Everyday life in Switzerland around 1850

The hand of a clock as the finger of

A gentleman in a black suit stands on the platform at Zurich railway station and looks at his onion-shaped pocket watch. The train from Baden is due to arrive; it will be bringing not only the famous 'Spanische Brötli' (puff pastries) which gave their name to the first railway in Switzerland, but also a fiancée.
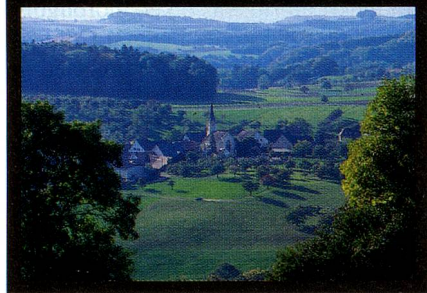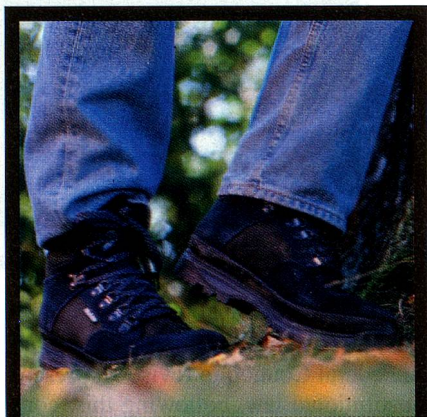
This is a scene which symbolises the mid-nineteenth century. Not because it happened every day – the railway would not be used every day for a long time yet, and nor indeed was the Gotthard coach itself, which was

*Willi Wottreng **

then in its heyday. But because it reflects two basic characteristics of the age which was then modern: the growing importance of time, and the shrinking of distance.

"Everything streams to the farthest point you can get to in one day with the highest speed and with relatively little money". This quote from a mid-century number of the 'Volksblatt' adds two more pieces to the jigsaw: money played a role in completing the structure of reality – as did the newspapers themselves, which were now in a position to transport the latest news cheaply and in a short time over large distances. To the novel feeling of symmetry in all fields of life was now added the discovery of news.

It would be erroneous to think that this new rhythm and measure – which also incidentally included the harmonised metric system of weights laid down in the federal constitution – did not affect the lives of ordinary people. Labour discipline had already started in the factories. Work no longer ended by the natural onset of fatigue, but when twelve hours had elapsed. Nor did it any longer start with the rising of the sun. The factory siren sounded at 11 o'clock exactly, dividing the working day into two symmetrical halves. This forced working men's families to divide up their days in a new and abstract manner.

But the main thing to be divided up was money. Although many people were still accustomed to taking Monday off, they felt it in their lunch contents by the weekend at the latest. In the year 1850

* Willi Wottreng is a part-time editor with 'Weltwoche' and a freelance journalist in Zurich.

a textile worker in the Zurich Oberland spent 700 to 750 francs a year to feed the family, but his annual wages were only 340 francs. His wife had to help and earned 215 francs, while the eldest child contributed 135 francs. In these circumstances, the average number of children per family dropped dramatically.

Changes in traditional agriculture were needed to feed the growing population. By 1850 fallow land – or empty fields – had virtually disappeared. This also reflected the process of compression, austerity, calculation and the loss of unlimited space which was coming more and more to dominate everyday life. The land had been distributed, it was now a question of using it for the best. Fortunately, a few years previously the 'spud', or potato – that gift from the New World to the Old – had made its appearance in Switzerland. This helped to solve part of the problem of obtaining sufficient food to eat.

The new conditions of life were not yet under control. While civilisation was beginning to lend new structures to the country, in many places there was enormous fear in people's minds every day of the week about what nature might do to them, as if life itself had become more prone to disaster than before. There was fear of fire which swept though villages, of flooding which destroyed crops, of avalanches which destroyed cowshed and barn, illness which rose as vapour from the common cesspits of the dwelling-houses. There is a strange logic by which progress is always associated with incessant danger.

Those who were threatened with utter perdition as a result of the new economic disasters together with the old natural disasters emigrated – often at their own wish, but sometimes because they were ordered to do so from above. The authorities issued decrees forcing poor people – who often turned into delinquents as they wandered hungry through the country as vagabonds – to extended periods of time in the colonies. And those for whom wandering was a way of life were forced to settle permanently, including gypsies and other travelling people. The process was one of stabilising the population. The order which was needed for the newly created federal state was being literally

God

created day by day. And order also meant the absence of disturbance, vagrancy and travelling labour.

Here is one poetic detail. It was in this way that the barrel organ – known as the 'Schwiizerörgeli' – first came to Switzerland. It was brought by a wood turner from Vienna who was forced to cease travelling and settle down in Oberthal in the Bernese countryside.

