

A man with short brown hair, wearing a dark blue suit jacket over a white collared shirt, is smiling broadly. He is positioned in the lower right foreground. The background is a bright, slightly overexposed scene of a roller coaster. The coaster's tracks are blue and white, and several red and white cars are visible, each carrying passengers. The sky is a pale, clear blue.

Benno Stieber

# ROLAND MACK

King of fun

**HERDER**

Benno Stieber

**Roland Mack**  
*King of fun*

Translated by Alan Fortuna



FREIBURG · BASEL · WIEN

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# **1. The Park of Dreams**

# Circus Macksimus

An old fairy tale park, a boulevard with old trees, a shining red *Western Railroad*, a paddlewheel steamboat, plus a mini-golf course and a track with little, rattling race cars that could be driven around. I must have been four or five years old the first time we visited Europa-Park. It was at its very beginning. From then on, like many other families from the area, we were there at least once a year. And we were always excited to see what new surprises the Park had to offer. There were reports in the newspaper about the *White Water Flume*, the new Italian quarter, the amazing magic show given by an internationally famous magician in the Baroque theatre. At the time, Europa-Park was the park of my dreams, as it was for many others. Steering the paddlewheel steamer while wearing a captain's hat, being pulled through the water by dolphins while sitting in an inflatable raft: these are experiences that belong to my childhood just as much as my first football, the caves and forts built in the forest or the first time sleeping alone in a tent.

At the Park in Rust, I once had the chance to assist a dog trainer on the open air stage. The dog didn't follow my instructions; instead, it pretty much did whatever it wanted and I had to follow him with my commands. That was the first time that I realized that show business works with a

series of little tricks. There I saw my first real variety show which we would otherwise only see on New Year's Eve on one of the two television channels and, as a teenager, was mesmerized by the skimpy outfits worn by the ladies of the Maxim ballet show.

Las Vegas in the Rhine Valley? Amusement instead of culture? My family was thankfully undogmatic about the question of whether or not it was all just consumerism and meaningless entertainment or if it was all actually culturally valuable. My parents had season tickets to the chamber orchestra, classical music played during our Sunday morning breakfast and books were important. But we also visited the Park once or twice a year with excitement, laughed at the parrot show and happily munched on cotton candy. At the time, not every family shared the same opinion. Many educated people, and the teachers at our school in particular, crinkled their noses at so much commerce and pure escapism.

Despite this, the Park grew from season to season, and I grew along with it. When I went away to college, I lost track of the development in Rust. And when I went back to visit it ten years later, the tranquil Park had become an entertainment empire with its own hotels and almost too many attractions to count.

Of course I had long known that the Park was the work of a single family from the same little town that I grew up in.



The Mack company grounds in Waldkirch on the banks of the Elz River had been a mystical place for us as children. It was there that roller coasters and bumper cars came out of the workshops piece by piece. I can still remember how we once spent many afternoons in the rain and wind hanging around the entrance to the complex because someone had allegedly heard from their dad that kids had once been allowed to test the roller coasters and bumper cars before delivery to the Park. Our wait was, of course, in vain.

The story of sceptical Waldkirch businessmen who didn't want to invest in the amusement park in Rust (and regretted it years later) was also well known around town. Together with his father, who lived for a long time in a house behind the Waldkirch complex, Roland Mack built the Park from the ground up. Today it can legitimately be said that Europa-Park is the world and work of Roland Mack.

Karl Valentin once said that, »art is a beautiful thing, but it takes a whole lot of work.« The same goes for the art of entertainment. But as a kid you never think about the work, and one of the secrets of small circuses and huge entertainment companies is to make hard work appear easy.

Germans have difficulties with emotional products. Even when choosing which car to buy, often more a question of

desire than pure rationality, Germans generally focus on qualities like technical perfection, safety, and practical purpose. In contrast, in the 90's Volkswagen was able to successfully market their new Golf (the epitome of a ›rational‹ car) in the USA with the simple German slogan: »Fahrvergnügen«.

