

# “Life goes on even where it seems to have been shattered”

In honour of Guido A. Zäch

by Dr Sabine Vuilleumier-Koch\*

*Hundreds of people wished to pay their respects to the doctor and founder of the Swiss Paraplegic Foundation.<sup>1</sup> Guido A. Zäch established this foundation in 1975 and, in 1978, the Association of Benefactors, which now has 2 million members. In 1980, he founded the Swiss Paraplegics Association as an organisation for people with spinal cord injuries, and in 1990 opened the “Swiss Paraplegics Centre” (SPC) and, in 2005, the Guido A. Zäch Institute. – He passed away at the age of 90 on 16 February 2026. Across the country, all interested parties were invited on 28 February and were able to attend the tribute ceremony in various buildings of the SPZ.*

The auditorium of the Paraplegic Centre in Notwil (LU) on Lake Sempach, the foundation’s main area of activity, was reserved for the deceased’s relatives and people in wheelchairs with their families. The Guido Zäch Institute and the *ParaForum* accommodated the other guests, from where the ceremony could be followed on a screen. Among those present were current and former staff of the Paraplegic Centre, fellow members of the student fraternity and many patrons of the Foundation.

## A headlong plunge into shallow waters

In the 1960s, as a young doctor, Dr Zäch first came into contact with people who were confined to wheelchairs following an accident. At that time, they were still regarded as “cripples”, received little medical care in line with the state of knowledge at the time, and lived on the margins of society, often in financial hardship. Ten years ago, Dr Zäch reported in an interview that, as an 18-year-old lad, he had dived headfirst into shallow water at a swimming pool. He saw stars and suffered a spinal contusion but was very lucky – he could have been left paraplegic. His

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*Entrance to the auditorium of the Paraplegic Centre, where the thanksgiving ceremony took place. (Picture sv)*

first patient was a man who was completely paralysed after diving into shallow water. He asked himself: What kind of care would I want if this happened to me? How would I like to be treated? This is how the vision of holistic care came about.

## Holistic rehabilitation

Right at the start of the ceremony, the chaplains at the Paraplegic Centre explained Guido A. Zäch’s approach to caring for seriously injured people. With great human warmth, he encouraged them not to give up despite the blow they had suffered, and to develop a new outlook on life: “Life goes on even where it seems to have been shattered.” With this attitude, he was a great role model for his staff. He also applied his own standard – of constantly surpassing oneself and making the seemingly impossible possible – to his patients. He expected them to make the most of their remaining abilities – always with the support of therapists who were highly trained both personally and professionally.

Combined with his enormous creative energy and perseverance, more and more aspects of holistic rehabilitation were successfully implemented. From surgical treatment in the acute phase, through intensive rehabilitation, to vocational reintegration and lifelong support, people

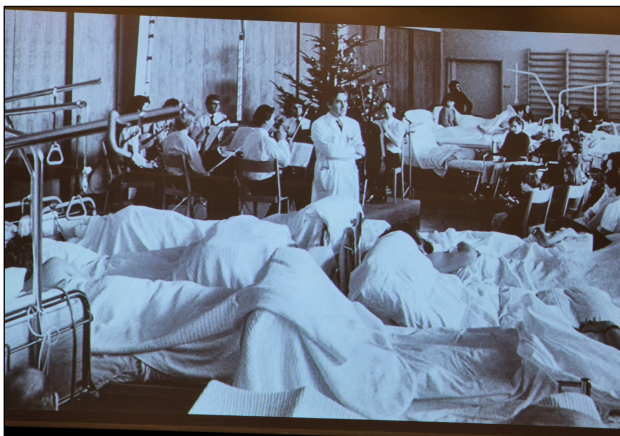
with spinal cord injuries are now offered everything at the Paraplegic Centre that enables them to reintegrate into society.

