

Emigration of Swiss industries

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EMIGRATION OF SWISS INDUSTRIES.

By OSCAR WETZEL.

It is, generally speaking, during recent years, respectively during the years after the Armistice, that the question of emigration of Swiss Industries has been in the lime-light; not always in a friendly way—I should say, in most cases, in a distorted manner. Swiss industries of different kinds, however, have been emigrating for many years, as a matter of fact for about 200 years.

Naturally, the general conditions of the country have always had an influence by accelerating or slowing up that process, and the following should give you a good idea of the general conditions, reasons and explanations. —

Comparing the situation of the Swiss Industries and their historic development with those of other countries, one cannot help noticing right away the particularly unfavourable conditions under which our factories in Switzerland are placed. This fact is so evident that it really should be unnecessary to come back upon it. Nevertheless, I think it will be of importance in this case to give you a few introductory remarks.

The Swiss Industries find themselves at a disadvantage:—

A) As regards cost of production.

- 1) Raw materials—which are so to say entirely missing in Switzerland, and owing to high cost of transport become more expensive than for any of the competing surrounding countries.
- 2) Cost of Labour — which is generally speaking more expensive than in many other countries, and especially more expensive than in the countries surrounding Switzerland. Owing to the standard of living of the Swiss worker, this relative high cost of labour has been felt in the Swiss Industries since the 18th century.
- 3) High taxation—imposed by the very advanced Labour Government and Labour Legislation.

B) As regards Sales possibilities.

- 1) By the absence of an important national market.
- 2) By the absence of Colonial markets.
- 3) By the absence of direct access to the sea, whereby again the transport cost seriously increases the price of our exported goods.

To these principal points could naturally be added quite a number of secondary reasons which we shall, however, neglect for the moment.

If on one side there are a number of unfavourable facts, how could the Swiss Industries have developed to such an extent if not some facts to a certain degree counter-balanced the above reasons. One of them, the *existence of a very well-qualified and well-trained working class* — which is the result of long evolution of the industries in Switzerland—has overcome many difficulties and would explain the *existence* of great exporting concerns in our country.

Switzerland can be considered as an Industrial country since the second half of the 16th century. Naturally at that time the industrialisation of the country had to be considered in relation to the surrounding countries.

The Cotton industry, for instance, commenced in Zurich in the 15th century and even before. The linen industry existed already at that time. The Silk industry of Basle and Zurich started in the 16th century, the Watch industry in 1587 at Geneva and 1679 at Neuchâtel, and Straw plaiting in Canton Argovie during the 18th century.

All these industries were, slowly but surely, perfected and developed and their markets went further and further away from the centre of production. The textile production of Switzerland spread to Germany, Poland, Russia, Austria and Italy, and the Balkan countries, etc. absorbed quite a lot of Swiss merchandise. France, nevertheless, remained up to the time of the French Revolution the principle market for our exporters.

The development and prosperity of the Swiss Industries was greatly influenced during the 16th and 17th century by two groups of important factors:—

- 1) The emigration of refugees from Italy and France.
- 2) The military and political neutrality during wars in which nearly all the States of Central Europe were implicated, and especially France and Germany.

Switzerland, therefore, to a large extent owed at this epoch her industrial supremacy to elements from *outside her country*; later on, however, the *contrary* was the case.

It was especially the first wave of refugees in the 16th century which turned out to be profitable for Switzerland, and during this period numerous industries were started in this country. The new wave of refugees produced by the revocation of L'Edit de Nantes went mostly towards Germany, where refugees at that time

found the best reception because the German States made every effort to start new industries there too, and even tried to acquire qualified Swiss labour. At the same time we find some protectionist tendencies in France, but by this period Switzerland already had an advance of about 130 years over her competitors.

Since the 17th century, Switzerland was parallel with England, the most industrialised country and financially the richest in Europe. We therefore find at the beginning of the 19th century, at the moment when mechanisation started to encroach more and more upon different lines of production, that Switzerland had—besides a well educated working class—industrial chiefs of capabilities and financial power as well as the "élite" of Export merchants who by their very wide relations were able to guarantee Swiss merchandise entrance to all the European markets and to the Near East.

These three factors, capital, labour and Export trade, helped to develop Swiss Industries to a considerable extent during the 19th century.

In the years following, Switzerland lost bit by bit, in any case in certain lines of business, the advantage which it had over its neighbours and competitors.

It is not only the advantages which Switzerland has from an industrial point of view, as for instance the power contained in the streams, rivers and lakes, utilized as electrical energy and consequently produced at comparatively low cost; neither is it the technical personnel, commercial relations nor the general education of the working classes and the leaders of industry, but it is as much the historic development of Swiss industries *in conjunction* with the above reasons which accounts for the position our industries have today.

TEXTILE INDUSTRY.

1) Cotton Industry.

The Swiss cotton industry, as already mentioned, goes back to the 15th century, and developed very considerably during the 17th and 18th century under the impulse of Protestant "émigrés" from France.

Included here, are Spinning, Weaving, Printing and Dyeing industries. Just before the French Revolution it was Switzerland who had the most important cotton industry in Continental Europe.

After a period of serious competition from other countries, especially England, where mechanisation had made very great strides, a new period of development during the 19th century brought this line of business to its old prosperity. During this time, however, we find Swiss goods being slowly pushed out from their markets in France, but on the other hand finding new markets in South Germany, Italy and the Balkan countries. Markets in the Levant, India, extreme Orient and South America were also developed.

Already at this period (the 18th century) we find that enterprising Swiss play an active part in the development of the cotton industry in foreign countries. In the 19th century, it is more the financial power of Swiss industries that pushes in the same direction, but from the middle of the 19th century one observes a movement of emigration of the cotton industry from Switzerland to Germany and Italy, countries which started politically to protect their own industries.

We find, first of all, Swiss starting cotton industries in France, and it is interesting to note that Basel firms seem to have played an important role in commencing mills in Alsace and Lyons. Later on, other Swiss from Geneva, Neuchâtel, etc., followed the lead, having found important markets open to their factories in France.

(Continuation on page 7.)

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