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Ibicaba – paradise in the mind's eye

The theme of emigration is a leitmotiv which runs through the work of the versatile Swiss author, Eveline Hasler. In the sixties and seventies she published mainly children's books and juvenile literature. But she became known as a novelist in 1982 for her book: *Anna Göldin – letzte Hexe* (Last Witch). In her latest novel *Ibicaba*, (Nagel & Kimche, Publishers, Zurich, 1985) she traces the fortunes of a group of Swiss who emigrated to Brazil around the middle of the last century. Here, the author describes for our readers what inspired her to write this moving book.

In the depths of the secluded canton of Glarus, I found an old oil-cloth book; it contained an exact description of a journey from the Thardis bridge near Landquart into the hinterland of São Paulo in Brazil. Thomas Davatz, the Prättigau teacher, wrote it in 1855 when he emigrated from Switzerland, together with the group of 265 Swiss from the cantons of Grisons, Zurich, Glarus, Aargau, St. Gallen and Fribourg. In the middle of the last century the textile industry had fallen into the red because of the English competition. The potato disease, which at the time raged throughout Europe, had robbed the poor of their staple food. Thousands thought of emigrating, but where to?

Brazil, the promised land

By mid-century, emigration to the USA was becoming harder, for inflation was rife in the States and immigrants without means were being turned back. But in the emigration newspapers, above all in the Swiss *Kolonist*, selective advertisements for Brazil were being made, in which contracts for shared-yield leases were particularly recommended for coffee plantations in the hinterland of São Paulo. It was said that thousands of Germans and Swiss were already working at Senator Verguiero's model colony. The agent, Eduard de Paravicini, who at the same time was



Eveline Hasler

the owner of the Swiss newspaper, had some of the emigrants' letters printed, as bait. Thus, for example, in the report of Joseph Moor, from Thurgau: «The soil is good to work; no stone is to be found; like ashes and manure is this earth.»

And in the letter of Bancratius Barandun, the native of the Grisons: «O poor Switzerland that enjoys the reputation of freedom...! But alas what freedom, that is repressed more than under any emperor. If you want to know what freedom is, you must come to America. You get a piece of ground to work; hardly the sun has risen, you go to work on the coffee land until 9 o'clock; then you return home to eat your mid-day meal and you rest till 2 o'clock; to the field again till evening, or 5 o'clock, and then back home. No one to give you orders...»

Like white slaves

However, the settlers at the colony of Ibicaba (roughly, «rich soil» in the local American-Indian) were

soon to be disillusioned. After a short time they became increasingly dependent on the owners of the plantation. Thomas Davatz, the spiritual leader of the emigrants, began a dangerous struggle for justice. He succeeded in smuggling a report of the true facts to Europe, and in his request for an impartial supervisor from Switzerland. The result, among like-minded persons, was a kind of «Rütli Oath in Brazil». Davatz also managed to prevent an armed uprising against the ruling establishment, so that the immigrants' resistance could be steered along legal, and thus more effectual, lines.

Seven months of research

How could this particular chapter of emigration have been forgotten or even suppressed? As in a jigsaw puzzle, the dramatic story was put together, piece by piece, from old reports and letters. In the end, the difficulties and battles of our emigrant ancestors also had political consequences. On his return, Thomas Davatz had a report printed in Chur: a record which touched off notes of protest and bans on emigration. The way was cleared for emigration to Brazil more in line with the principles of human dignity. *Eveline Hasler* ●

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