

Intolerable Conditions

Alain Claude Sulzer

Novel

German



Title

Unhaltbare Zustände

Publisher

Galiani, Berlin

Publication date

August 2019

Pages

272

ISBN

978-3-86971-194-2

Translation rights

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Stettler is an aesthete who lives for his work, and particularly for the moment when his newly decorated window display is ceremonially unveiled at the Quatre Saisons department store. Customers, passers-by and the managing director all adore his creations. Until suddenly everyone's talking about the 'new age' which has apparently dawned. What could this be, since over the last 30 years his creations have always captured the spirit of the times? Stettler, who is almost 60, finds that the arrival of the 1968 protest movement changes everything. Suddenly a new employee is put in charge of the window displays... and it's now Stettler's life that's turned upside down – except for one thing: his enthusiastic pen-friendship with the pianist Lotte Zerbst. Their first-ever meeting lies ahead, as Lotte has been invited to perform at a concert in Switzerland.

Author

Alain Claude Sulzer was born in 1953, and works as a freelance writer in Basel, Berlin and Alsace. He has published a number of novels, including the recent bestsellers *Zur falschen Zeit* (*At the Wrong Time*) and *Aus den Fugen* (*Going to Pieces*). His books have been translated into all major languages. He has won several prizes for his work, including the Prix Médicis Étranger, the Hermann Hesse Prize and the Culture Prize of the City of Basel.

Photo: Gaëtan Bally, keystone

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Excerpt translated by Steph Morris

1 Winter

In no season was Stettler's unflinching aesthetic judgement in such demand as in the weeks leading up to Christmas. His knowledge of colour, form and material, his sense of space and symmetry, brightness and darkness, light and shade, the sum of his talents indeed, became indispensable. Advent was his best season; never did his colleagues take more interest in his work than in early December, that first Thursday of the month when the newspaper was gently removed from the shop windows, his works of art at last unveiled, when you could watch passers-by stop, in awe of the fruits of his labours – when the time for admiration had arrived, in other words. Neither staff nor public could keep their eyes off the spectacle before them. Everyone wanted a look. They stood, spellbound, open-mouthed, speechless like children in front of a Christmas tree, and it was a few moments before they found their voices again and could point out this or that detail to other curious onlookers, usually people quite unknown to them – assuming they were not content simply to marvel at it all in silence. People clustered into joyful groups, warm and content, cold no more now the displays glowed with promise, the hearts of all those present glowing too, whether clad in skimpy jackets or wrapped in mink. His work was complete, conjured as if from nothing thanks to his unflinching sense for beauty, in reality of course the result of decades of practice and perfection, of weeks of careful thought, mulling over how to stage good taste as dramatically as possible; the result also – and no-one could or ever should know this – of sleepless nights in which he brooded over half-formed ideas and random flashes of inspiration till they slowly took shape, while the images he would later sketch out with a steady hand appeared ever clearer in front of his eyes. Then he began to plan and calculate. On large, rectangular sketchpads, placed landscape to match the format of the windows, the next stage began, typically from left to right, because when he imagined being an unsuspecting passer-by he always approached the shop windows from the left. And con-

struction began in the left hand corner; no-one ever saw this, but the production process always began there. The squared paper became the display window, in front of which stood a solitary observer. The white page was an empty stage which slowly filled with objects.

More crucial than the most esteemed plaudits of his colleagues was the approbation of the customers. And more important than the opinion of returning customers, familiar with the department store and aware of what they could expect, was the opinion of passing trade, unsuspecting but seduced into stopping to look. They were more important than anyone else, people who had walked past by chance, had no preconceptions and now stood at the illuminated windows in astonishment.

Attracting strangers who had never stepped inside the *Quatre Saisons* was without doubt the most crucial task of the window dresser. It was the main aim, the *holy grail*, as the English say, and Stettler set himself this goal every two months when the window displays changed, not just in December. "Premeditated seduction," his mentor, old Bickel, had repeated time and time again. "Seduce them and you've got them in the palm of your hand. And once there, they'll come into the shop. They'll look around and discreetly check their purses. The shop windows are the doorways to the temple. Once they're inside they won't leave in a hurry. It must be love at first sight, the start of a life-long relationship, like marriage!" For years, Stettler had put it much the same way to his colleagues, above all the younger ones and the apprentices, sixteen and seventeen-year-old lads, still kids, with little idea of life and no clue about the art of selling and seduction, seldom sure exactly why they'd even chosen this profession, one which offered adventure solely within the confines of a preordained space, not in the big, wide world.

"Seduction is not an art anyone's born with – get that into your thick heads – so you're going to have to learn it. That's what you're here for, nine to five every day. And there's one person who can teach it to you and that person is me." He dinned this into them time and again, and sometimes couldn't help slapping one of the spotty-

faced youths on the forehead when he saw he wasn't paying attention.

Then he would say: "I'm talking to all of you," and for a moment it went deathly quiet, while the victim fought back tears. "It's so you remember, got it? So it seeps into your brain cells and oozes into your bone-marrow. All of you!" Eager nodding. Red faces. Awkward silence. They hardly dared breathe in his presence.

The apprentices lived in fear of their master much as Stettler had feared his master, Bickel, who had feared one person only, old Schuster, as he walked the length and breadth of his kingdom, left hand behind his back. Clearly Schuster's sons would one day inherit it. They had little choice and would hardly regret it. "And no-one ever died of washing," Stettler added when the stench of sweat in the cramped apprentice room became overpowering. He had adopted this reprimand from Bickel too. He wouldn't tolerate foul odours, above all when they were crawling around in their socks on all fours in the display windows.

In the run-up to Christmas it was especially important to 'top' the previous year's profits, as the current vernacular had it. Stettler was fifty-eight and didn't feel it just in his back and knee joints; everything around him had started changing. The summer bathing fashions offered increasingly *risqué* views of the female body, whilst the models in the shop windows were no longer made of plaster or *papier mâché* but of a plastic closely resembling flesh – once these mannequins hadn't even had heads. And with its ever larger baubles, the Christmas tree on the nearby town hall square, itself grew taller every year itself, alarmingly so, and symbolised the current lack of restraint in everything from naked flesh to excessive Christmas festivity.

Stettler was pleased to note that at least the scale of his shop windows had not changed and was unlikely to in the foreseeable future. He knew the measurements of the seven windows off by heart, recessed beneath a two-hundred-year-old balcony: 3.8 metres wide, 2.1 metres deep, 2.7 metres tall.