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Maverick farmer and rebel
Bernard Rappaz in his element:
surrounded by hemp.
Archive photo: Keystone (2003)

Bernard Rappaz, self-proclaimed Winkelried of cannabis

The pugnacious hemp farmer from Valais, Bernard Rappaz, returned to the media spotlight with a brand of legal cannabis. But the adventure was cut short. Having experienced both fame and prison, the rebel has withdrawn to the village of Isérables. The plant to which he has devoted his life is now booming.

STÉPHANE HERZOG

The name Bernard Rappaz was back in the news a few months ago in Geneva, with Holyweed, a brand specialising in the sale of CBD: cannabis without the high. One salesperson was eager to sing the praises of the Swiss organic produce. And to cite the name of the famous Valais hemp farmer as a partner in the company. Upon enquiry, it was found that the commercial interest of the herald of hemp, or the dealer of the century, depending on

your opinion, had come to an end. “I left the company. I asked that my name no longer be associated with this brand,” clarified Rappaz.

Cannabis, which led to the fall of the Valais hemp farmer, is back on the Swiss scene. Hemp production has greatly increased thanks to the release of CBD. Between 2008 and 2020, the area dedicated to this crop has grown from six to 320 hectares, according to the Swiss Farmers’ Union. Ironically, Switzerland is set to begin

testing the distribution of marijuana, which will serve as a further boost to the cultivation of this illegal plant.

Adventurer is the best word to describe this child of Saxon, who comes from an agricultural family, and who transitioned from growing apricots to growing cannabis in the 1990s. Media attention, arrests, prison, trials, appeals: this cannabis sativa activist has lived a wild life. “Rappaz? He’s an excellent agitator,” comments sociologist Gabriel Bender from Valais, men-

tioning a protest during his time in prison because his peers were not receiving enough fruit. “We are deprived of freedom, not dessert,” Rappaz had declared. “He inhales smoke and blows it out as well,” continues the local history expert, setting the Bernard Rappaz saga within the curious history of Saxon. Since the 1960s, this commune has been led by a party that came from the Union des producteurs valaisans (Union of producers in Valais). It set itself apart with its support for union action against the influx of agricultural products from Italy, against fluorine pollution and against the installation of hydroelectric plants on the Rhone River. In the 1970s, in need of workers for the harvest, Saxon saw the arrival of the hippies. The Sapinhaut festival, which was created at this time, brought together people who were against the military, the clergy, etc. “Everything that made conservatives in Valais bristle,” comments Bender. This is the setting in which Bernard Rappaz grew up.

Withdrawal to Iséribles

The individual who claimed that cannabis came somewhere between coffee and cigarettes is now living in a two-room home in the isolated village of Iséribles, supported by his old-age and survivor’s insurance. His home offers an unobstructed view over the plain where, from the beginning of the 1990s, he began planting and distributing cannabis. “The more THC there was, the better,” admits the Saxon native, who still grows plants on his balcony. “The polite neighbours tell me I have beautiful geraniums,” he says. When he arrived in Iséribles in 2016, Bernard Rappaz received a visit from the president of the municipality,

suspicious of the individual. He began by telling him that his car was wrongly parked. Next, the local priest stopped by, accompanied by a sacristan. The men had a drink together, before leaving for mass. Since then, the ex-prisoner has gained acceptance within the community. What does the former organic farmer think of CBD and the attempts to distribute marijuana? “I tried producing cannabis that was low in THC myself, but the profit margin was not high. In Valais, a small portion of vineyards could be replaced by cannabis. It’s a plant which grows easily and without plant protection products. Its production has to remain Swiss and natural.”