The old freedoms were of the past. This was also probably marked in forms of address. The singular mode of address – the 'Du' form – of village life gave way to the urban 'Ihr' (You instead of Thou), which created formality and distance. Instead of the heartfelt 'Vergelts-Gott' (thanks be to God), 'Oblischee' – 'much obliged' in French – came into vogue, and this reflected a

bilateral obligation similar to an exchange of commodities. The new age, with its rhythms which were coming to affect daily life in an increasingly far-reaching way, spread ineluctably – in spite of many difficulties and obstacles. The old habits had to give way because they were less rational.

While the city gentleman waits on the station platform for his lady-love, who will soon step down from the train with her fashionable crinoline (the wide ladies' dress stiffened and circled with pieces of whalebone) and her soot-covered face, his servant waiting at home will be guessing whether the marital union will bring sweet bliss in its train. According to the old custom, she will cast molten lead into water and then read the couple's fortune in the form it takes. Or she will take a log at random from the woodpile and read from its shape the secrets of the future. Or she will throw a slipper into the air and know from the direction in which it flies whether the days to come are going to be good or bad. ∎

Wages in 1850
(in centimes per day)

Metalworking: 200
Building: 200
Food production: 110
Clothes production: 255
Leatherwork: 320

Prices in 1850
(essential everyday food and clothing in centimes)

1 kg bread: 32
1 kg potatoes: 7
1 litre milk: 8.5
1 kg butter: 133
1 kg beef: 61
1 kg coffee: 150
1 egg: 3.5
1 litre wine: 1.5
1 pair shoes: 640
1 fathom wood: 2,280
1 pair stockings: 55
1 men's shirt: 275
1 woman's dress: 500

Source: Albert Hauser, Das Neue kommt. Schweizer Alltag im 19. Jahrhundert (The New Comes In. Swiss Everyday Life in the 19th Century)

Emigration in the 19th century

Dreaming of a better life

"His wife came in unnoticed; wringing her hands she stood behind the pile of uncorrected exercise books. She did not know what to cook. As always when she was near crying, her eyelids fluttered. Potatoes, he said absently. They've gone rotten, she said. In the cellar they only had at most 15 kilos left of the better sort. Also she ought to keep a few to use as seed potatoes. In that case maize then… Her cheeks suddenly reddened with anger. Maize meal had gone up in price since the bad potato harvest, she said vehemently. She had no more money left in the drawer, and running up bills was out of the question, he had said so himself."

This is how, in her novel 'Ibicaba. Paradise in their Heads', Eveline Hasler describes the way Grisons village schoolmaster Thomas Davatz lived. In 1855 he decided to emigrate with 265 others to try to build up a new livelihood in Brazil. In the same way, thousands of Swiss men and women emigrated in the 19th century in order to try their luck across the ocean.

As in other European countries, the last century was an era of mass emigration. The trend originated with the Napoleonic wars, followed by the famines of

1816/17 and 1845/46, and the introduction of mechanical weaving machines around 1840. In view of the difficult situation throughout almost the whole of Europe, emigrants sought a better future mainly in North and South America, although some of them also turned to Russia under the Czars. Between 1850 and 1914, about 400,000 Swiss left their country. Most of the emigrants were from Ticino, the eastern Alpine valleys and central Switzerland. Fewer came from the Swiss plateau and fewer still from the French-speaking region.

Experts today distinguish between two types of emigrant. There was group emigration, mainly to America and often linked to the founding of Swiss associations or even settlements having Swiss names. We find, for example, Nova Friburgo in Brazil, New Glarus and New Bern in the United States and Nueva Helvecia in Uruguay. Then there was also individual emigration by professional people seeking work. Examples of the latter were Swiss doctors, governesses, dairymen and confectioners, who were particularly in demand in Russia.

Most of the time emigration was promoted by official bodies in Switzer-

land. Municipal and cantonal authorities very often financed emigration in order to relieve themselves of their assistance obligation towards the poorer section of the population. Right into the 1920s the federal government was still providing subsidies for those emigrating to Argentina, Brazil, Canada and France as part of the effort to bring unemployment down.

The dream of Thomas Davatz and those who went with him ended in a nightmare of slave-like penury on a

❞❞ MY SWITZERLAND:
The government looks after the poor people, drug addicts too. It uses our tax money for good things. Also I feel good in Switzerland because it's clean and there is always enough water here.
ALINA (12) **❞❞**

Brazilian coffee plantation. But for the majority of emigrants the voyage into the unknown did in fact lead them out of the claustrophobic poverty of their homeland to a better life in the New World.

René Lenzin ∎