Summary:

- The Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK can claim the dubious honor of being the center of academic Israel-hatred and anti-Semitism in German-speaking Switzerland.
- The actions of pro-Palestinian activists include “Heil Hitler” graffiti and stickers defaming Jews as pigs, disruption of graduation ceremonies, verbal attacks against Jewish students and weekly “Lunches for Palestine” organized in the school building.
- Jewish students at the ZHdK, especially those from Israel, feel intimidated by the climate at the university and, whenever possible, avoid the school building in Zurich’s industrial district out of fear.
- The fact that it could come to this is primarily down to ZHdK Rector Karin Mairitsch (57). She even refused to accept proposals aimed at alleviating the situation at her school, citing formal legal reasons.
- Instead, it allowed 42,000 francs to be used to support a pro-Palestinian event in which one of its lecturers played a leading role.
- The ZHdK states in a statement that it does not tolerate any anti-Semitic statements or actions. At the same time, as a university it is “caught between the protection of freedom of expression and its clear limits in the case of hate speech and

discrimination.”

By Sacha Wigdorovits [i]

After Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Thomas D. Meier, then Rector of Zurich University of the Arts ZHdK, did not hesitate for long. He launched his own website under the title “Solidarity with Ukraine: contact points and actions”.

Meier wrote in plain language: “We are following the current events in Ukraine with horror and deep concern and condemn the Russian government’s military offensive in the strongest possible terms. We are of the opinion that the Russian attack on a sovereign state in Europe is a blatant violation of international law and cannot be justified by anything (…) Our solidarity is with the Ukrainian people.”

After the massacre by the terrorist organization Hamas in southern Israel on 7 October 2023, the largest pogrom since the Second World War, Meier’s successor as rector, Karin Mairitsch, acted differently: she remained silent.

It was only nine days after the terrorist attack, and only after insistence from members of her teaching staff, that the ZHdK Rector was finally prepared to send an e-mail to the students – including those from Israel and Jews from Switzerland affected by the October 7 attack.

E-mail on October 7, where terror and Israel are not topics

To avoid exposing herself, however, Mairitsch, who took up her post at the ZHdK in October 2022, did not send this email herself – she had a member of staff do so. She wrote to the students on Mairitsch’s behalf: “On behalf of the ZHdK, we would like to express our sympathy in view of the violent conflicts and the serious consequences that the civilian population in the Middle East is suffering.”

The fact that these “violent clashes” were an act of terrorism perpetrated by the Palestinian Hamas and a mob from Gaza is not mentioned in the email. Nor does it say that the crime scene “in the Middle East” was Israel and that the “civilian population suffering” were 1,200 mostly Israeli victims – babies, children, young

people, women and men of all ages – who were brutally tortured, abused, raped and murdered by the terrorists.

In response to criticism from those affected, Mairitsch explained why she had concealed all of this in the “compassion” email with the following words: “There is currently an increased risk potential. This affects us all and is by no means limited to people with a connection to Israel or Palestine. (…) The ZHdK has not yet commented on the tragic incidents in order not to increase the risk to its members.”

All anti-Semitic actions had no consequences for the perpetrators

This justification by ZHdK Rector Mairitsch is factually incomprehensible. But it is emblematic of her behavior in the two and a half years since then. Since October 7, 2023, Mairitsch has done hardly anything about the anti-Semitic and anti-Israel actions at her school. These are numerous and extensive:

- Graffiti and stickers with anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli slogans such as: “Adolf Netanyahu”, “88” (an international code for “HH – Heil Hitler”; “H” is the eighth letter in the alphabet), “Pigs are not kosher”, “Destroy Israel”, “Victory to the Resistance” with the red triangle used by Hamas, etc;
- Verbal attacks on Jewish students and pressure on Israeli students to distance themselves from their home country;
- Flyers that aim to demonize Israel and, in a perverse reversal of real events, refer to 7 October 2023 as a “painful reminder of the start of Israel’s genocidal offensive in Gaza”;
- Disruption of diploma events by pro-Palestinian activists;

- Defacing the diploma exhibit of a Jewish student;
- Publication of pro-Palestinian messages on official ZHdK online channels – which had no consequences for those responsible apart from an admonition to refrain from doing so;
- Events such as “Art in Conflict”, to which Lebanese, Syrian and pro-Palestinian guest speakers were invited – but no Israeli speakers (even though the ZHdK has an official partnership with the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem and also teaches students from there);
- The organization and financing (with CHF 42,000) of the symposium “Der Grosse Kanton: Aufstieg & Fall der BRD” on 5/6 December 2025, an event about which the Neue Zürcher Zeitung subsequently wrote that it was a “friendship meeting of pro-Palestinian activists”. Significantly, the event was organized together with the ETH architecture department, where a similar anti-Semitic and anti-Israeli mood prevails as at the ZHdK.

Refusal of countermeasures for “formal” reasons

In various announcements, the ZHdK school management has stated that it is committed to “political neutrality”. But the fact is that Rector Mairitsch and her team have so far done practically nothing against the ongoing anti-Zionist (anti-Semitic) and anti-Israel political actions at their university.

The building services immediately removed all the graffiti. And in the meantime, the ZHdK, in collaboration with the Swiss Federation of Jewish Communities SIG, organized an event for its members entitled “Making Jewish perspectives visible:

Anti-Semitism, diversity and social dialog” for its members (tellingly, it was attended by very few participants).

On one occasion, the school management also filed a criminal complaint against an activist. However, this was apparently later withdrawn after principal Mairitsch was heavily criticized by pro-Palestinian activists for pressing charges.

The ZHdK management is not just standing idly by and watching the anti-Jewish and anti-Israeli activities at its school. It even refused to deal with a motion to calm the situation. This involved suggestions from Jewish members of the ZHdK as to how the school could react to the ongoing anti-Semitism and discrimination against its Jewish members.

They did not have the right to submit such a proposal to the university management, the authors of the proposals were told by the university’s legal service. This is because “formally” only members of the university management itself and representatives of its participation committees are entitled to submit proposals.

Jewish ZHdK students are afraid

The passive behavior of the school management has massively unsettled and frightened the Jewish – especially the Israeli – members of the ZHdK. As a result, they stay away from the school whenever possible. It has even happened that a ZHdK graduate asked for his exam to be postponed because a pro-Palestinian campaign was taking place at the same time. (His lecturer was understanding and postponed the exam).

The ZHdK explains that it is aware “that geopolitical tensions are also noticeable in everyday university life and can lead to uncertainty among individual university members.” The fact that this concerns the war in Gaza caused by the terrorist organization Hamas and pro-Palestinian actions on the one hand, and the Jewish students and employees of the ZHdK affected by this on the other, is not mentioned by the school management.

In its response, the ZHdK also deliberately avoids any indication that Hamas sympathizers are behind the numerous graffiti and actions since 7 October 2023. And despite the numerous well-documented examples, it writes that these were

“isolated incidents”.

On the other hand, the ZHdK school management refers to “the tension between the protection of freedom of expression and its clear limits in the case of hate speech and discrimination”. And it assures that it does not tolerate “any anti-Semitic or discriminatory acts”.

The two and a half years since October 7, 2023 show that these are empty promises. Nor does it appear that anything will change in the near future.

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