

# Letter of Correspondence

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According to the stamp of receipt on its cover, the five-page letter of complaint about Swiss graphic design education shown here reached the Gewerbeinspektorat Basel-Stadt (the cantonal authority responsible for trades) on October 8, 1945, and was then placed in the official archives.<sup>1</sup> It was sent by the Schweizerischer Werkbund (SWB), an association founded in 1913 to increase the quality of mass-produced goods through the unification of art, industry, and trade, and through “enlightening”<sup>2</sup> the population in matters of quality and taste.<sup>3</sup>

Visually, this letter by the association of artists, architects, entrepreneurs, and design experts did not stand out significantly from the usual administrative correspondence received by the authority in question, though the SWB was well aware of the importance of design for its printed matter. A subtle, typographically reduced letterhead was combined with machine-written text on basic stationery. [Fig. 66] In this case, an “official” or “administrative” appearance was obviously considered the most appropriate to underline the credibility of the senders and the seriousness of their complaints.

In contrast to its pared-down appearance, the SWB letter’s terminology was drastic, warning of the danger of an imminent *Gleichschaltung* (enforced conformity)<sup>4</sup> of education at Swiss arts and crafts schools. [Fig. 70] It referred to the ongoing negotiations between Swiss authorities, schools, and professional associations about the implementation of federal professional regulations for graphic design education. According to the authorities’ plans, the two educational models for graphic designers—on the one hand attending a full-time *Fachklasse* (subject class)<sup>5</sup> at an arts and crafts school, on the other hand an apprenticeship in a studio—were to be united under the same, nationwide regulations.<sup>6</sup>

The SWB’s critical intervention came at a relatively late stage, as negotiations had already been going on since the 1930s. In 1938, Berchtold von Grünigen—graphic designer, teacher, and SWB member—had even made an official plea to the SWB that it should finally break free of its “reserve”<sup>7</sup> and get involved in these discussions immediately. As an association whose members came from a wide variety of professions, the SWB was not an expert committee for graphic design. But according to von Grünigen, it was precisely this independence from any specific professional grouping that made the SWB predestined for the role of an arbitrator in this matter.<sup>8</sup> Seven years later, however, the SWB’s letter opted to go on the offensive instead of attempting

mediation. It did not shy away from drastic measures, such as stirring up fears of competition from other countries which might lead to the potential loss of Swiss design’s international reputation, [Fig. 68] and threatening to inform the Swiss public about the situation. [Fig. 70]

The SWB was closely linked to the arts and crafts schools, especially in Basel and Zurich,<sup>9</sup> which shared its self-perception as members of a design elite and the self-appointed defenders of progressive ideas.<sup>10</sup> So it is not surprising that the SWB’s letter underlined the importance of the schools, claiming that only their specialist classes (the *Fachklasse*) provided “artistic” training, and downgraded the importance of studio apprenticeships as being representative of mere practical crafts. [Fig. 67]

Following the elimination of the like-minded Werkbund in Germany and Austria in the 1930s, the SWB felt a particularly strong obligation to hold up its ideas and exert its influence.<sup>11</sup> In several passages of the SWB’s letter, it criticizes the regulations being planned as being equivalent to the enforced conformity of politics and culture in the fascist regimes of Europe. Such a comparison was considered presumptuous by the letter’s recipient—which is indicated here by a handwritten exclamation mark that was added next to the text. [Fig. 69]

Although this letter succeeded in introducing the SWB to the authorities as a negotiating partner in matters

of design education,<sup>12</sup> it did not achieve the independence from regulatory control that it desired. In 1948, joint regulations for both educational models were adopted. Despite some compromises, officially at least, the Fachklasse now had to adhere to the same “minimum requirements”<sup>13</sup> as a studio apprenticeship. But conversely, the educational path offered by the Fachklasse für Graphik was finally recognized at an official level.

1 Since the same letter was sent to the authorities in Zurich, it was also archived at Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Archive, AB-UAE-00002.