There is a similar difference between the relationship that Germans and Americans have with the entertainment industry. Yes, millions of Germans flood into amusement parks every year, and yes, the entertainment industry here in Germany has become a real economic powerhouse that reaches into almost every facet of our lives. But many still equate amusement parks with state fairs, honky-tonk entertainment, and commercialism, while in the USA even the educated classes are not ashamed to spend a carefree day at Disneyland.

Such sentiments have always pained Roland Mack, and he has fought his entire life to improve the acceptance of his industry and of showmen in general. Today, Europa-Park is a state of the art enterprise with complex operations, and with its attractions, shows, restaurants and hotels, it can measure up to competition from around the world. With over 3,500 employees and seasonal workers, it has long been the region's largest employer, with over half of its workers coming from the nearby Alsace region. It is an entertainment centre that in the meantime is known all

across Europe. With its youth camps and multiple facilities for conferences and meetings, it has also become a social meeting place – and, if you don't expect the avant-garde – has become a home for cultural events as well. This is all in part due to Roland's and his wife Marianne's Christian beliefs: they feel a duty to make the Park something meaningful, and not just a place of diversion and amusement.

But here we go again making rationalizations. Efforts are then acknowledged when the sweat hasn't dried yet and the thoughts behind them can be measured. This mentality has always been a part of the Mack family, a family of craftsmen who have been in business for over 230 years. For generations, the Macks have been builders and draftsmen, and not exactly entertainers. Roland Mack grew up building carousels and wagons, was trained as a welder and became an engineer, and was the first in his family to go into show business – and to do it to perfection.

He is also the first in the family to actually embody the entertainment and joy that the Park seeks to provide its visitors. He is incredibly enthusiastic about his product, like a magician who is especially convincing because he believes, even just a little, that he can create wonders. This enthusiasm is visible as he shoots through a loop the loop on one of the Park's roller coasters or when he applauds his performers and clowns in a new revue from the front row.

Roland Mack loves the stage that he has built with his Park, and he performs on it with passion. People that are enthusiastic about something can infect others with their enthusiasm. Roland Mack has become one with his Park, which makes it difficult to separate the entire artistic work into categories like business sense and passion, managerial considerations and individual taste.

Naturally, the success of Europa-Park is due to many heads working together, not just Roland Mack's. The first was Franz Mack, Roland's father, who had the idea and entrepreneurial courage. As the head of a successful family business he started over and founded an amusement park at a time when the industry was barely known in Germany. Then there was Ulrich Damrau, the theatre and film architect, who gave the Park its unmistakable character by designing buildings in a wide variety of European styles. And Jürgen Mack, Roland's brother, who joined the company 13 years after Roland and acts as a sort of Minister of the Interior, helping to shape Europa-Park and always with an open ear for staff members. Marianne Mack, Roland's wife, also plays an important role: she has worked at the Park since day one and has cared for the family at home as well. Meanwhile there's a whole counsel of creative people and business professionals in the company who have each improved the Park in some way in

their area of expertise. And today, the next generation is ready to leave their mark on the Park as well.

Yet Roland Mack is the one in control and brings everything together. He is still the person who essentially sets the tone in the Park. Nobody knows the Park as well as he does and no one has made more of an impact on the Park from the day it opened. There is a picture from the opening ceremony in which a tall, lanky engineering graduate in a grey suit, with a dark moustache and perfectly manicured part in his hair sits awkwardly behind the wheel of the *Western Railroad*. That was 1975. Today we see a radiant man who celebrates his birthdays with Hubert Burda and Sabine Christiansen [media giants in Germany]. A man who feels just as comfortable, sitting cross-legged, talking with industry leaders as he does standing in front of a lecture hall of young students inspiring them with his world of engineering and entertainment. He has grown along with his business. People like to call such businessmen down to earth, which is certainly the case here because how else can a man like Mack be? Like a restaurateur and his restaurant, like a farmer in his fields, Roland Mack is intimately connected to his Park. In contrast to many other businessmen, he can't move the production and development departments of his company to a foreign country. His customers have to come to him in his Park. To keep them coming, the head of the

company has continued to invest, build, and develop, and has compared himself with, emulated and in many ways surpassed his competitors. This has created a little kingdom in which only one voice really counts at the end of the day: Roland Mack's.

