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"Sacks of coffee lay around in piles"

The young customs officer could scarcely believe his eyes when he started his first job in the Campocologno customs post in the most remote corner of the Puschlav. Hundreds of smugglers would gather each morning in front of the customs post when it opened at five a.m.. Walter Mürger, now retired, recalls the most extraordinary years of his career.*

Swiss Review: Why did you start your first job in Campocologno of all places?

Walter Mürger: I grew up in Wattwil (SG) and attended the customs college in Liestal (BL). At the end of our training, we were given our postings. Everyone used to say, "Please don't let me be sent to Campocologno, at the end of the world!" And that's exactly where I was posted.

What was your impression after the first few days in Campocologno?

It was a shock. I was fresh out of college, having learnt how to prevent smuggling. Yet every morning I was confronted with hundreds of smugglers in front of our building, fetching sacks of coffee and hauling them over the mountain to the green border with Italy. And no-one intervened, because it was entirely legal – at least on the Swiss side!

And how did your colleagues explain the situation?

Because of the "Export 2" regulation, nothing illegal was happening on our side of the border. And of course I noticed how much money coffee smuggling was bringing to the Puschlav. At that time there were lots of ways of earning money – coffee roasteries, depots and warehouses, and goods transport. Even the smugglers themselves were a source of income. In the evenings they used to frequent Campocologno's restaurants and spend lots of money.

What about the Italian customs officers? Did they seek increased collaboration in the fight against smuggling?

Not at all. Naturally they, too, had a share in the profits through bribes from the "capi" of the smuggler bands. Everyone profited.

Even Switzerland: after all, there was no need to refund sales tax as is the case with normal exports.

So only Swiss customs officers came away empty-handed?

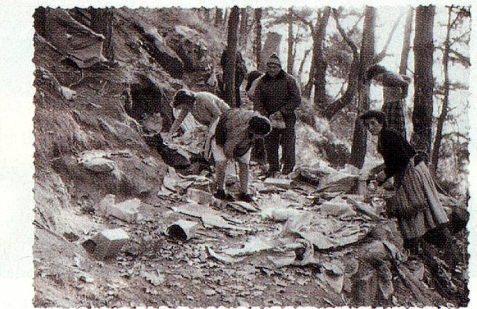
We used to joke that we could also haul sacks up the mountain. I never did it, but one or two of my colleagues may well have helped on occasion, when off-duty. The interesting experiences I had were sufficient reward for me. We often patrolled the border to catch illegal immigrants. Sometimes, when I lay in hiding, a few women would pass by, lift their skirts suddenly at the green border, and bring out bags of sugar. Sugar was also smuggled at that time.

Were there any illegal immigrants in those days?

Mostly they were the smugglers themselves. Sometimes they would have to flee back to Switzerland across the green border, to avoid an Italian border patrol. That constituted illegal immigration. We would report them, and they had to pay a CHF 50 fine. Anyone caught three times would be banned from entering the country for five years.

So at least that was a lucrative source of income for the Swiss customs!

We also checked the sacks of coffee lying around in piles at the border. Because the goods had to leave Switzerland within 24 hours of the export declaration, all the sacks were dated so that we could check whether the deadline had expired. If so, we waited until the smugglers came to pick up the sacks and fined them another CHF 50.



Men crossing the border heavily loaded down with coffee. Women hiding bags of sugar under their skirts.

At the end of the 1970s Italy reduced import duties, signalling an end to the good old days of smuggling.

Coffee was no longer an interesting commodity, so for a time smugglers switched to alternative goods, mainly electronic equipment, radios and TVs. The trade was finally killed off in 1994 with the abolition of the "Export 2" regulation.

And things became a little quieter at the customs post in Campocologno?

The crazy years were over, and the number of customs officers declined from 20 to 10. I have spent my entire working life in Campocologno. I married and had children. I used to say that when they reached school age I would go home. Now I'm retired, still here and speak Grisons dialect like a native.

Interview: Stephan Bretscher

*Name known to the editor.
Translated from German.