2 Kienzle 1939: 63.

3 See Schweizer Werkbund 1913: n.p. This attitude also resulted in a sense of responsibility for design education.

4 Shortly after World War II, this terminology was loaded with meaning. In German, *Gleichschaltung* primarily evokes associations with National Socialist ideology. For its opponents and victims during the 1930s and 1940s, the term was synonymous with the persecution of political opponents and state terror.

5 The Fachklasse course model arose from the reform movements at the beginning of the 20th century that sought to bring together artistic and practical activities at arts and crafts schools. See Kienzle 1930: 270. See also “Timetables,” in the present volume.

6 See “Sonderstellung,” in the volume *Tempting Terms*.

7 von Grünigen 1938: 64.

8 See *Ibid.*

9 Regarding the close connection between the staff of the arts and crafts schools and the SWB, see Bignens 2008: 16–18.

10 See von Grünigen 1945: 1–2. See also “The Basel School,” in the volume *Tempting Terms*.

11 See Kienzle 1939: 63.

12 See Tschudi 1945: n.p.

13 Regarding these regulations, see “Legal Documents,” in the present volume.

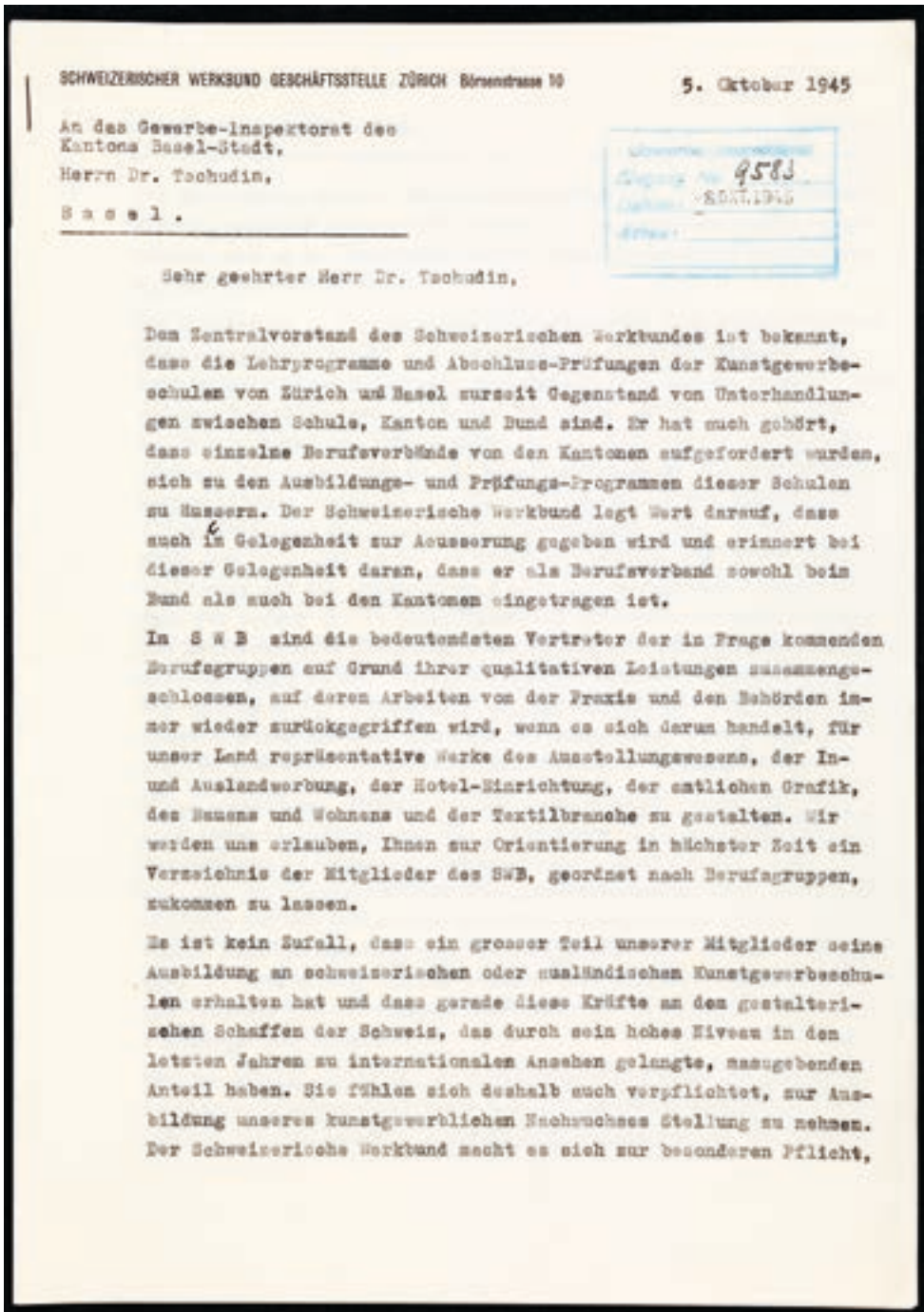


Fig. 66 Letter by the Schweizerischer Werkbund to Gewerbeinspektorat Basel-Stadt, concerning the importance of arts and crafts schools for Swiss graphic design education, Richard Bühler and Egidius Streiff (signees), Zurich, Oct. 5, 1945, p. 1.

[It is not by chance that many of our members received their training at Swiss or foreign schools of arts and crafts, and that it was precisely these designers who have had a major impact on design in Switzerland, whose high level of quality has helped it to achieve international renown in recent years. For this reason, they feel compelled to take a stance when it comes to training our young, up-and-coming designers.]