One could see the Park today as an unbelievably successful patchwork company made of different industries such as the hotel business, gastronomy, engineering, logistics and show business combined to make a well-oiled machine that is designed to professionally entertain people. Or we could see Europa-Park the way that Roland Mack apparently still does after all of these years: through the eyes of his visitors, as a glittering world that is extravagant, luxurious, surprising, and even a little mysterious.

Since its foundation, over € 600 million have been invested in Europa-Park, and the Park has had around 100 million visitors. The five hotels associated with the Park cope with many hundred thousand reservations per year. Yearly revenue is estimated to be around € 300 million, the family does not provide more detailed numbers. For years, the company has been able to finance many of the investments in the maintenance and development of the Park through ongoing business revenue and company reserves.

The Park knows no crises. When riding around in a golf cart through the Park with Roland Mack one has the impression that he believes, much like many of his visitors, that he has created the best of all possible worlds. Still, he never lets up, and he continually drives his employees to reach new heights of performance, even if his tone is harsh sometimes.

What drives this man? When the spotlight is on him, he often says that it's his enthusiasm for the product and for the success and the recognition. The latter is particularly important to him, and it is something that he enjoys quite a bit. In more reflective moments, Roland Mack also mentions a touch of fear: the fear that the endless success, the continually increasing numbers of visitors and all of the awards will suddenly end someday. Somebody else might come and do it more successfully, or people's leisure behaviour could change, and suddenly nobody would be interested in going to amusement parks.

At the end of the 90s, when the Internet was no longer just a toy for the initiated but had conquered living rooms everywhere, Mack began to worry that people would lose interest in the Park and its attractions and find their amusement in virtual worlds. It was around this time that Mack built large hotels and sought to turn Europa-Park into a place that was not just a destination for a family day trip, but rather a location to spend an entire holiday. In the end,

these worries proved to be unfounded; people are still looking for controlled adventures and, more than ever, want to be whisked away to real-world fantasies. The Park's visitor numbers have continued to rise over the years.

Despite its undeniable place at the top in Germany, and counting among the largest and best parks in all of Europe, Roland Mack still relentlessly compares his Park to the competition. In every telephone call with the few remaining colleagues from other amusement parks that are still run by their founders, he never forgets to ask about their successes and their planned new attractions. He is constantly checking the occupancy in his hotels and asking for the daily numbers in the afternoon. Roland Mack can simply not rest on his laurels, and he says that success has to be earned every day. This is something that he preaches to his employees, and is an idea that drives him back to his desk or some construction site at the Park every morning, regardless of how long the night before might have been.

»Whoever likes to party should also like to work.« This is but one of the dictums from »der Vadder«, that is Franz Mack. It is the way the Mack family unifies the work ethic of a middle-class entrepreneur with the competitive spirit of a showman.

The life of Roland Mack is the story of a pioneer. It's a story of becoming something greater than just oneself, and of successfully overcoming personal boundaries and



limitations. And it is the story of a land grab the size of which rarely occurs today. But success has a price. Harshness with oneself, and often enough with others, is a story that every businessman can tell. But in this case, the entrepreneurial virtues of hard work, discipline and sense of reality stand in particularly strong contrast to the product being sold, which has to appear both fanciful and effortless in order for it to captivate and enthrall visitors. He who looks behind the curtain and deigns to report about how much effort actually goes into the seemingly easy is suspected of being nothing more than the killjoy who wants to give away the magician's trick.

