

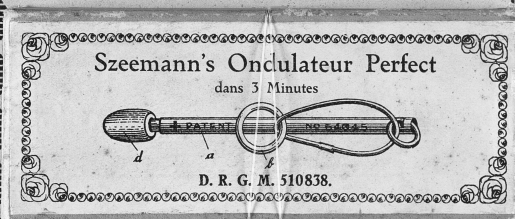
Shortly after the Second World War, I was on vacation at the Untersee. The Swiss lakes are rarely without their rainy days, and I spent them combing through a huge pile of magazines, mainly the Schweizer Spiegel. During the war, as part of the spiritual defense of the country and as a diversion for border guards who were cut off from the outside world and condemned to inactivity, this particular magazine had published a series of real-life adventures as experienced and told by real Swiss people. I still remember Friedrich Glauser's tales from the foreign legion and, most of all, the life story of Captain Heinzelmann from Bern, who navigated the high seas on his barge, generally carrying ambiguous cargoes, unambiguously scuppering Armenian corpses in the Bosphorus, never omitting to collect postage stamps wherever he went, and ultimately settling down to open a philatelist's shop in Bern. And so it was only right that, having read my grandfather's memoirs (the first draft was written when he was eighty-nine), I advised him to send them to the Schweizer Spiegel, though nothing came of it until his ninety-fifth birth-day, when just "his journeyman years" appeared in the Schweizerische-Coiffeurmeister Zeitung.

Grandfather, 1968

Hungarian by birth (born in Diósd in 1873, died in Bern in 1971), he wrote the way he lived: important things large, the rest small. "The best life," he used to say, "starts and ends with God." His contained a wealth of stories; no great adventures, but plenty to suggest that this self-made master hairstylist had lived a full life. As short as Napoleon and at once decent, charming, stubborn, and obstinate, he boxed his way through life, an uncompromising stylist who never shied away from industrial espionage, watching through the keyhole as the famous Marcel Curling Irons were demonstrated in Vienna, inventing coloring combs, devising the first permanent wave machine, hooking hairpieces

Szeemann's Ondulateur „Perfect“

schafft in 3 Minuten die schönsten Wellen

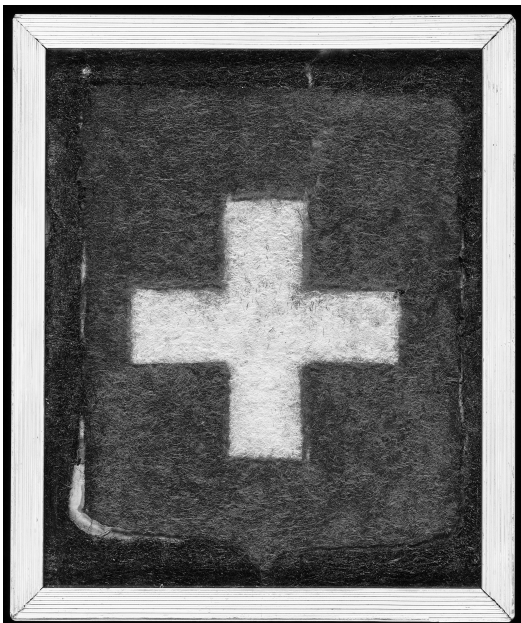


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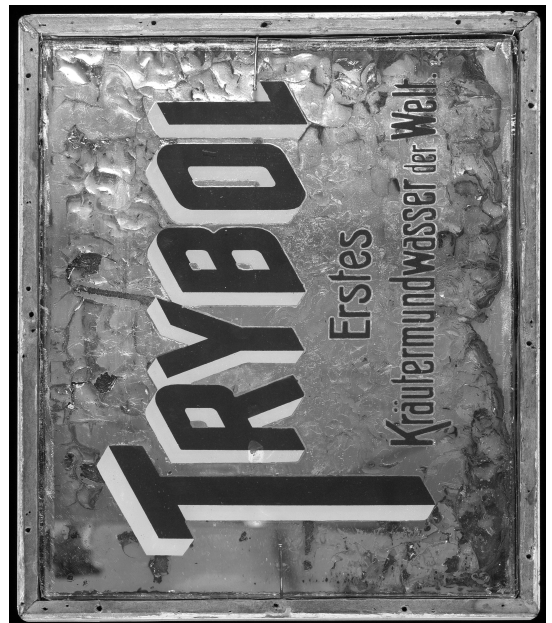


with his wife. When he died at the age of ninety-eight in 1971 he had outlived all his children. His wife, Leontine, a Bohemian goldsmith born Drtilek in Vienna in 1881, followed him to the grave two months later.

