SO FAR, SO GOOD...

…UNTIL IT ISN'T

In Zurich's Seefeld district, **JAN GERBER** runs one of the most exclusive clinics for mental health. His clients come from around the world and suffer from the consequences of wealth, power, and fame. He knows from personal experience what depression feels like.

By Barbara Halter

JAN GERBER

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Jan Gerber, we are here in an apartment within your Paracelsus Recovery clinic. A new patient will soon be moving in. What awaits this person?

JAN GERBER He or she will live here together with a therapist, who has their own room with a bathroom and is available around the clock.

Even at three in the morning?

JG That is part of our "live-in therapist" model. Treatments take place within the client's apartment: conversations, yoga, acupuncture, massage, breathwork, and techniques to improve wellbeing. Most often there is a separate room for this, or the private chef and housekeeping staff withdraw accordingly.

The apartment spans two floors. From the dining table you look out over Lake Zurich.

JG All our apartments offer a lake view. They are high quality and at the same time feel like a home — we have no interest in conspicuous luxury. Clients should feel as though they are at home.

Your clients are wealthy. Do affluent people suffer differently from those on ordinary incomes?

JG What connects us as human beings is that every one of us can feel loneliness, grief, or fear. Mental illness such as depression can affect anyone. Looking at the demographics, however, it is clear that certain risk factors for mental health correlate with greater wealth.

Can you give an example?

JG We know that highly successful and affluent people frequently carry a psychological predisposition towards ADHD and bipolar disorder, or have experienced trauma. With these preconditions, one often discovers that trauma can drive a person to perform. Mentally healthy people find it considerably harder to work eighteen hours a day.

What can happen to those close to them?

JG When those affected have not learned to manage these dispositions, or when they go untreated, they can spiral out of control. In ADHD, this often manifests as exaggerated risk-taking or impulsivity. When a multimillionaire possesses a great deal of power, a downward spiral can accelerate dramatically — for instance in the case of an addiction, which is nothing other than an attempt at self-medication to suppress painful feelings.

Can psychological problems be suppressed or concealed for long?

JG Yes, and that functions well up to a point. Anyone who has reached a certain position of power is rarely questioned. Employees, family members, or business partners may sense that something is wrong, yet do not dare to raise the problem. We frequently observe that the environment helps to maintain the façade — until everything comes apart.

How does great wealth affect the psyche?

JG Money means security and solves many problems. But whoever has a great deal also has more to lose. Very successful or wealthy people inevitably have negative experiences with friendships or within their own family. Family members suing one another is not uncommon. That is painful and erodes psychological substance. At some point you no longer know who you can trust.

Are there further burdens associated with great wealth?

JG In many countries, wealth represents a security risk. Training in behaviour during kidnapping attempts is a routine matter. That creates strain and generates fear. In the face of poverty elsewhere in the world, wealthy people are also shaped by shame and guilt.

You yourself have become wealthy as an entrepreneur. What has that done to you?

JG In my younger years, when my bank balance was not yet where I wanted it to be, I projected a great deal onto possessions. I was convinced that money would solve all my problems — the emotional ones included. Money was the incentive to feel respected and loved. Once I had reached my goals, I realised that wealth had not helped me; if anything, it had produced the opposite effect.

The term "Succession Syndrome" originates with you — inspired by the television series of the same name. What do you mean by it?

JG When someone has built a company and sold it for ten million, that counts as success. But when your family earns billions, that achievement pales in comparison. Such people often have to live with the narrative that they owe their success solely to their connections.

How does this affect the children?

JG Children of the second generation are frequently tormented by questions of identity. In many countries they grow up isolated and sense early on that they are set apart. Their comfortable environment tends to remove all obstacles. Yet to grow, a person needs resistance and difficult situations. These children are robbed of the chance to develop a healthy psychological sense of self. That is tragic.

Do you feel compassion for your clientele?

JG Very often — even when some people make it difficult to feel empathy or sympathy for them. Some also behave aggressively in their day-to-day clinic life, or have done terrible things in their lives. When you look deeper, however, there is an explanation for every form of behaviour — however reprehensible it may appear.

An office is set up for clients on request during their treatment. Is that healthy?

JG It is above all pragmatic. We do not only treat individuals here — we also treat