## Microcosm Park

It's just before nine in the morning. After the showers in the night and one last bout of rain a few hours ago, the sun is now shining in the sky as if it knows exactly what Europa-Park expects of it. For an hour or so already, the first few hundred visitors have been crowding themselves through the metal gates in the German Avenue. They were the first in line at the cashier, and now they want to be the first to ride the *blue fire*, *Silver Star*, or *Eurosat* roller coasters, maybe making a quick stop at the *Swiss Bob Run* on the way there.

At 9 o'clock on the dot, Miro Gronau turns the key, says, »Please step back,« and opens the door with a swing. The mass of people pours into the Park. At the front of the pack are the boys, big and little, who take over the still idyllic grounds at a run. They only have one goal, the roller coasters. It's never too early for an adrenaline cocktail. Keeping these rides safe with all of their loops, corkscrews and thrills, is the responsibility of a man with the appropriate name Achim Stoß [in German Stoß means impact or collision]. Long before the Park opens he tests the cars on the roller coasters, and yes, every morning he takes test rides on a quasi-empty stomach. Talk about a fast-paced job.

Behind the screaming hordes of adolescents shooting through the gates of the Park, stroll the couples and families. Their first targets are totally different. They want to saunter with the small children through the Fairy Tale Forest, or drink a latte macchiato on the Piazza. Opening the gates is like a starting gun, and it is one of the best parts of Miro Gronau's day. Sometimes, Roland Mack is also there by the gates. You can't get any closer to the visitors than right here, and you can feel the anticipation and reverent excitement in the air.

Roland Mack greets his visitors very briefly maybe exchanging a few words with a few of them. Then he hops into his golf cart (which can drive a little bit faster than any

other in the Park) and speeds off. There await meetings or a visit to one of the new attraction's construction site. The boss always wants to be kept in the loop and wants to know how each day's developing in his Park. Even when he's travelling, he makes sure to get daily reports on visitor numbers, hotel bookings, and the daily prognosis sent to his mobile phone. If he ever gets the feeling that there's a problem anywhere, he knows the right number to call.

Miro Gronau is the park director. If the lights go out somewhere or, even worse, an entire ride, he is the man that has to solve the problem. His work day today began 45 minutes before the official opening of the Park. He printed out the daily schedule on the printer in the small office that he shares with the director of the workshops. In the conference room a few steps away, his colleagues from the Park restaurants, security and hotels have already begun to meet. Gronau asks the group, »Did anything unusual happen yesterday?« A group of Swiss had jumped over the turnstiles in the hotel *El Andaluz* in the afternoon. They were levied a fine and banned from the hotel; a year-long Park pass would have been cheaper for them. The group laughs.

While this is going on, Jürgen Sedler begins his rounds on his golf cart. He has already been at work in the nursery buildings since 5:30 in the morning. Now, just before the Park opens, the master gardener checks his plans one more

time. Not one single brown leaf should ruin the appearance of his lavish plots. Plants that have died are replaced immediately. Early this morning, new plants were loaded onto electric trucks according to a disposition list and planted in the correct location in the Park. Europa-Park is a real garden, with old growth oak trees and exotic plants, as were the fashion in castle gardens in earlier centuries. Additionally, there are over 2,000 potted plants and over 300,000 summer flowers planted in beds around the Park. Sedler's team has to take care of all of them, and at the same time makes sure that there is always a flowering landscape around the entire premises regardless of what time of year it is.

Even the plants are under the purview of the boss. Roland Mack knows exactly how important they are and always have been, especially at the beginning, when the site did not have as many rides or attractions to draw guests but garden shows were in fashion. This began a tradition that has been continued until today at incredible expense. Some of the olive trees in the Spanish quarter even get root heating so that they can survive the harsh German winters without damage.