### **“Nothing is impossible”**

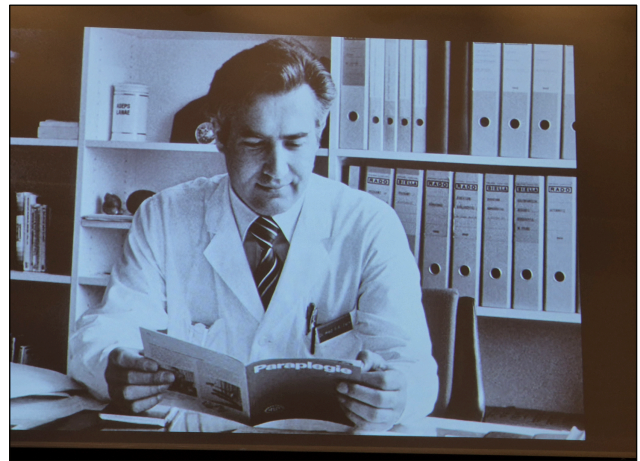
*Heidi Hanselmann*, Chair of the Foundation Board, *Lukas Engelberger*, President of the Conference of Cantonal Health Directors, *Michaela Tschuor*, President of the Cantonal Government of Lucerne, and *Walter Steffen*, Mayor of Nottwil, paid tribute to the character and life's work of Guido A. Zäch from the perspective of their respective roles and their personal encounters with the deceased. He always took action whenever he felt something was not right. He did not wait for favourable circumstances but got straight to work. He set to work with incredible dedication and showed courage where others hesitated. His motto had always been: “Nothing is impossible!” Dr Zäch would kneel down before people in wheelchairs so that he could meet them at eye level. He realised early on what we now call inclusion.

### **Love for people and nature**

Guido A. Zäch's family expressed their deep gratitude to him through photographs, accompanied by piano music. As a husband, father of seven children and grandfather of 12 grandchildren, he had always been there when needed. Striking photographs showed him as a boy, a young doctor, with his wife and children at various stages of life, as well as his grandchildren. His love of nature was also mentioned. He used to find solace there, for example in the rose garden, which was laid out on the grounds of the Paraplegic Centre and also tended by him. The fact that he, a lover of roses, passed away on Rose Monday was a lovely coincidence. He



*Christmas celebration at the Paraplegic Centre in Basel in the 1980s. (Picture ma)*



*The young doctor Guido A. Zäch specialises in paraplegia. (Picture ma)*

was also very interested in Swiss history and collected old engravings, postcards and stamps.

The detailed career of the doctor and humanist Guido A. Zäch is set out on his website.<sup>2</sup>

### **Top sporting achievements with paraplegia**

*Heinz Frei* is one of the most successful Swiss athletes of all time: 15 gold medals at the Paralympics across three sports (athletics, handcycling, cross-country skiing), 14 world championship titles (handcycling, athletics) and 112 marathon victories, as well as many other medals and wins. Today he is President of the Swiss Paraplegic Foundation's Association of Benefactors.

At the tribute ceremony, he described his relationship with Dr Zäch from his perspective as a wheelchair user. The accident that led to his paraplegia is described on the “Swissparalympics” website:

“In 1978, the then 20-year-old Heinz Frei fell on wet ground, slid down a slope and plunged into a small ravine.

Fortunately, the fall was witnessed, and Heinz Frei was rescued by helicopter. At the Paraplegic Centre in Basel, he was diagnosed with paraplegia. Over the course of five months, Frei learnt to get ready for life in a wheelchair and to return to everyday life with the greatest possible independence.”<sup>3</sup>

At the hospital in Basel, he was fortunate enough to meet Guido A. Zäch, the consultant. The doctor's rounds were legendary: time and again, Dr Zäch made it clear to him that he now had to use his head – it had not been affected by the paraplegia! He had to focus on what was still possible, not on his limitations. Guido A. Zäch

had restored a sense of self-worth to him and hundreds of others, enabling them to participate in social life. He had “lent” them his life; his work made them proud. Heinz Frei was visibly moved as he recounted these experiences.

Anyone visiting the Paraplegic Centre in September 2025 to mark the foundation’s 50th anniversary could gain a good insight into its extensive sports facilities: indoor swimming pool, tartan track, hall for ball sports and table tennis, and much more – sport as a source of renewed courage and self-esteem.

### **The legacy lives on**

With its 2,240 employees, the Paraplegic Centre is today the living legacy of Guido A. Zäch. Chaplains, politicians and board members expressed their confidence that he had succeeded in passing on his “nothing is impossible” attitude in all its facets. This is evident in small ways too, such as when people in wheelchairs share a meal with those on foot and in other daily encounters on equal terms.



*Aerial view of the Paraplegic Centre in Nottwil, Lucerne.  
(Picture [www.paraplegie.ch](http://www.paraplegie.ch))*

It was a worthy farewell celebration that encouraged people to get together over the abundant refreshments’ reception at the end and reflect on the experience.

*(Translation “Swiss Standpoint”)*

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.paraplegie.ch/de/ueber-uns/organisation/organisationen-schweizer-paraplegiker-gruppe/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.guidozach.ch/pdf/CurriculumvitaeGuidoA.Zch.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.swissparalympic.ch/athleten-archiv/heinz->