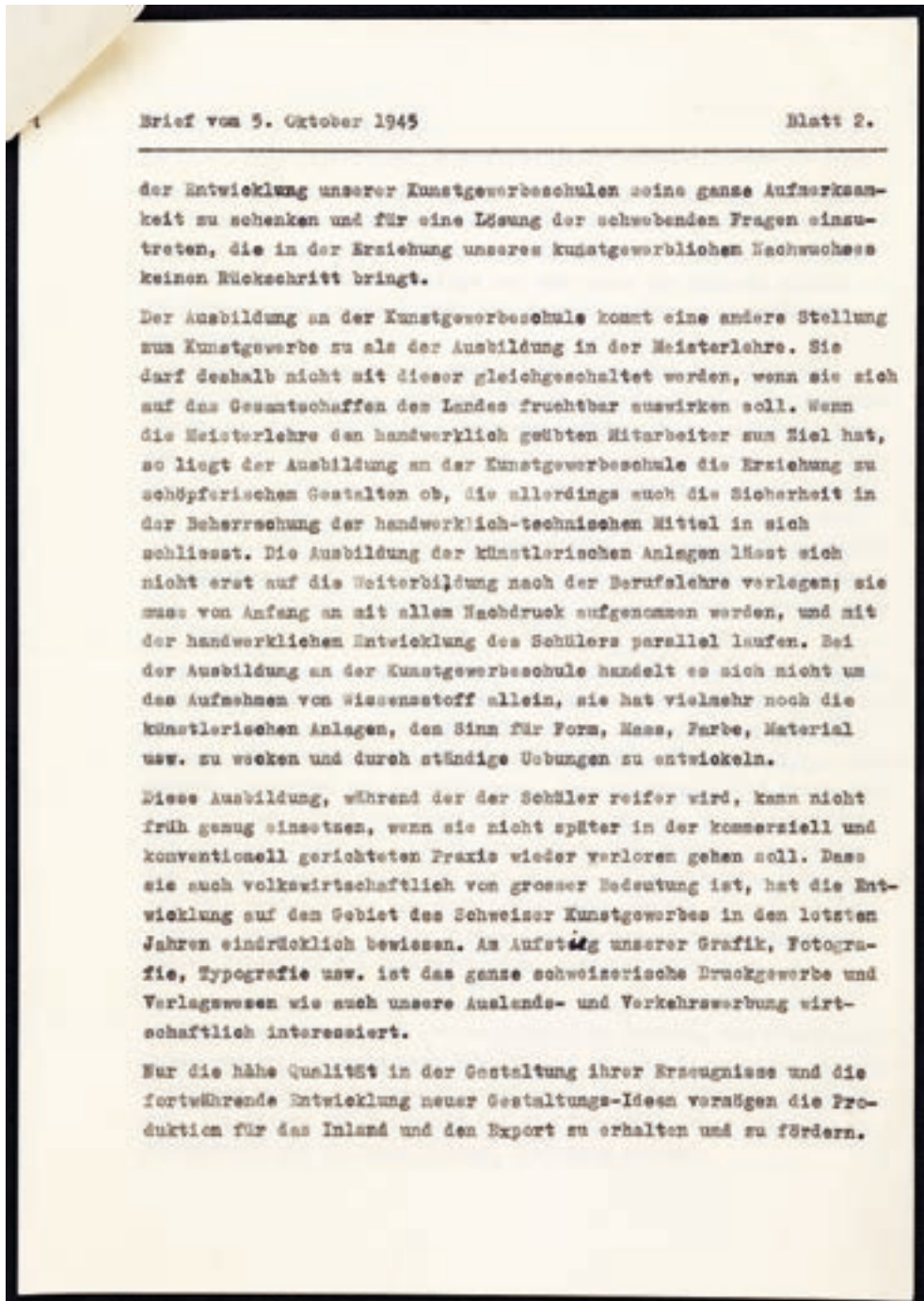


Fig. 67 Letter by the Schweizerischer Werkbund to Gewerbeinspektorat Basel-Stadt, Zurich, Oct. 5, 1945, p. 2.

[The training offered at the schools of arts and crafts provides a different approach to the applied arts from that of an apprenticeship with a master craftsman. This is why, if the former is to have a profitable impact on the overall design scene of the country, it must not be forced into conformity with the latter. While the goal of an apprenticeship is to train a well-practiced handworker, the training at the schools of arts and crafts aims to inculcate an ability to engage in creative design [...]]