At the same time, the morning meeting continues planning the day in the Park. How many visitors are expected? Which regions are on holiday right now? Today, it's just Bavaria and France. And in Switzerland today is

apparently a holiday that is taken from the moon calendar. There are a lot of people with free time, and the five Park hotels are almost booked out, »above all with Bavarians,« says the colleague from the hotels. The morning meeting also takes a quick look at the weather forecast. After early morning showers, the weather should get better and stabilize over the course of the day. That's good news. Spring had been incredibly rainy, and the Park is playing catch-up in order to make this season more successful than the last. That's what the boss expects.

How long will the Park remain open today if the weather stays good? This last point is always a bit critical for the park director. In Europa-Park, they are proud to not have fixed opening times and every day a decision is made when to close the gates based on the number of visitors, the weather, and - just a little - according to Roland Mack's gut feeling. And once a year the Park even stays open until midnight. Every once in a while, the employees grumble about the flexible closing times; it makes the overall working hours and the end of the workday hard to calculate.

Even though his employees sometimes quietly grumble, and the local residents - due to the noise - complain somewhat more loudly, this gesture towards his guests is important to Roland Mack. They are the paying customers, and they should be satisfied, and on especially nice days

they should even get a little bit more. On those days, the roller coasters *Poseidon* and the *Alpine Express »Enzian«* stay open an hour and a half longer than usual. Gronau, who sets the closing time as the park director, says, »As far as the boss is concerned, I often don't make the right decision, and then I get a telephone call from him.« Gronau used to be Roland Mack's personal assistant, so he knows his demands well and can take his rebukes in stride.

At the end of the morning meeting, the head of security reports an early morning accident on the *EP-Express*, the most important mode of transportation in the Park for guests. An employee from a glass cleaning company hired to clean the windows above the train tracks forgot to take down his ladder. The Park Express, which thankfully drives through that section fairly slowly, rammed right into it. While that may sound like a slapstick scene from an Harold Lloyd silent film, the situation was still dangerous; although the cleaner survived the incident without a scratch, the air conditioning unit on the top of the train was torn off. For that reason only two of the total three trains are running today. »It's a good thing we are not expecting a peak day,« says Miro Gronau. Later, he takes a couple of pictures of the damaged train and sends them to his boss.

A group of rugged Rust retirees are wiping down the benches and other seating areas on the German Avenue, slowly making their way towards Greece and Spain. They

do it every morning, more out of love for the Park than for the money. It's a tradition that's been around since the opening of the Park, and one that shows that the older residents of Rust view Europa-Park (which used to be a town garden) as their own.

In the *El Andaluz* hotel, the remaining guests are still eating breakfast. They are bent over their blue Europa-Park brochures and planning their day. Should they begin at the castle and then go through Italy, Russia and England, slowly making their way back to the hotel, or should they do it the other way around? What are the times for the ice revue and the stunt show? And then they rush off to the Park. Along the way, they are greeted from the walls by the Park's sovereign: Roland Mack. Here's a picture with Jogi Löw, later comes one that was taken with Kofi Annan and another with Marianne and Michael. And the leaders of Gazprom and Dieter Zetsche from Daimler are there as well. The pride in being on a first name basis with the famous and powerful is something that the Macks like to flaunt. Many guests stop and admire the gallery on their way to the Park.

While some hurry off to the Park, others take their time first doing their morning rounds through the palm gardens. They would prefer to take it easy.

At the other end of the Park, on the terrace at the *Castle Balthasar*, tables are being set. In the kitchens of the hotels

and restaurants, the breakfast buffets are cleared away. Already preparations for the lunch rush are underway. The countless food stands around the Park are being restocked. In the distance, the cries of visitors getting a veritable shower on the *Fjord-Rafting* ride can be heard. Over 6 million litres of water circulate in the canal, explains the white-haired man at the stand where you can buy the picture they take of you while you're on the ride. »It costs Mr. Mack a whole lot of money,« he says as if that's a reason enough to take a ride. The showers on the playground behind the English themed area are better portioned. Under a veil of fine mist, parents can cool off in the midday heat while the children, wearing life vests, ride around in little boats in a pool.

