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Memories are History (2)

In the February Helvetia we brought some of the memories Hans Buess told me over breakfast. And over another cup of coffee he told me some more:

Our only income was from a few liters of milk we could sell, the calves which we sold to the butcher – and from the two mentally handicapped women who lived with us. At that time, Social Welfare tried to place their clients in families. The women helped a bit; they did the dishes, peeled potatoes, and we looked after them. They couldn't have lived on their own. Social Welfare paid us a Franc per woman per day for food and board.

When World War II started, Dr Wahlen decreed that we had to plough at least 50% of our land. We got rid of one cow and planted vegetables for sale. It meant more work, but also more income. We could build a washhouse, with a room over it. We now had a bathtub. Mum could do the washing inside, and Dad could distill the cherries and apples in the warmth. This was a winter job.

We also started planting Digitalis (foxglove) for the pharma industry. The tiny seedlings were supplied. We had to prick them out and plant them in seedbeds first and later in the field. One year we planted half an acre (1800 sqm). Each plant had to be watered. The water was collected in the big village fountain into the Göllewagen. One cow pulled it to the field over a kilometer away and with watering cans each plant was individually watered. What a lot of work that was, but it paid well. We got Fr 5'000 that year!

The pharma industry was only interested in the leaves. The plants were harvested in autumn, in one go. Sometimes it was already cold, and you soon had stiff fingers, especially when the plants were wet. We had to cut the leaves off. For 1 kg of leaves you got sFr 1.-. Once it was so cold and wet that we couldn't be bothered to cut each leaf off separately. We cut the whole stalks and put them into the bags and sent them off to Basel like that. But they didn't accept it and sent the bags back, and we had to separate the leaves from the stalks. Well, at least we could do it at home, not out in the field.

We were three children. My sister was the oldest, and we also had a younger brother. We all helped in the fields and in the house, as all work was done by hand, without any machinery.

After six years of Primary School I was accepted in the Bezirksschule 7 km down the valley. In summer I could ride my bicycle. In winter, it was a half hour's walk to the railway station, a four minutes' train ride and another fifteen minutes' walk to the school. School started at eight o'clock, and as I would have been about five minutes late with the later train, I had to catch the earlier train, before seven – and then hang around for over an hour before school started. That was boring and often cold – but you were not allowed

to be late. When I went to the Bezirksschule, I only worked on the farm in the holidays.

My sister didn't go to the Bezirksschule. The Bezirksschule was only for boys. When my sister left school she didn't do an apprenticeship. She was a postie and delivered the mail in our village. She lived at home and helped till she got married. And even then she and her husband lived in our parents' house, but they had a flat of their own, with their own kitchen. They didn't have a bathroom, nor a laundry.

Washing day was always a big day – three or four times a year. In those times a woman had a dowry with dozens of sheets and pillowcases and teatowels.

After the Bezirksschule I spent a year in Neuchatel to improve my French. I was with a farmer; he called me "le petit Balois" as I was only 1.6 m tall.

Then I did my three years' apprenticeship as a bricklayer. We only went to the Gewerbeschule in winter, when you could not work long days on the building site. In summer we worked a 55 hours' week, even the apprentices, 7 to 12 and 1 to 6, Saturday only till lunchtime. We were not allowed to take holidays in summer.

Going to Gewerbeschule in winter was great. We had to go to Sursee. The train journey took about 45 minutes. From Tecknau on we were four – enough to play cards. That's where I got into the habit. After my apprenticeship I left home and worked in Berner Oberland and Graubünden.

My younger brother did an apprenticeship as a shoemaker. After his apprenticeship he still lived at home and went to work as a storeman in a neighbouring town. In the evenings and over the weekends he helped our parents on the farm when it was busy, such as making hay, picking cherries, harvesting the potatoes. When he got married, he and his wife lived with our parents in the one household. I think it wasn't always easy for his wife to live with her mother-in-law in the same household and be the No 2 woman.

When my sister and her husband finally moved to their own home away from the parents, life became a bit easier for my brother and his wife as they moved at least into their own separate apartment, though still under the same roof with our parents.

I still like to take a holiday in the old country whenever possible, but home is here, and I agree with a friend of mine – he is an immigrant, too – who says that we live in paradise.

Cows and kids

The Swiss spend as much annually on subsidising three cows as they do on primary schooling for one child. That, at least, is the conclusion of one of the country's leading economics professors. Silvio Borner, head of Basel University's department of applied economics, calculated that a single Swiss cow costs SFr4,000 in government subsidies, while the bill for keeping a child in primary school for one year is SFr12,000.