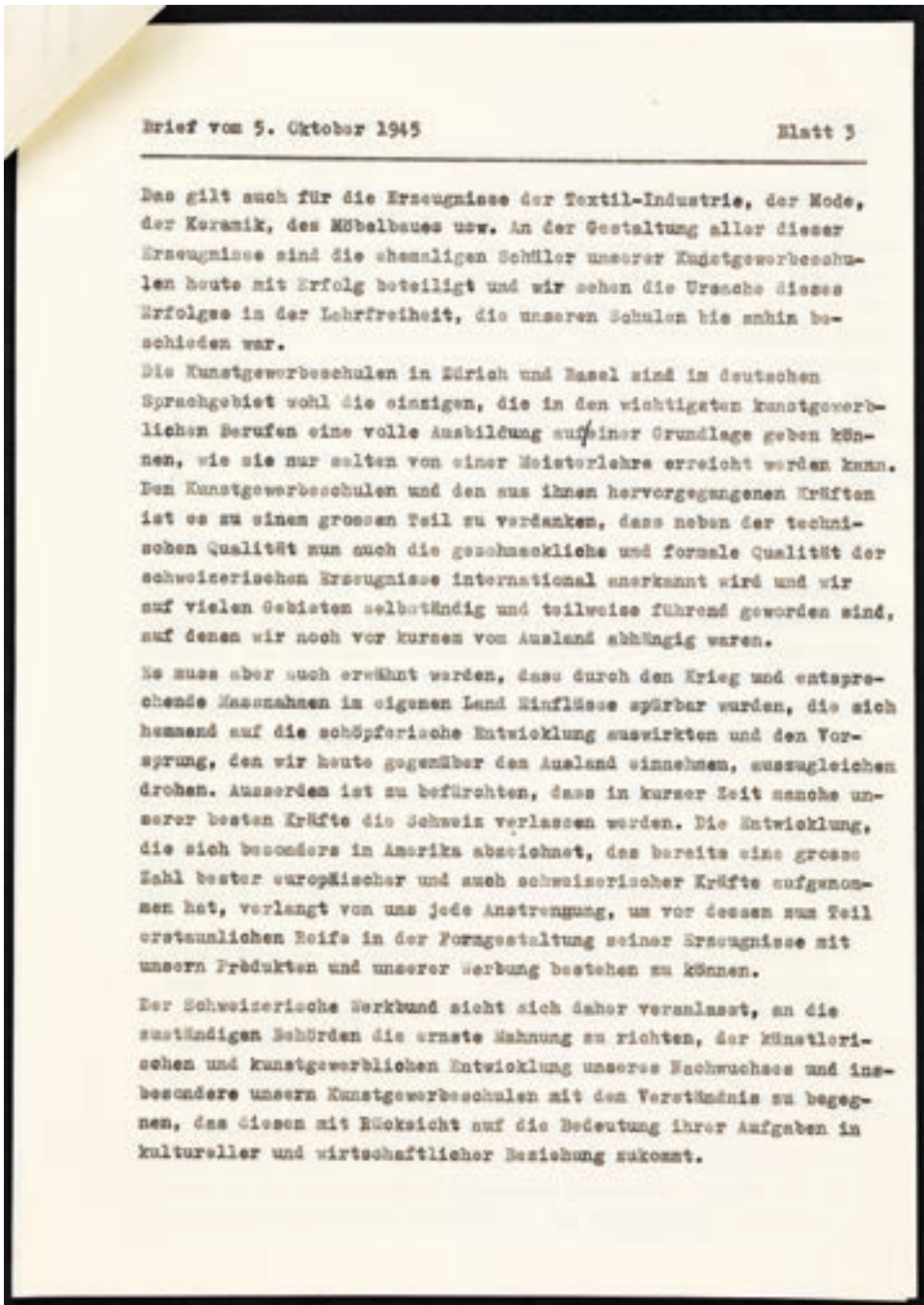


Fig. 68 Letter by the Schweizerischer Werkbund to Gewerbeinspektorat Basel-Stadt, Zurich, Oct. 5, 1945, p. 3.

[It is in large part thanks to the schools of arts and crafts and their graduates that Swiss products are now internationally recognized not just for their technical quality, but also for their good taste and formal quality. In many areas, we have become independent, in some of them even a leading nation, even though until recently we were dependent on foreign countries in this regard. But it must be mentioned that the war and concomitant measures here at home have let influences become noticeable that have held back creative development and that threaten to thwart our advantages when compared to foreign countries.]

