

Zeitschrift: Swiss pioneers of economics and technology
Herausgeber: Association for Historical Research in Economics
Band: 2 (1967)

Artikel: Konrad Ilg (1877-1954)
Autor: Ingold, Walter / Wüthrich, Rudolf
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1091177>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 19.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

KONRAD ILG
1877—1954

When, at the end of the nineteenth century, the trade union movement in Switzerland began organised operation, great sacrifices were demanded from individual members in the way of communal thinking and the courage of their convictions. It was first necessary for the trade union movement to fight for recognition, for in those days employers were less approachable than they are today in respect of the social improvement of their workers. Some of them, in fact, were even hostile to the organisation of workers into trade unions. For this reason, the main need of the workers' movement was for fire-eating pioneers and idealistic fighters to make a way through the many difficulties confronting them and their social demands.

One such pioneer was Konrad Ilg, who grew up as farmer's boy to a peasant farmer in Salenstein, Canton Thurgovia, later making his way by the aid of his own powers and the confidence of the metalworkers, and becoming a major labour leader and President of the 'Swiss Metalworkers' and Watchmakers' Union' (Schweizerischer Metall- und Uhrenarbeiter-Verband). For nearly forty years his personality was stamped on this largest of the Swiss trade unions.

He has passed into the history of Switzerland through the pact he inspired in 1937 in the Swiss engineering and metalworking industries, which subsequently became known as the 'peace agreement' and which has eliminated all kinds of militant labour troubles such as strikes and lock-outs from this important branch of the Swiss economy. In the difficult period immediately preceding the second World War, Konrad Ilg on the side of the workers and Dr. Ernst Dübi for the employers procured the boon of peace for their country. This demanded men of sturdy Swiss character. Konrad Ilg was one.

The years of youth, apprenticeship and travel

Konrad Ilg was born on January 25th 1877 in the Thurgovian fishing village of Ermatingen on the Untersee arm of the Lake of Constance. His mother, Katharina Ilg, came from the neighbouring Salenstein, where a friend, the shoemaker Leonhard Gilg, took in the young Konrad as a foster-child, while Katharina Ilg was forced to earn her living and that of the child by washing and cleaning in Ermatingen. It is certain that he never knew his father, but it may be assumed that his foster home was not too unpleasant, even though it could not compensate for a parental upbringing. At all events, he did not become estranged from his birthplace. He remained true to it all his life, as is evidenced by his dialect.

The countryside where he was born, the Untersee with its pleasant shores, the rustling of the reeds, the fishing boats, the lush gardens with their mallows and mulleins, the fertile vineyards and the mysterious ravines — this rich landscape must have influenced the lively spirit of the boy at an early age. He seems to have been most impressed by the mantle of history that lay over his homeland and by the two castles of Salenstein and Arenenberg that dominated the little village. But it was less the dour, tower-like Salenstein, rearing up before its background of woodlands and with a history extending back to the twelfth century, than the Arenenberg, standing attractively in open country above the village, that attracted him.

Although in general he spoke seldom of his early youth, for many years afterwards he would, among close friends, tell of the deep impression the stories of the princely inhabitants of Arenenberg, the Bonaparte family, made on his child's mind. The whole history of the great Napoleon and his heirs caught his imagination and constantly led him to draw near to the castle and examine its surroundings. When he was told that at midnight the French Emperor himself would appear on a fine grey horse near the castle and answer any question put to him, he could not rest until he had put the matter to the test himself. How great was his disappointment when he received no imperial answer to his repeated calls.

But once Konrad began to grow up, there was little time left for such pastimes. He moved from the shoemaker Leonhard Gilg to the peasant farmer Konrad Gilg, with whom he served as farmer's boy in return for board, lodging and a small wage. Although here, too, he obviously did not fare badly, he did at least learn from experience the life of those who are

forced to earn their own living from youth onward. Under these circumstances no-one will be surprised that Konrad Ilg was only able to attend the elementary school in Salenstein under schoolmaster Harder. But at least he was spared the fate of many a child from under-privileged households, of having to spend the rest of his life as a daily labourer. In Parson Sulser of Ermatingen he found a man who took charge of his welfare and, once he was confirmed, afforded him the opportunity of learning a trade.

And so, in the Spring of 1894, Konrad Ilg started an apprenticeship of three and a half years with the locksmith Jakob Tuchschen-Baumgartner at Frauenfeld. This energetic craftsman, who had taken over in 1888 the workshop opened by his father and — thanks to his skill — had built it up rapidly into a going concern, provided excellent facilities for the young man to learn every department of his trade. While Konrad Ilg was serving his apprenticeship, Jakob Tuchschen went into the light metalwork business. Between 1895 and 1898 he expanded the existing artistic and builders' smithy into a full-blooded structural ironwork shop, increased the number of his employees from ten to twenty-five, and thus created a firm base on which the present-day firm of Gebr. Tuchschen AG, Frauenfeld, grew up. It was in this forward-looking undertaking that Konrad Ilg carried out his occupational training, which he completed in 1897 by passing his apprenticeship examination. For the rest of his life he looked back gratefully on his training in Frauenfeld.

