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A culture born by the whole of society

Referat von Regierungsrätin Jacqueline Fehr anlässlich der «Opera Europa International Summer Conference»

Ladies and Gentlemen

It's a great honour for me to be able to welcome all of you to Zurich. It's a pleasure to have you here, the driving forces behind the opera houses of Europe.

Zurich and the opera are almost synonymous. We're proud of our opera. For me, running an opera house is an expression of a society's desire to work together to create something special – something that goes beyond the everyday. An opera house is a festive highlight, a symbol of the great breadth and wealth of a community's achievements.

The City of Zurich has devoted a wonderful new square to its opera house. You must have seen it on your way here. It's not called "Opera Square", although that's precisely what it is most days of the year. You should have been here ten days ago, when more than fourteen thousand people sat in this square in pleasant weather to enjoy Franz Lehár's operetta "The Land of Smiles", broadcast live from the opera house. Another two-and-a-half thousand gathered 200 kilometres away in Lugano, in the south of our country, to watch a live transmission of the event. It was great. I'll say something more about it in a moment.

I'm sure you also have wonderful stories to tell about your opera houses all over Europe. That's why you're here! I would like to warmly welcome you to Zurich for your twenty-eighteenth summer conference.

I'm with you here as a representative of the political authorities of the Canton of Zurich. I'm a government councillor of a canton that's home to around one-and-a-half million people.

I don't know what you know about Zurich, but I bet you've at least heard the clichés. And you're also aware that clichés always have a grain of truth.

In fact you have everything that's essential to Zurich, right before you:

- the lake
- the opera house
- the banks.



Take a look over the lake and you'll see that we enjoy certain privileges here in Zurich. It's in a great location in the heart of Europe, and the lake has always been a magnet for those keen to leave the narrow confines of their valleys. That's why the people who live in the Zurich area are so open-minded and innovative. We're aware of the privileges we enjoy.

But they weren't handed to the people of Zurich on a plate. First the swamp on the shores of the lake had to be drained, bridges had to be built, and international relationships had to be forged.

The industrious folk who achieved all this are said to have had the diligence instilled by Huldrych Zwingli – our very own religious reformer, who back in the sixteenth century – we too are celebrating the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation – was the man behind what has possibly been Zurich's only contribution to world history. The Reformation replaced the authoritarian exclamation point with the democratic question mark. That changed the world.

Over the centuries, Zurich's diligence and urge to innovate produced great wealth – reflected in the opera house and banks you see here.

On the subject of the opera house, I stand before you as a representative of the Canton of Zurich – the “owner”, so to speak, of this opera house. We're very proud of our wonderful opera house. It creates a dual challenge. On the one hand it's a beacon of culture that's visible internationally, moulding the image of our city throughout Europe.

But the Zurich Opera House is also a local stage. As I mentioned before, only a few days ago Andreas Homoki and his team staged the “Opera for Everyone” event. In fact “for everyone” sums up the whole project: the opera house and its team also made the production accessible for those with impaired vision and hearing. Visually impaired people were provided with headphones for a live commentary on what was going on on stage. People with impaired hearing had their own section of the square where an interpreter translated the music and words into sign language. It really was “opera for everyone” on a local stage.

Events like this are the opera's way of saying thank you to local people, a great symbol of openness that breaks down barriers, and roots culture and the arts in the local population.

Naturally this isn't an act of altruism – it is the people, after all, who fund the opera house.

I don't need to tell you how expensive it is to run an opera house. Again and again political debate flares up in Zurich on this subject.

Around twenty years ago the canton and the city of Zurich found a good solution to all this. The canton finances the opera, but the city takes some of the strain by funding other cultural beacons such as the Schauspielhaus theatre and the Kunsthaus art museum. The arrangement works. And it's standing the test of time.

But we also afford ourselves the opera out of conviction.



In this context I'd like to quote the president of the ETH, our world-leading federal institute of technology here in Zurich, who said: "The best people come to the coolest cities." And as we all know, an important component of coolness is culture. In other words, we promote culture because we love culture in all its many and varied forms. We do this knowing that culture also makes us attractive and attracts talented people to Zurich.

Which brings us to the banks. I'll keep it short: While the banks might sometimes make the headlines for the wrong reasons, they're also a very positive expression of a service-oriented, business-minded and open society.

I won't take much more of your time – just let me express my thanks. I'm sure you are also using creativity and dedication to make culture an important connecting link in your own cities and countries. It has to be that way. These days we Europeans have plenty of reasons to stand up for our societal values. Defending and nurturing a culture born by the whole of society is an important part of this effort.

I would like to thank you for using your knowledge, creativity, dedication and hard work to help make Europe an important beacon on the world map.

I wish you a wonderful and illuminating stay here in Zurich.