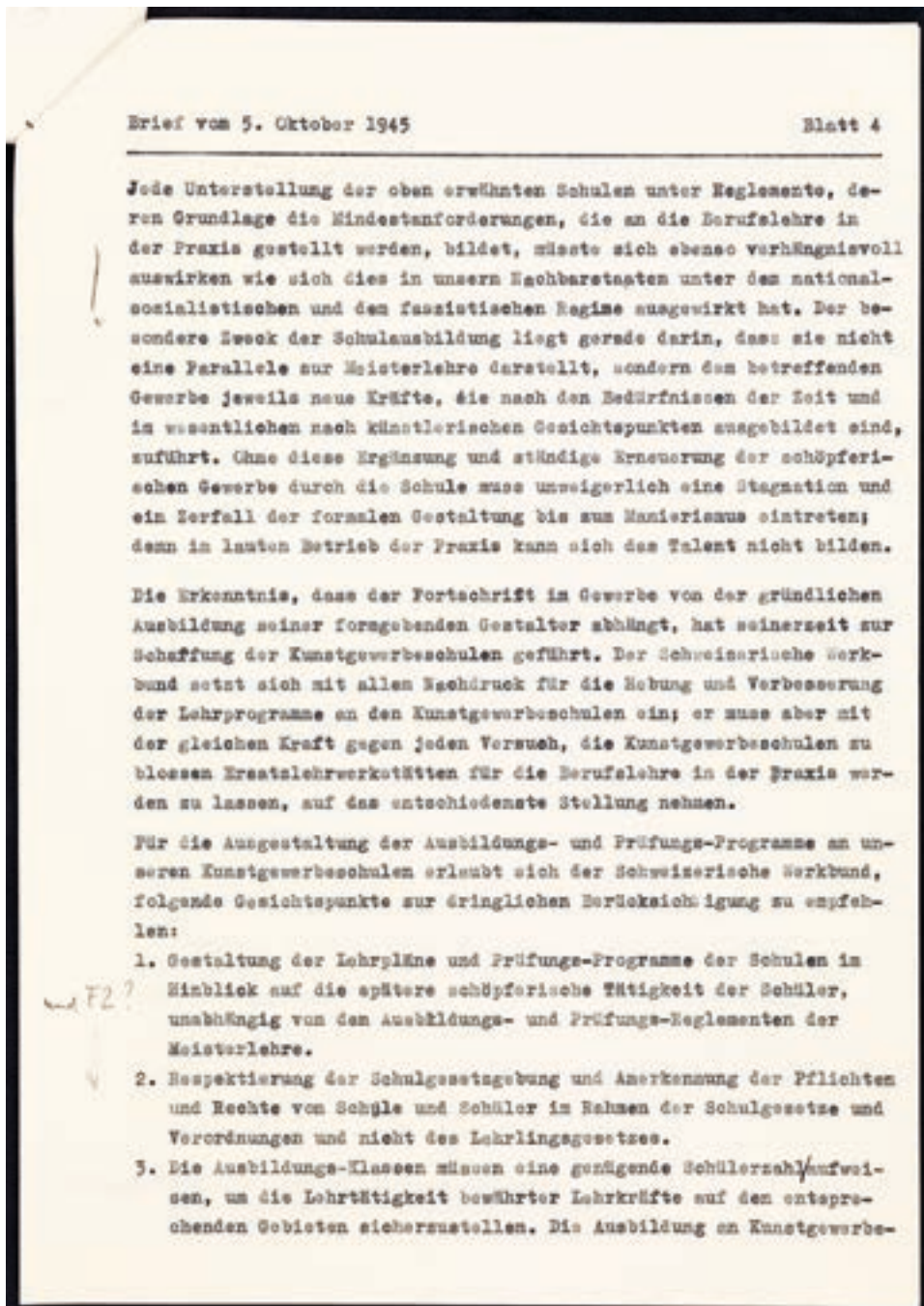


Fig. 69 Letter by the Schweizerischer Werkbund to Gewerbeinspektorat Basel-Stadt, Zurich, Oct. 5, 1945, p. 4.

[Every effort to subordinate the abovementioned schools to regulations founded on the basic requirements of a practical apprenticeship would be as disastrous as it proved in our neighboring countries under the National Socialist and fascist regimes.]

