and then left home. For some months he worked at his “trade”. But he spent more and more time with his “friends” from the drug milieu, he lost increasingly the power to control the habit, and more and more often he took a shot of heroin. That started him on an ever more gruesome career as an addict. Prison, homelessness, prostitution, attempts at withdrawal, “dealing” and “pushing” drugs, burglaries, pain, fear and yet another jail sentence...

After a lengthy spell in jail, he has been working regularly for several months, and is firmly decided to live a decent life again. In the course of the next few years he will have to pay off a pile of debts totalling some 60,000 francs – debts arising from the small-scale loans that he had entered into in order to buy drugs.

He keeps cheerful in spite of all these disasters, and considers himself lucky – his AIDS test is negative...! *Annemarie Lanker*

Annemarie Lanker is a welfare worker and is in charge of the Narcotics Advisory Service for Young People and Parents in Thun.



Berne’s Kleine Schanze, where a heated tent provides temporary relief from the miserable life of drug addicts