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[Peter von Matt]

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the landscape. Ugly, grey concrete buildings or sheet metal constructions in gaudy colours like mauve, red, lemony yellow and worse are scattered across the landscape.

In the valleys of Valais, where we enjoy spending our holidays, the meadows, fields and forests are increasingly making way for service stations, garages, small factories, shopping centres and rental properties, which are soulless as they are common and identical in all cantons. We are seriously considering spending our holidays in one of the many countries that have successfully main-tained their beauty and soul.

WILLY HENRI PFISTER,
BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

Switzerland – a giant construction site

As a 17-year-old, I visited the National Exhibition in Lausanne in 1964. One image stuck in my mind – a new building constructed on a meadow, which was part of a slideshow illustrating urban sprawl in Switzerland. Even then calls were being made for the restriction of development zones and for more rigorous construction laws and spatial planning regulations.

After graduating as an architect, I worked in Cape Town, Kiel, Amsterdam, Pietarsaari, Athens, Los Angeles and San Francisco as well as in Berne and Interlaken. I now live in Bainbridge Island in the USA. Poorly regulated, unrestricted construction is taking place everywhere. The suburbs are growing rapidly here in the United States without well planned and designed development strategies. Switzerland is still an incredibly beautiful alpine nation and a dream destination for many foreigners. However, I have noticed with great concern on my visits

how urban sprawl is continuing and development is increasingly taking place in the alpine valleys. I dread to think of the future we are creating for our children and grandchildren.

ANTON HUGGLER, USA

Prejudiced journalism

I am certainly not the only one to consider your coverage of the “Hildebrand affair” to be biased and incomplete. You are certainly entitled to dislike the Swiss People’s Party, Christoph Blocher and the “Weltwoche”, but your article is unquestionably “prejudiced journalism”. Most of the Swiss media conveyed a poor image in their coverage of the Hildebrand affair, preferring to shoot the messenger – Blocher – rather than read the message.

MICHEL TURBERG
PHUKET, THAILAND

Lack of judgement

Through his actions and his wife’s legally acceptable currency transactions, Philipp Hildebrand handed an opportunity on a plate to the Swiss People’s Party (SVP), Christoph Blocher and, in particular, the “Weltwoche”. His outstanding professional attributes were unfortunately accompanied by a lack of judgement with regard to the moral perceptions of the Swiss nation. It is a shame, that the Swiss banking centre should lose this highly qualified person through these unnecessary circumstances and, much more annoyingly, that Switzerland’s image should be tarnished by this. Mr Blocher and Mr Köppel will be rubbing their hands together with glee at the prospect of this coverage successfully conveying their nationalistic image of Switzerland. This is unacceptable to a liberal Swiss abroad.

ERNA BUNGER, GERMANY

THE GOTTHARD POST BY RUDOLF KOLLER is one of the most well-known Swiss paintings. The work of art produced in 1873 depicts a mail coach drawn by five horses travelling through the winding Tremola. A stray calf finds itself in front of the carriage thundering down the valley at great speed. The image frequently featured in calendars and magazines for many years. In his latest book “Das Kalb vor der Gotthardpost” (The Calf in front of the Gotthard Post), literary scholar Peter von Matt writes that as a child, with a “mixture of trepidation and fascination”, he often wondered whether the calf managed to escape or whether the horses trampled over the defenceless animal and the mail coach plunged into the ravine.

The mail coach scene is actually not a particularly cosy one. It is just that nobody really looked closely at it before

Peter von Matt. “An oppressive air” hangs over the high-speed scene. It is not just the calf immediately in peril that is placed in danger by the mail coach but also the startled cows standing in a cloud of dust by the edge. There are always victims who are left behind or lost when the speed of things increases. The height of irony is the fact that the painting was commissioned as a gift for “Switzerland’s greatest ever tycoon of progress”, Alfred Escher, a railway entrepreneur and the driving force behind the Gotthard railway. This is the man whose life’s work indirectly resulted in the disappearance of all mail coaches.

Peter von Matt sees the fact that the image has become an icon of the good old days as one of the painting’s paradoxes. It does not in fact portray such an idyllic image as otherwise the “horses would be trotting sedately, the cows grazing peacefully and the coachman blowing on his post horn”. In terms of art history, the startled herd represents a “spoilt idyll”, as von Matt writes. He adds: “What was perceived and admired as a conservative manifestation in truth bore the signs of upheaval in civilisation and its dangers.”

Based on and continually returning to the racing mail coach, von Matt explores Swiss politics and literature in his fascinating and brilliant text. The outcome is a subtle deconstruction of long-since-outdated Helvetian idylls that sometimes never even existed in the first place. He illustrates, for instance, how Gottfried Keller literarily papered over the cracks in the Swiss idyll. Von Matt outlines the phenomena of the relationships between faith in progress

and conservatism and between an outward economic outlook and isolationist self-centredness in all their nuances. Although Switzerland is a highly developed nation, opinion-forming power largely remains in the hands of those who essentially regard the nation as a traditionalist, rural alpine republic.

The political, economic, cultural and literary correlations and insights that Peter von Matt, one of Switzerland’s most prominent intellectuals who celebrated his 75th birthday this year, sets out in his essay and other articles compiled in this book eclipse some major historical works on Switzerland. And he once again achieves this with his unmistakable symbiosis of pithy language and analytical depth.

JÜRIG MÜLLER