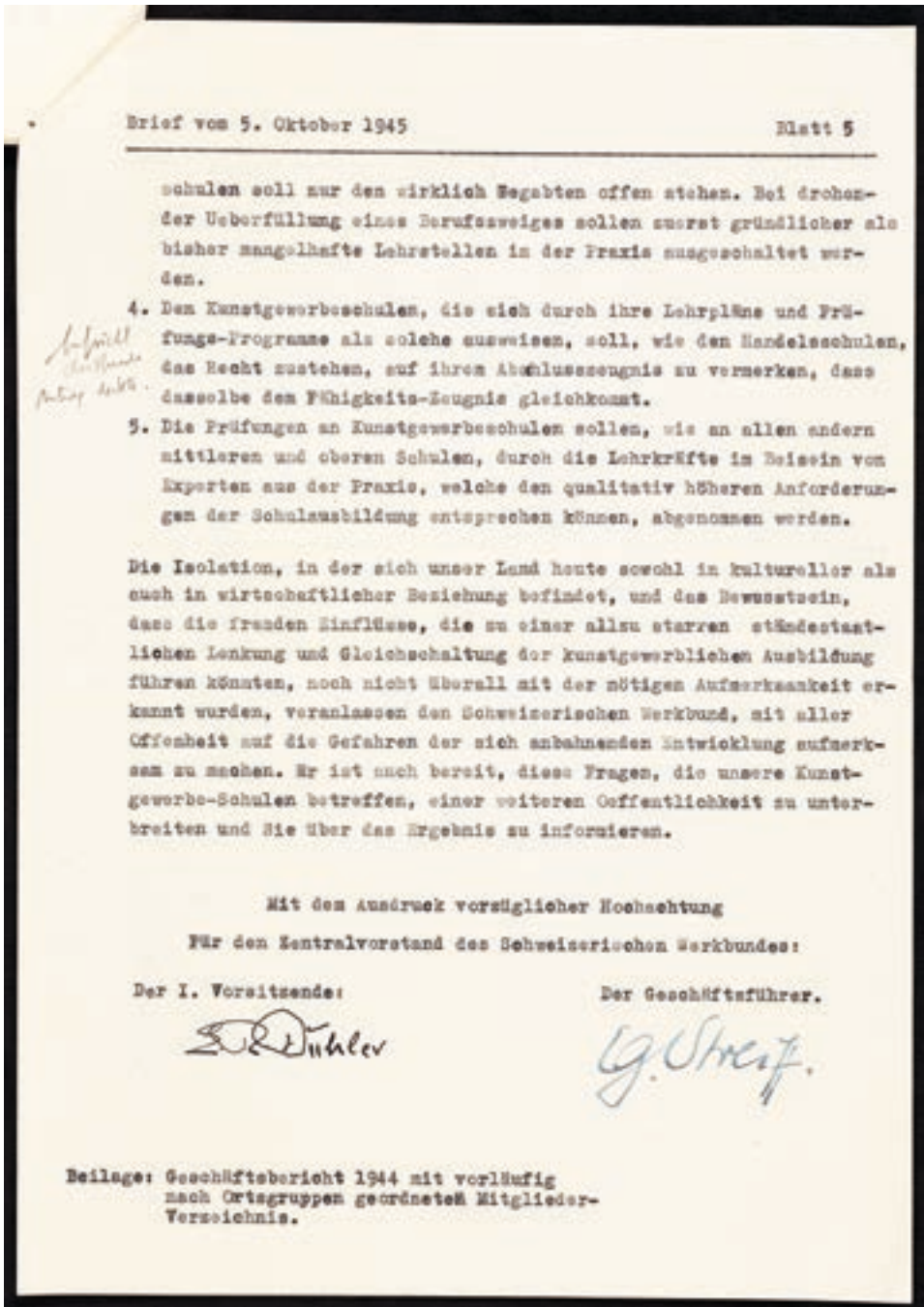


Fig. 70 Letter by the Schweizerischer Werkbund to Gewerbeinspektorat Basel-Stadt, Zurich, Oct. 5, 1945, p. 5.

[Our country finds itself in a state of isolation today, both culturally and economically, and we are aware that not everyone has been sufficiently attentive to recognize how foreign influences could lead to all-too-rigid governance and enforced conformity in our arts and crafts training such as is typical of a corporatist state. For this reason, the Swiss Werkbund feels compelled to point out openly the dangers of such a possible development. We are also ready to discuss with a broader public these issues that affect our schools of arts and crats, and to inform you of the results of that discussion.]