

Jean Ziegler – the man who refused to turn a blind eye

by Sabiene Jahn*



Sabiene Jahn. (Picture www.manova.news)

*Jean Ziegler has died. An unusual podcast obituary by Tahir Chaudhry** pays tribute to a great Swiss human rights activist and to an almost lost form of moral radicalism: the courage to call hunger, exploitation, and indifference by name.*

Raised in a middle-class Swiss household, he broke away from his parents' home at age 18 and went to Paris, where encounters with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir shaped him. Later, he taught at the University of Geneva and as a visiting professor at the Sorbonne, served for decades in the Swiss National Council for the Social Democratic Party (SP), and fought against global hunger from 2000 to 2008 as the "UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food."

Sometimes books sit untouched on a shelf for a long time until a death brings them back into our hands. Jean Ziegler was one of those authors whose words do not age, because the world against which they were written still persists. Anyone leafing through his books today will not encounter a humanist softened by age, but rather a man who defended language against trivialisation. Ziegler wrote about hunger as if it were a crime. He called the world order "cannibalistic," and one might wonder why this characterisation was so difficult to refute.

Jean Ziegler, born in Thun in 1934 and died in Geneva in June 2026, was a sociologist, professor, member of the Swiss National Council, author, critic of globalisation, and UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food.^{1,2} Above all, however, he was a man who refused to take refuge in that comfortable neutrality that so of-



Jean Ziegler in younger years.
(Picture Screenshot www.srf.ch/play/tv/10-vor-10)

ten masquerades as objectivity in the face of the preventable deaths of others. His most famous statement stands as solid as a mountain rock: "Every child who dies of hunger is murdered." It cannot be ignored.

The obituary "My Farewell to a Giant," published by journalist *Tahir Chaudhry* for "Grenzgänger Studios" on YouTube, does justice to his life in a special way.³ It is not merely a tribute or a chronicle of his career and books. Chaudhry knew Ziegler personally. He had met him in Geneva in 2017 as a young journalist—at the time still an intern—with a notebook, pen, and voice recorder. Audio recordings from that encounter have been preserved. In his obituary, Chaudhry now poses questions to the deceased, and Ziegler answers them once more himself. He lets the deceased speak once more.

Chaudhry traces the biographical roots of Ziegler's restlessness. Ziegler tells of the indentured children in Switzerland—poor children who were given away because their families could not feed them. He saw them shivering, wearing ragged stockings and wooden shoes, herding cows, while land-owning farmers sat in the tavern.

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His father explained to him sadly that these were simply indentured children, and there was nothing that could be done. For a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old, Ziegler said in retrospect, such a statement was unbearable. When you tell a young person that the world cannot be changed, “then he explodes.” He argued with his father, ran away, and it was only later that the two found their way back to each other. This small episode encapsulates almost everything that would shape his later life: the inability to accept injustice as fate, and the refusal to appease the suffering of the weak with religious, moral, or political excuses.

The podcast makes it clear that Ziegler didn’t become radical through theories alone—he became radical through observation. He saw children shivering, saw hunger, and the power dynamics behind it. He saw the kind of violence that doesn’t necessarily involve weapons—the kind that manifests in prices, interest rates, debt, land grabs, and trade agreements. His language was impatient. It didn’t stem from an academic need to refine concepts. It sprang from a fundamental outrage that the world produces enough yet still allows people to die.

In the interview, Ziegler says that, according to the “World Food Report” data at the time, global agriculture could easily feed far more people than lived on Earth. For the first time in human history, there was “no longer any objective shortage.” For Ziegler, the fundamental problem lay not in production, but in the lack of access to land, purchasing power, food, and means of production. This is the point at which compassion turns into an indictment. Where there is enough and yet people still die, hunger is no longer merely a tragedy. It is organised, tolerated, and politically administered violence.

In another interview published in 2024—though its internal references suggest it was written earlier—Ziegler once again broke down this indictment into its specific mechanisms.⁴ He spoke of chains of causality. Death by starvation, he said, is physiologically the same everywhere. First, fat reserves are depleted; then the immune system is destroyed; next, the muscles are exploited; infections follow; and finally, death occurs. But the paths leading to this outcome vary. Ziegler cited agricultural dumping, speculation on rice, corn, and grains, biofuels, foreign debt, and structural adjustment programs as the

central causes. This made his indictment even more precise. For him, hunger was the result of specific decisions and laws.

Ziegler had a word for this system that seemed too strong to some yet stuck precisely for that reason: “cannibalistic.” He spoke of an “incredible concentration of power” in the hands of transnational corporations and financial oligarchies. He spoke of a dictatorship that was stronger than many nation-states because it eluded state, social, and union control. In his view, the mountains of corpses caused by hunger and the accumulation of power by financial capital were inextricably linked. “The system accepts these murders,” he says.

Ziegler becomes particularly forceful when he shifts the concept of the “cannibalistic world order” from a moral metaphor back to an economic description. In African markets, he explained, subsidised European products could be sold at prices that a local farmer could not compete with. A few kilometers away, this farmer stands with his family under the scorching sun and has no chance of earning a living wage. Ziegler made a similar argument regarding biofuels. One could understand the motives—climate protection, independence from oil—but burning food while a child starves to death every five seconds was, for him, “a crime against humanity.” He did not accept technical rationales if they ultimately factored in the deaths of the most vulnerable.

