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Nomadic humanity

“In every era and every region inhabited by man, emigration has occurred and will occur.”

Historian and author Leo Schelbert is one of the best-known experts in the history of Swiss emigration. The American-Swiss talks about his observations.

Swiss Review: Are there any fundamental differences between emigration in 1974 and emigration today?

Leo Schelbert: Sometimes one sector needs immigrants, sometimes another. The economy is like a sea, and we are the driftwood that floats seemingly irrationally from one shore to another. The way I see it, individual and collective migrations are basically linked to economic trends. Political and religious crises are atypical phenomena, although they play an important role.

Why did you emigrate?

I came to New York in 1959 to study American history, and graduated from Columbia University with a PhD and a thesis on the Swiss Anabaptists. In 1969, lacking the necessary contacts and social status to obtain an academic chair in Switzerland, I accepted an invitation to teach American history with the focus on emigration/immigration at the University of Illinois in Chicago; prior to this I had been lecturing for six years at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey. Between autumn 1969 and autumn 1971, however, thanks to a grant from the Swiss National Science Foundation, I was able to perform research in Switzerland in addition to lecturing on the history of Swiss emigration. This research work resulted in various publications.

Did “dissatisfaction” with Switzerland play a role?

Absolutely not! For four years I taught at pre-gymnasium level and greatly appreciat-

ed the work. But being able to conduct research into history besides teaching (I directed some 25 theses) was a special privilege for me. The Chicago position allowed me to do this. I am a “Swiss abroad” rather than a “Swiss from abroad”, who has made Switzerland’s global presence his speciality. So my Chicago position was ideal for that.

Are Swiss sufficiently aware of the importance of the Fifth Switzerland?

Thanks to the good work performed by embassies and consulates, many people are made aware of globalisation and the role of Switzerland as a neutral country with a semi-direct, albeit not unproblematic, democratic system. In the USA our country is not widely known and therefore poorly understood. My historical work, lectures and seminars help not so much to praise our country but to make its impressive history, variety and direct democracy more understandable. I know lots of Swiss here who do their best to promote this objective.

What role does a publication like “Swiss Review” play?

I find it extremely valuable – a true gift! It’s not easy to obtain information about referenda, problems and achievements back home. With “Swiss Review”, my sons and daughter regularly receive important information. I myself also receive the “Tagesanzeiger”. We Swiss living abroad do not need entertainment and sound bites: we need properly presented information. Many thanks for providing it!

Your scientific research examines the reasons for emigration. What are your conclusions?

In every era and every region inhabited by man, emigration has occurred and will occur. Some people are drawn by the unknown, others remain where they grew up. I am the only one of a family of eleven children to settle abroad, although many of my siblings have lived at some time or another in England, Japan or the United States. The mistake that emigration historians make is to concentrate on exceptions i.e. crises in the home country. There have always been crises in every country, and often they drive people abroad. But they are atypical.

But economic crises are frequently cited as the main reason for emigrating...

In my opinion that is wrong. Take, for example, miners. They can be found everywhere they have the opportunity for work: in Scotland, Germany, South Africa, Pennsylvania, etc. The same is true of teachers and farmers.

In the 19th century Europeans appropriated millions of square kilometers from native inhabitants in the west. Companies, supported by governments (Canada, USA, Peru, Brazil etc.) needed to make a profit and build up neo-European nations of “settlers”: a euphemism for the civil form of racist (white) supremacy. As you can see, I’m a bit of a heretic!

Interviewer: Charly Veuthey

Specialist in the history of emigration

After matriculating from high school in Immense, Leo Schelbert worked and studied in Switzerland for several years. In 1959 he moved to the USA to study history at the University of New York. He continued his American career with lecturing and research work at the universities of Newark and Chicago. Specialising in the history of emigration, he is responsible for a large number of publications, with particular emphasis on Swiss emigration to the United States.

- New Glarus, the Making of a Swiss American Town (1970)
- Einführung in die schweizerische Auswanderungsgeschichte der Neuzeit (1976)
- America Experienced. Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Accounts of Swiss Immigrants (1996, 2004),
- Der Kolumbusbrief. Fanal einer neuen Zeit (1976)