ADDICTION

ESCAPE

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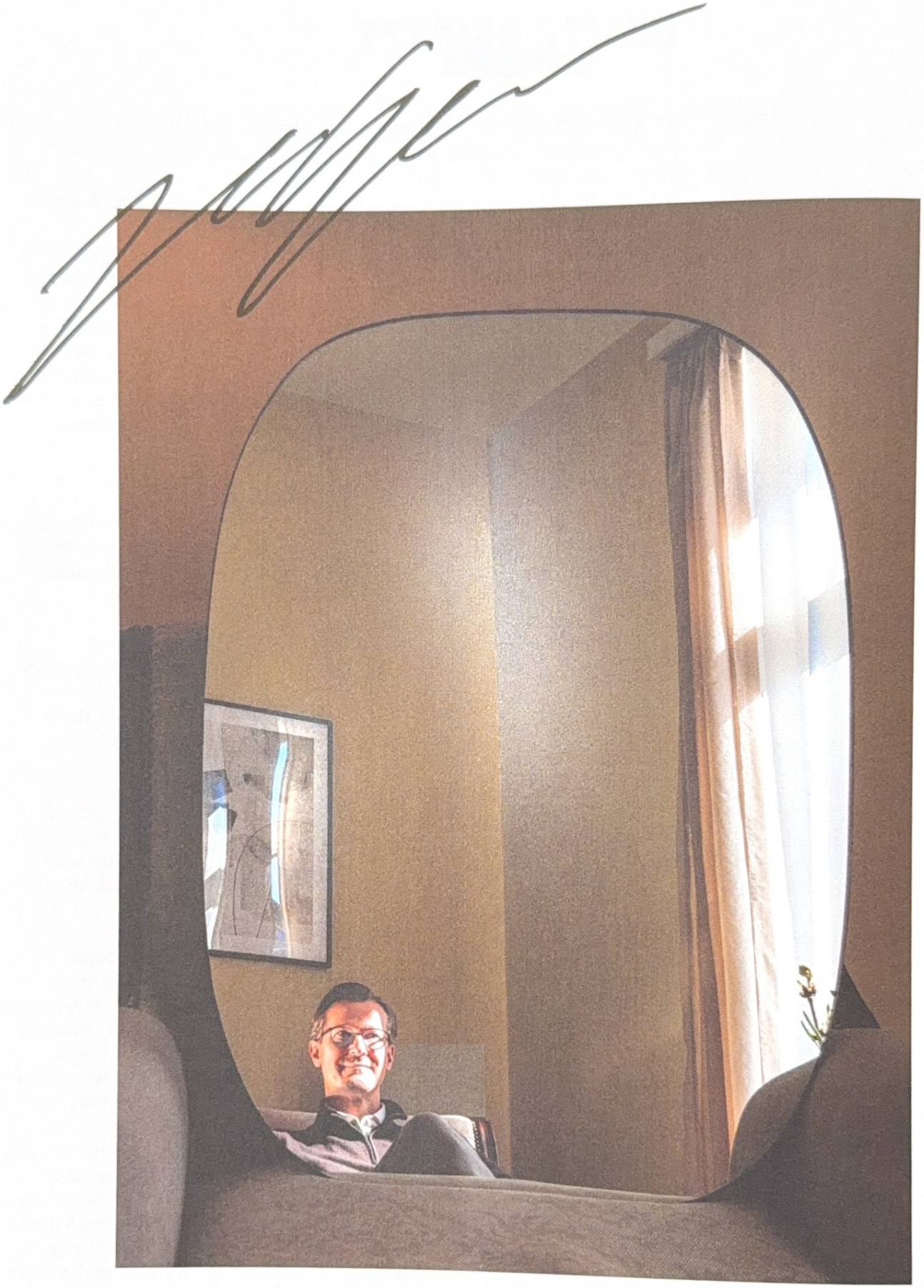
TABOO

THERAPY



Jan Gerber, co-founder and CEO of Paracelsus Recovery, in the offices of his clinic in Zurich's Seefeld district.

Photo: Boris Müller

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senior executives of large companies or holders of political office. These people cannot simply disappear from public view for several weeks.

What does that mean for the therapy?

JG For up to two hours a day, those concerned can work from here and remain professionally present. Others must be physically present at their workplace. There have even been cases where clients travelled once a week to their workplace by private jet, accompanied by their therapist, returning to Zurich in the evening.

How long does a stay last?

JG The longer, the better. On average the therapy lasts six weeks. Many clients are then cared for by us over months, sometimes years. We also offer a one-week programme, because certain people would otherwise not come at all. Within that framework one can stabilise a person for the moment. Problems that have built up over decades cannot, however, be resolved in that time.

You have decided against confidentiality and speak openly about your own depression. Why?

JG For years I committed myself, through my work for the clinic, to dealing openly with psychological illness so that those affected would face less stigma. When I fell ill myself, I initially kept my depression private — only the chairman of the board and one other person were informed.

And the rest of the staff?

JG For them, I was away on a business trip — though shortly before New Year I checked into the Hohenegg clinic in Meilen. In mid-January I informed the team; a few months later, the public. "Walk the talk" — one's actions should follow one's words.

Do you recommend this path to others?

JG As managing director I do not generally involve myself in therapeutic decisions. At our team meetings, however, I raise many questions and put myself forward. When people who are considerably better known than I am speak openly about their suffering, that can have a very positive effect.

What has it brought you personally?

JG It was an enormous sense of liberation and deeply healing for me — even though it continues to require a great deal of courage. I have experienced recurring depressive phases. In moments when one feels like a heap of misery, one does not particularly want to be seen in the press.

It was recently reported that Sarah Ferguson sought treatment at Paracelsus Recovery. A YouTube video shows you in conversation with her.

JG We have not confirmed the rumours about any stay. The video was made over a year ago, when Ferguson visited Zurich and wanted to speak with us about the subject of mental health, as the topic is of great interest to her. I would never ask such people for an interview.

What happens with a person who is not only wealthy but also famous?

