

Escher's fall

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The crisis destroyed the position of the man who had created the project. The Historical Dictionary of Switzerland describes Escher's last years as marked by setbacks. Delays on the Gotthard from 1875 required substantial additional credits and federal subsidies, which forced Escher to resign as chairman of the Kreditanstalt in 1877 and as president of the Gotthard direction in 1878.¹ The resignation from the Gotthard direction took effect on 28 June 1878. Kuoni describes it as a political sacrifice demanded by those who had to justify the rescue to their voters.² Escher's own canton had refused him support. When additional subsidies were put to the Zurich electorate in 1878, the voters rejected them, a result that the Historical Dictionary names as the event that forced Escher to leave the presidency of the company.³

The Zurich vote carried a symbolic weight that went beyond the sums involved. The democratic movement had transformed the cantonal constitution in 1869 and had founded the Zürcher Kantonalbank in 1870 as a bank for the people in deliberate contrast to the Kreditanstalt (see Chapter D.V). For many of its supporters, the Gotthard crisis confirmed their suspicion that Escher's combination of political power, banking and railway interests served a narrow elite at public expense. The rejection of subsidies by the Zurich electorate was their answer. It also showed that the financial centre that Escher had built now depended on a democratic public that could refuse to underwrite its risks.

The humiliation continued. Escher was not invited to the celebration of the tunnel breakthrough on 29 February 1880. He declined, for reasons of health, to attend the opening ceremonies of 1882.⁴ Other accounts add that his name was not mentioned in the speeches of 1882 and that an invitation reached him late.⁵ He died on 6 December 1882 at the Belvoir in Enge, six months after the line had gone into service. A monument by Richard Kissling was unveiled in front of Zurich main station in 1889.⁶ Standing

at the head of the Bahnhofstrasse, the street that would become the address of the great banks, the statue has become one of the emblems of the Zurich financial centre.

Escher's return to the chair of the Kreditanstalt in 1880, which he held until his death, suggests that the banking community did not share the public verdict.⁷ The distinction matters for the history of the financial centre. Escher's reputation as a politician and as the promoter of the Gotthard suffered lasting damage in his lifetime. His reputation as a builder of institutions recovered only after his death. For modern observers the lesson lies in the danger of personal concentration: a transaction that depends on one man's authority will be judged by that man's fate, while a failure of the transaction becomes a crisis of confidence in the whole system that he represents.

1 Notes

1. HLS, "Escher, Alfred" (Bürgi), French version (see above). ↩
2. Kuoni, "Der Gotthardbahnbau: Querelen und Opfer" (see above). ↩
3. HLS, "Ferrovia del Gottardo" (Bärtschi), Italian version (see above); the French version, "Chemin de fer du Gothard", <https://hls-dhs-dss.ch/fr/articles/042006/>, reports the same rejection by the Zurich voters in 1878. ↩
4. HLS, "Escher, Alfred" (Bürgi), French version (see above). ↩
5. Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, [aboutswitzerland.eda.admin.ch](https://www.aboutswitzerland.eda.admin.ch), "Alfred Escher, ein Visionär der modernen Schweiz", <https://www.aboutswitzerland.eda.admin.ch/de/alfred-escher-ein-visionaer-der-modernen-schweiz>; Gerber, "Der Gotthard brach ihm das Genick" (see above). ↩
6. HLS, "Escher, Alfred" (Bürgi), French version (see above), on the date and place of death and the monument by Richard Kissling inaugurated in 1889. ↩
7. HLS, "Escher, Alfred" (Bürgi), French version (see above), which gives his chairmanship of the Kreditanstalt as 1856–1877 and 1880–1882. ↩

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