Ten years in prison

The hemp farmer highlights the problems with indoor cultivation, which is extremely energy-intensive. “I am go-

ing to write to the Confederation to ask that cannabis grown for clinical trials be stamped as natural Swiss produce,” he declares passionately. Does he miss the media spotlight? “For a supporter of Buddhism like me, ego is the worst enemy,” he answers. What was his experience of prison? “I began at 19, for refusing to pay military tax. All in all, I must have spent ten years in prison. Prison is scary, because it’s the unknown, but I got used to it.” At the Crêtelongue prison in the Rhone valley, the farmer taught prisoners to prune fruit trees. The man has used hunger strikes as a weapon: “I beat all the records, not eating for 120 days.” In his youth, Bernard Rappaz also participated in a raid on a bank. The result: 42 months in prison.

On his farm in Charrat, named l’Oasis (the Oasis), the hemp farmer played with the ambiguities of the law. His hemp went out in the form of



Not his first or last time in handcuffs: Bernard Rappaz on trial in Martigny in 2011.

Archive photo: Keystone

The Confederation is to test the dispensing of marijuana

The Confederation is in the process of supervising the implementation of pilot trials in the distribution of cannabis for non-medicinal purposes. In 2020, the decision sparked resistance from SVP and CVP senators. “Cannabis is more harmful than tobacco and the number of people dependent on it is constantly on the rise,” argued Peter Hegglin (CVP/ZG). Public bodies will participate in this cannabis distribution under the umbrella of the Federal Office of Public Health. In Geneva, for example, the university has been mandated to lead trials planned to commence in 2022.

The studies will notably provide information on the effects of controlled access to cannabis on the physical, psychic and social health and well-being of consumers. Tons of cannabis containing THC will be required. The Confederation aims for Swiss products, organic “if possible”, cultivated thanks to legal exemptions. (SH)

hemp, for a total revenue of five million Swiss francs. Rappaz also possessed a “gigantic” stock of hemp in a factory in Chavalon, around 52 tons, with a market value of 35 million francs. The sentence was upheld on appeal.

A seemingly strict sentence

The former conscientious objector disputes the court verdicts and regrets nothing. “I have dedicated my life to defending a plant which has been made illegal for the wrong reasons, and to testing and demonstrating its multiple uses: therapeutic, recreational and industrial,” he says. For Aba Neeman, his lawyer since 1995, “the courts in Valais wanted to get rid of him by giving him a long sentence, because each time he completed a period of imprisonment for hemp growing, he started with cannabis again”. At that time, a liberal wind was softening attitudes towards cannabis, “but judges apply the law, and do not take account of political considerations”.

For someone who claims to be inspired by Gandhi, the accusation of bodily injury seems surprising. Neeman confirms that the event appears to have consisted of a few slaps given to a young girl whilst Rappaz was on a trip to Laos with a female friend. Was his client drunk on money? His lawyer considers that “he is not venal; he is an idealist. He was constantly in debt and he was negligent with his business.”

Gabriel Bender notes that, “Rappaz was imprisoned for years for cannabis, whilst the Valais wine producer Dominique Giroud, convicted for tax evasion, has not served a single year. It is an archaic system. In order to sanctify someone who drinks wine, you have to sacrifice someone who smokes cannabis.” A journalist from Geneva who interviewed the hemp farmer recalls a character who was very focused on himself. “Rappaz was isolated”, he considers. “I put myself out in front, a bit like Winkelried,” says Rappaz, comparing himself to the legendary Swiss hero.

cushions, infusions, oils and fibres. Doctors signed prescriptions for the purchase of products containing THC. But things changed in 2006. The Valais farmer was condemned to five years and eight months imprisonment by the district court of Martigny for serious breach of the Narcotics Act, as well as for bodily injury, money laundering, serious breach of road traffic rules and breach of various social security laws. Between 1997 and 2001, according to the prosecutor, writes “Le Nouvelliste”, the Saxon farmer, who was “the biggest cannabis trafficker in Switzerland”, had set up a “colossal” drug trafficking system. During this period, he had illegally sold five tons of recreational

Pensioner Rappaz at home in Iséables. Not surprisingly, he prefers cannabis to geraniums on his balcony.

Photo: Stéphane Herzog