JG This affects identity above all and makes everything considerably more complex. We all play different roles depending on our environment. This happens entirely naturally in healthy people and does not impair personality. It is also not inherently problematic to make a foolish remark in a social setting. For public figures this does not apply. They rightly fear behaving in a false manner. In the worst case, a misstep can lead to a scandal.

How difficult is it for your clients to accept help, as a rule?

JG Fear and shame tend to be greater in those who have more to lose than others. By the time they come to us, many are already completely at their limit. Some are physically incapable of getting themselves to a place where they can find help.

That is hard to imagine.

JG I experienced this myself: I could no longer get out of bed, could not formulate a single coherent sentence. One is simply blocked.

What helps in situations like that?

JG The environment plays a major role — usually it takes some pressure, but also a great deal of love, for someone to enter a clinic.

What happens afterwards?

JG In the first few days the focus is on stabilisation — through relaxation methods or medication. Only then does psychotherapy begin.

How important is the clinical staff?

JG It requires a great deal of experience, humanity, time, and authenticity. Our clientele have a highly sensitive radar for anything that seems suspicious, and they sense immediately when someone is not behaving genuinely.

What does it mean for the therapy when a patient is world-famous?

JG The team is supported particularly closely — including through external supervision. Even seasoned therapists often find it difficult when they are sitting across from a Hollywood star.

Tell me more.

JG When someone says they treat everyone equally, whether Hans Müller or George Clooney, that is a warning signal for me. In the therapeutic

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relationship, the patient usually projects onto the therapist. The reverse also occurs — we call it countertransference.

How does one handle that?

JG George Clooney knows he is world-famous and that the therapist has a preconceived image of him. This must be addressed openly. Otherwise the celebrity becomes the elephant in the room and disturbs the relationship of trust.

What happens with patients who could be a danger to themselves or others?

JG These are not the right place for us — since we cannot hold anyone against their will.

Not everyone is here entirely voluntarily?

JG We repeatedly encounter people — often from wealthy families — who are pressured into a stay. When we sense resistance, we address it openly.

How do you do that?

JG Something like: "You are here against your will. Your family has organised and paid for your stay. Either you go home, which carries unpleasant consequences — or you make use of the time here. In that case, let us look together at how you can benefit most from it."

Your clientele is accustomed to having wishes fulfilled. Is confrontation in therapy even possible?

JG On this point we have been gathering experience since Paracelsus Recovery was founded. Many therapists have been with us from the very beginning. Our clientele pays us to solve their problems and expects a corresponding service — this awareness is ever-present.

What does that mean in practice?

JG Our psychiatrists require a great deal of finesse and human pragmatism. The question is: how can the goals best be achieved? Every claim to a perfect cure is unrealistic.

What happens when an addicted patient orders from a dealer?

JG Such incidents do occur — and they can be used therapeutically. One patient ordered hard drugs but confessed before delivery, in conversation — together we then destroyed the substance.

What about other substances?

JG Alcohol is often involved: clients wish to visit a bar in the evenings. For that, however, they must wake their therapist. The apartment is locked in the evening and they have no key. In that moment the impulse can be weakened through conversation. If the client goes to the bar anyway, they must sign a document confirming the end of the therapy.

In therapy, the term "burning bridges" is used — to become well, patients should for example end harmful relationships. Does that apply to your clients too?

JG Wealthy people generally have to continue playing their role. After therapy there may be divorces, but in these circles it is often practically impossible to detach oneself from a social circle or a family system.

Can you illustrate that with an example?

JG We treated a person from a royal family in the Middle East who lived in a toxic family environment, suffered from eating disorders and an addiction. Since they had no financial means of their own, it was clear they would return there after treatment.

What could therapy achieve in that case?

JG Our focus was on helping them to survive within their environment and to find a certain degree of contentment. It required years of therapeutic work before they recovered. One of our therapists was consistently present for months, accompanying them even on travels.

Would wealthy people be happier with less money and fewer material possessions?

JG That is the question to which there is no answer. It always comes down to the individual and to how the brain's reward centre is shaped by life circumstances and the surrounding environment. Someone who grew up in a marble palace may already experience moving into a beautiful villa as a loss. Perhaps that person never learned to manage their own household. This does not make someone a bad person. Many are trapped in a gilded cage.

Does this question concern you personally?

JG Only rarely today — but certainly during painful phases of my life. "Possession possessed" — I would endorse that phrase.

What does it mean for you personally?

JG If I were to start over, I would accumulate possessions more slowly. But once you own a house into which you have poured a great deal of money and love, you cannot simply step back from it.

What does a psychologically healthy life require?

JG Reflection and gratitude help me. Nature too has a healing effect. In the Feng Shui principle of harmony, mountains and water are regarded as the ideal landscape for creating energy and harmony. When I look out from the office over Lake Zurich and the mountains, that makes me happy.

JAN GERBER, born 1981, is CEO of the luxury clinic Paracelsus Recovery in Zurich's Seefeld district. He co-founded it in 2012 together with his father, a psychiatrist. The cost of an intensive programme amounts to 95,000 Swiss francs per week.