Chaudhry lets these statements have their impact. He explains that he does not share every one of Ziegler’s positions. He is neither a Marxist nor a communist. Chaudhry pays tribute to a man whose answers did not always convince him, but whose questions and observations continued to haunt him. This distinction is crucial. For to reduce Jean Ziegler to a political label would be to make him smaller than he was. His real impertinence lay not in the fact that he was on the left. It lay in his insistence on a moral reckoning that no one is willing to face.

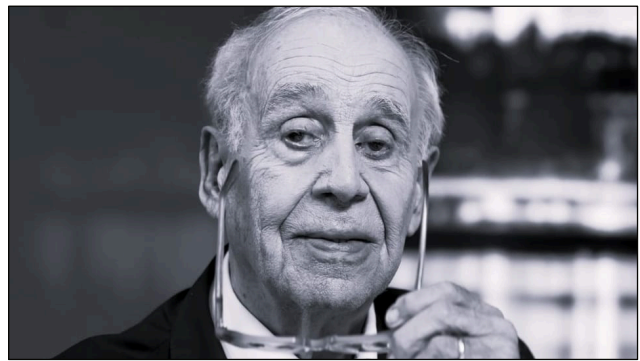
Even in his obituary Ziegler himself does not come across as a bitter judge of the world. He utters a sentence that is almost disarming in its simplicity: “Only happy revolutionaries are good revolutionaries.” And he goes on to say that those who do not love life cannot love people either. This is perhaps the most beautiful correction to the cliché of the angry accuser. Ziegler was angry, yes. But his anger stemmed from a

love of life. That is why he possessed this peculiar blend of harshness and warmth, of curses and tenderness, of political acuity and personal attentiveness.

Chaudhry recounts how, in 2017, he had suggested interviewing Ziegler during a major editorial meeting. A senior journalist then labelled him an anti-Semite and an anti-American, without offering any justification. A few days later, Chaudhry travelled to Geneva anyway. On the trip, he read Ziegler's book "The Narrow Ridge of Hope". After nearly eight hours on the train, Lake Geneva came into view outside the window, with the Alps in the background, seagulls skimming the water, and sailboats dotting the lake. But the postcard-perfect idyll shattered even before he reached the hotel. His newsroom's tight budget had led him to a neighbourhood where red-light-district facades, shady characters, and people openly escaping reality marred Geneva's glamour. He couldn't sleep that night.

The next day, he sat across from Ziegler. The man was 83 years old at the time and, as Chaudhry recounts, brimmed with charm, mischief, and humour. There was no trace of resignation. After three hours, Ziegler asked where the young journalist was staying. When he heard the name of the hotel, he shook his head in disbelief. He offered several times for him to stay at his house. When Chaudhry declined, Ziegler insisted on at least inviting him to dinner. The young trainee, still searching for his place in journalism, realised that this world-renowned intellectual—whose formative years as a young man had been shaped in particular by encounters with *Jean-Paul Sartre* and *Simone de Beauvoir*—took his company seriously. The interview turned into a conversation. The conversation turned into a personal exchange. Ziegler paid—as Chaudhry recounts with quiet irony—with his wife's credit card because his own accounts had been frozen.

This scene is more than just an anecdote. It reveals a man who did not reserve the grand concept of solidarity solely for books and speeches. Ziegler asked about family, about faith, and about the path of a young journalist. Later, he called Chaudhry regularly—every two or three weeks—to ask about his family and his thoughts. Here, a different side of Ziegler emerges: the champion of the hungry, yet also the warm-hearted elder who takes an interest in



Jean Ziegler in later life.

(Picture Screenshot www.srf.ch/play/tv/10-vor-10)

the younger man, encourages him, and takes him seriously.

One of the most powerful passages in the podcast delves into Ziegler's own understanding of his life's journey. He recounts his encounter with *Che Guevara* in Geneva.⁵ Ziegler wanted to go with him, out of Switzerland and into the revolution. Che pointed to the illuminated city and apparently said that down there lay the monster's brain, that Ziegler was born there, and that was where he had to fight. For Ziegler, this became the strategy of "subversive integration": entering institutions, harnessing their power, and turning it against their own rigidity. This is how he made his way to university, to parliament, and later to the UN. This is a central theme of his life. Ziegler was an intruder into institutions—a man who mastered their language while simultaneously piercing through their moral evasions.

This holds a relevance that extends far beyond his biography. At a time when many people waver between conformity and withdrawal, Ziegler points to a third option: to enter without allowing oneself to be internally ensnared; not to idolise institutions, but to understand their levers of power and ultimately to make a difference. One might ask where integration ends and compromise begins. But one cannot deny that Ziegler viewed his official posts as battlefields.

