

Emigration in the 19th century : dreaming of a better life

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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 ■