Lunch time is approaching, and visitors are flocking to the restaurants in droves. The crowds begin to push through the alleys of the Scandinavian quarter, long queues start to form around the food stands and a girl sticks her head in the mouth of a shark while her parents take her picture. Meanwhile, Roland Mack is sitting with Chip Cleary in the »Circus Macksimus,« Mack's conference room at the hotel *Colosseo*. They're talking about the plans for a new waterpark to be built in the coming years on land next to the current park. Cleary, a short American with an impish look about him, was the president and CEO of the IAAPA, the international association for the amusement



park industry, until Roland Mack replaced him as president in 2012. More than anything, Cleary is an expert for waterparks. For months, the head of the Park in Rust has had Cleary present him with ideas and calculations for the new major project, and he is always asking questions about the smallest possible details. Before breaking any ground on the project, Mack wants to be sure of everything. A second park in Rust should attract more overnight guests and be a logical expansion of the already well-known attractions. Without question, the new waterpark is quite possibly the largest challenge that the Macks have undertaken since the opening of Europa-Park in 1975.

Miro Gronau is called to *Wodan*, a wooden roller coaster on the south side of the complex. There is a problem there with a sensor that automatically stops the cars on the track, and the coaster has been shut down for safety. On the way there, he sees the cart of some gardeners who are working on a plot in the Park. Normally, that kind of work is done before the Park opens in the morning or in the evenings after the Park has closed. But visitor surveys have shown that landscaping work doesn't bother visitors; on the contrary, many visitors enjoy getting tips from the landscapers for their own gardens at home. He leaves the gardeners to their work. *Wodan* is waiting.

By the time Gronau gets to the giant wooden frame at the edge of the Scandinavian quarter, the ride is already up

and running again. The cars are racing out of the station one every minute. There are only a few seconds for the cars to arrive, the passengers to get out and get on, workers to collect everyone's handbags, and then the safety bars drop for the next ride. Bowing down in synchronized movements, the team follows the car as it goes to the station checking the fit of the safety bars and away it goes with a slight acceleration out of the station. Soon thereafter, high above the heads of those waiting for the ride, the clattering sound of the conveyor chain can be heard, and then: the screams of the passengers, somewhere between joy and terror as the coaster rolls over the crest. You can feel the entire wooden frame shaking from the force of the drop.

The *Wodan* team changes places every half hour. The worker who had been checking the entrance switches over to the control station for the coaster. The proper rhythm of arrival, getting out, getting in, checking and departure is an extremely important part of the operation explains Gronau. A roller coaster can be viewed as an assembly line in a factory. Every 62 seconds, a car should leave the station and at every arrival a red digital clock begins the countdown. Every delay means a loss of »productivity«. For a roller coaster, this means that there are some people that day who won't get to ride. For every one second delay in the process, 600 fewer visitors per day get to experience

the pleasant terrors of *Wodan*. But this type of purely economic view of the roller coaster is something that visitors should notice as little as possible. For them, waiting means frustration, and a lot of waiting means a lot of frustration. The equation is that simple. For guests who want to ride the main attractions on peak days, waiting times can reach more than an hour. At the same time, waiting in a queue is part of the anticipation according to psychologists. For that reason, the Park began early on to design the waiting areas as zones to get people in the mood for the ride. This can be done with dramatic music, as at *Wodan*, with animations, as at the *blue fire*, or with decorations and sound design, as at the *Eurosat*. A visitor favourite is the interactive yodelling course for visitors queuing up for the *Tirol Water Flume*.

In the administrative area on the west side of the Park, the plans for next season are being made. In the call centre, calls are coming in every second. Hotel rooms are being booked and conference rooms are being reserved. Expert symposia, wedding parties, press conferences: the Park has long been a location for events of all kinds. In the internal training centre next door, seminars and courses are permanently run for employees as »training on the job,« which they say includes extensive riding of the roller coasters in the Park.