His hope in this regard was never naive. He spoke of hunger, massacres, wars, polluted water, and a "Third World War" against the peoples of the Global South. And yet he also said that there is an incredible strength within human beings. He pointed to nurses, to liberation movements, to people who help others even though they have little left for themselves. It takes a great deal, he said, to destroy a human being. This statement reveals an astonishing anthropology. Human beings are vulnerable, manipulable, corruptible—but not easily broken completely.

When Chaudhry asks him, what forces prevent us from becoming human or remaining human, Ziegler responds in a way that is both political and spiritual. The worst thing the oligarchy has accomplished, he says, is the “alienation of collective consciousness.” People are made to believe that they are no longer the subjects of their own history. An invisible hand, market forces, and so-called laws of nature determine the fate of peoples. The individual is expected to assimilate, submit, and become a mere function. Against this, Ziegler posits a sense of identity—that human capacity to recognise oneself in the suffering other. In Kant’s words, the inhumanity inflicted upon another destroys the humanity within me.

This is one of the most profound ideas in this obituary. For it shifts the question from politics to the very essence of being human. It is not merely a matter of whether we feel compassion. It is a matter of whether we still perceive the harm done to another as an affront to our shared humanity. Where this awareness is destroyed or buried under concrete, the world becomes manageable. Then hunger statistics become tabulations, the dead become collateral damage, the poor become risk groups, refugees become streams, and wars become situations.

Ziegler was so dangerous precisely because he disrupted this numbness. He forced language back to the body – to the starving child and the freezing boy. To the people without clean water, to the farmers without land, to the indebted, the exploited, and the displaced. His concepts were grand, but they always had a body.

Toward the end, Chaudhry’s obituary becomes even more personal.

During a walk through Geneva, Ziegler spoke about death. He quoted the old saying, “All hours wound, but the last one kills.” He regretted not having engaged more deeply with Islam, with its rational approach and its conception of humanity’s great religious founders as links in a common chain. Then he asked Chaudhry an intimate question: “What will become of me after death?”

Chaudhry answered from the perspective of his faith. He spoke of the soul that outlives the body, and of a reality in which titles, power, money, and lineage no longer matter. In the end, only the truth about a person counts. Everything will bear witness—all deeds, words, intentions, even the animal that was wronged. Ziegler,

Chaudhry recounts, found this idea beautiful. This episode is also moving because it strips Ziegler of his image as the unshakable figure.

The most powerful moment comes from the final question in the 2017 conversation: How should people remember him when he is no longer here? Ziegler does not answer with the confidence of a man who already knows his legacy. He thinks of his children, hoping they will remember him with love. Then he pauses. There were moments of emptiness, discouragement, and cries for help on his answering machine that he did not answer—because it was late, because he was tired, and because he had just gotten home. He is ashamed of that. And then comes that one sentence, which is greater than any self-justification: People should say he did what he could—but he could have done more, should have done more.

This is perhaps the most moving assessment from a man who fought for nearly a century. The realisation that even such an active life cannot stand fully before the unheard cries for help. This humility is what makes Ziegler great. For whoever, in the end, looks not only at their words but also at what they have failed to do, has not sold their own soul for public fame.

In the end, the podcast’s final gesture no longer belongs to Ziegler himself. It belongs to Tahir Chaudhry. He bids farewell, raises his right fist, and shouts, “Viva la Revolution.” It is no casual effect; it is a gesture of passing the torch. He takes on the restlessness, his refusal to accept powerlessness as a law of nature. His belief that human beings are more than consumers, market participants, spectators, or administrative numbers. In this final gesture lies the true punchline of the obituary. Ziegler is gone, but the contradiction remains.

Ziegler insisted so stubbornly that there is no such thing as true powerlessness in democratic societies. One could end agricultural dumping, change stock market laws, ban speculation on food, restrict the production of bioethanol from staple foods, and cancel the debt of the poorest countries. For him, these were not utopian dreams. They were political decisions.

Hunger, he said, is the fear of tomorrow. It is biologically inherited because malnourished mothers give birth to children who are already damaged, and because inadequate nutrition in the first years of life can permanently scar a

child's brain. This sentence reveals that Ziegler was speaking not only of death, but of a destroyed future.

Jean Ziegler did not save the world. He did not abolish hunger, nor did he break the power of the financial oligarchies or end exploitation. But he did something that has become rare in times of linguistic numbness: he gave things back their moral names. He spoke of hope without downplaying the catastrophe.

One must ask whether one's own sobriety is not sometimes merely a sophisticated form of cowardice, and whether neutrality can truly be a virtue where people die needlessly. Whether realism without compassion has not long since become the language of conformity.

Jean Ziegler is dead. Tahir Chaudhry's obituary gives us one last glimpse of him. In doing so, he does not bring closure to the memory. It remains a mission.

Source: <https://globalbridge.ch/der-mensch-der-nicht-wegsehen-wollte/>, 18 June 2026

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")

¹ <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/alt-nationalrat-jean-ziegler-stirbt-im-alter-von-92-jahren/91560834>

² <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/616943?ln=en>

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZJ0qHin9ANM>

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=13Qc0UWgQr0&t=224s>

⁵ <https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/wirtschaft/jean-ziegler-und-die-schweiz-das-gehirn-des-monsters-ist-hier/47590682>