Grandfather always knew what was good for him and was always in good health. That said, he was never rich because he always put all his eggs in the wrong basket. He was a spirited speculator who never bought the right shares. When someone offered him some land by the train station at a knock-down price he divided the asking price by the cost of a shave and decided that a hundred thousand shaves sounded too good to be true even for the Franke district. That said, his establishments were always in the best locations in Bern: Falkenplatz, Christoffelgasse, Bundesgasse, Hirschengraben, and Spitalgasse. In short: he liked to keep himself healthy, which meant refusing any form of medication, taking lengthy hikes, socializing with colleagues, daily outings to the Schweizerhof and the Wächter in the Viennese coffeehouse style, a good gossip with the musicians from the Hungarian ladies' orchestra at the casino, and, for the mind, chemical experiments in his laboratory. Grandfather's journeyman years took him through Hungary, Romania, Greece, Turkey, Vienna, Karlsbad, Wiesbaden, Berlin, Hamburg, Nice, and London, and it wasn't by chance that he eventually settled in Bern. After stopping here in 1897 there was no room in his heart for any other city. He realized the dream of "the poor Hungarian boy who Loves Switzerland above all else." And it was the Swiss he was most drawn to when abroad. When he arrived in London with just half a penny to his name it was a Swiss lady who gave him food and board. He repaid her with his art, fashioning a hairpiece by which she would always remember him. And Lord Allen's proposal? "He said I should stay in London. He wanted to fit out a first-rate shop for me at his place on Old Bond Street. That's a capital offer, I said, but I can't be getting tied down in London. I want to settle down in Switzerland. I'm heading for Bern." In 1904 he and his family moved from London to Bern. He became a naturalized citizen in 1919. One idiosyncratic work that certainly stems from this period is his felt rendition of the Swiss arms made from the red, white, and black hair of his clients. It was mounted on a mirror



with the following inscription:
"TRYBOL Erstes
Kräuter-
mund-
wasser der Welt"
[TRYBOL The
world's first
herbal mouthwash]





Louis XVI hairstyle called "La Belle Poule [The Beautiful Hen]," as done by Grandfather



Grandmother, circa 1906

Grandfather was a hairstylist first and foremost. The art of hair-dressing was his life. Nothing was more important to him. He was also a passionate collector (of professional documents, stamps, engravings, badges, shooting target cards, emergency currency). His apartment at Ryffligässchen 8 was a classic example of an overfilled lodging, going from three to two rooms. When it was cleared out after his death in 1971 I kept everything that reminded me of my grandparents. For years I've thought this apartment was worthy of an exhibition, as the visualization of a history, as evidence of a way of life, as an illustration of the knowledge that there comes a point in each and every person's life where all symbols become self-explanatory - at which point there is no longer anything to stand in the way of the accumulation of symbols and objects. Grandmother, to whom he was married for sixty-nine years, had been deaf since the birth of their children. But only to outsiders. To her, everything he did spoke. She often found him impossible to live with, but he was her life, and she was his. She was a brilliant cook and loved festivities of any kind. She was always there and - though deaf people are often sad - always on form. Though this little couplet (they were five foot one and two) hardly made life easy for their children and forced both of their sons to go into hairdressing, they were goodness itself to their grandchildren. For larger celebrations Grandfather would always come up with elaborate prank programs, and his artfully wrapped Christmas presents echoed the labyrinth of the apartment in the form of little props that kept me and my brother busy for hours on end. After the early deaths of their children (my father, in 1958, was the last of them), my grandparents were looked after by my selfless mother. Grandfather had more time in his old age. And although he was still dressing the hair of his loyal lady customers at ninety-two years of age, his main interest by that point was

his grandchildren. He came to every exhibition that Dr. Harry (as my grandmother called me) put on at the Kunsthalle. In his best threads, kissing the ladies' hands, he was the doyen of the vernissage.

When visiting memorials or making exhibitions there was always one question that fascinated me: Can life be (artificially) reconstituted from objects? A one-to-one reconstruction of the apartment wouldn't have done it. Grandfather's idiosyncratic sense of order needed to be broken down for display. The salient points of the exhibition are as follows: Family tree, Grandmother, Roots in the Austro-Hungarian empire, Bern and Switzerland, Professional life (apprenticeship, journeyman years, his own establishments, printed matter, gatherings, and honors), Grandfather's relationship with money, Role models, Grandparents' apartment, Grandfather's contribution to the triumph of beauty, What others have said.



It's a happy coincidence that Toni Gerber is taking on my old apartment as he celebrates the tenth anniversary of his gallery with this exhibition for a centenarian. I've been schlepping my grandfather's worldly possessions around for two years and between three buildings to install them here at Toni Gerber, my last Bernese residence. The result is an homage to a man who came to Bern, mounted by one who's now leaving it.

A grandfather exists beyond death in the conversations we have about him and in the stories he told that we continue to tell. In this case it's an exhibition, for he often told his own story and even committed it to writing for posterity. It's all there, and you too ought to know what snake fat's good for, how to toss a gugelhupf out of a train window, how to react when jealous competitors brick up the door of your shop in the night, and what ethics are: "I've been through some very dark times too, but I thank my dear GOD for health and good guidance. He never let me do anything bad. But how did you know, Herr Szeemann, whether you were doing good or bad? It's not something I can really explain. There were times when I'd feel at ease, when I was doing something good, and times when I'd feel ill at ease, when I was about to do something bad. That's really all I can say about it. I follow my feelings."