Once his apprenticeship was over, his master allowed him to go on tour, as was then the custom for newly-passed journeymen. Even during his apprenticeship, Jakob Tuchschen had mentioned to Parson Sulser a certain 'awkward' aspect to Konrad Ilg's character, which often led to conflicts with other workers, and suggested it might be desirable for him to make contact with new comrades after completing his training. 'You need have no worries about how he gets on. Konrad has learned so much that if he has a mind he can earn his living anywhere, and it can do him nothing but good to have to rely on himself.' So Konrad Ilg set off on his travels in Autumn 1897. His route led by way of Winterthur to Männedorf, where he took on his first job. The conditions do not, however, seem to have attracted him particularly — he was offered 15 Francs a fortnight plus board and lodging. By Summer 1898 he was already in Zurich.

Here for the first time he came into contact with the body that was soon to provide him with his life's work. Joining the local trade organisation,

the Zurich locksmiths' group 'Vorwärts', made him a member of the 'Swiss Metalworkers' Union'. His initial relations with the metalworkers' organisation were, however, of short duration. In 1899, as a member of the Bienne locksmiths' association, he took an active part in a wages campaign, but then the onset of economic crisis in the metalworking industry forced him to work in places where trade unionism was completely undeveloped. For some months he worked in the Val de Travers in Canton Neuchâtel, then in Rheineck and Engelberg, attended a course in Zurich to extend his knowledge of art ironwork and even for some time toyed with the idea of a tour in France. Under these circumstances he had no opportunity for almost four years to join a trade union.

This crisis period, in which he learned from personal experience the unsatisfactory conditions in which journeymen and apprentices had to work in many places, seems however to have sharpened his views on the economic and social position of the workers. It must have been at this time that his experiences convinced him that only by association into trade unions could the workers hope to improve their lot. This is the only explanation for the single-mindedness with which Konrad Ilg resumed his union activities as soon as he had the opportunity.

As far back as 1902/03, when he was again in the Val de Travers for a short time, it was mainly his energetic promotion work that consolidated the recently-formed metalworkers' union of the valley at Couvet.

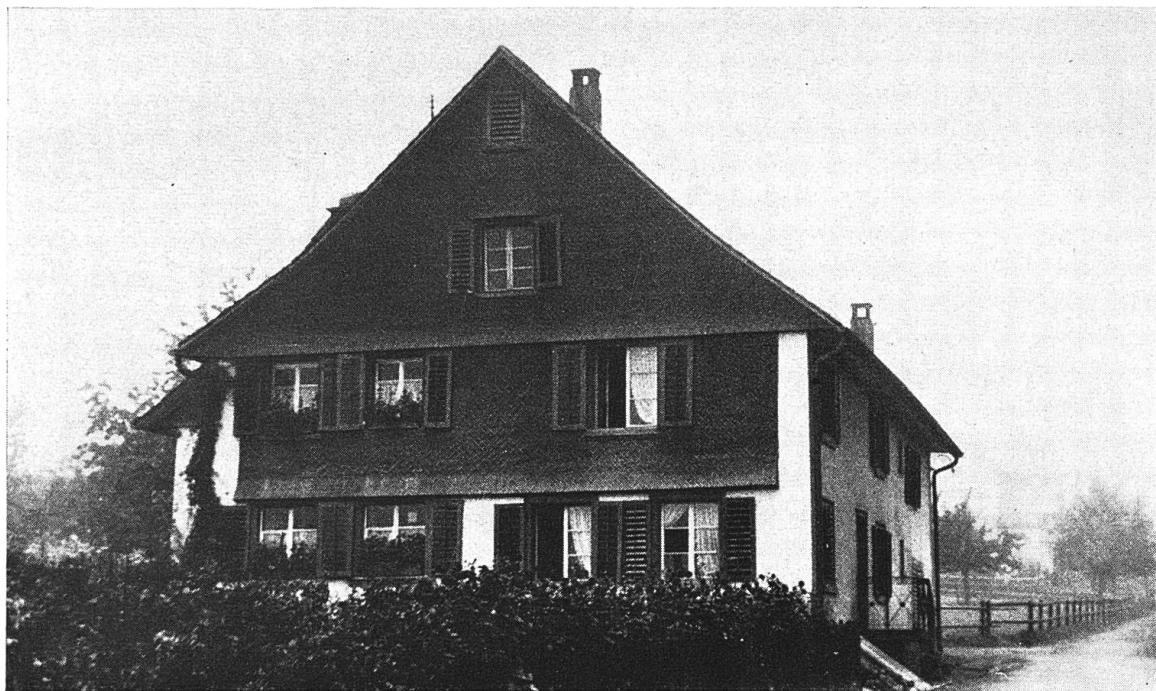
But it was not until he went to Lausanne in 1903 that his true field of activity opened up. Scarcely had the young, energetic locksmith been accepted a member of the bilingual Lausanne trade organisation when he was elected Vice-President, as a preliminary to the Presidency, which he held from 1905 to 1909. But he seems to have quickly won a name for himself outside of his own trade organisations. In Spring 1904 the German-speaking workers' organisation of the city made him President of their parent organisation, the Lausanne 'Arbeiterbund'. His skill in negotiation and the fact that he could speak and write both French and German — he had taught himself laboriously in spite of his only moderate natural talent for languages — brought him additional responsibilities. The merger of all the local metalworkers' associations into the 'Metallarbeiterunion' in October 1905 was largely the result of his initiative.

His influence also became marked within the Lausanne 'Arbeiterunion'. This rather loose grouping of all the unions in the city was passing through

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Konrad Ilg." The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

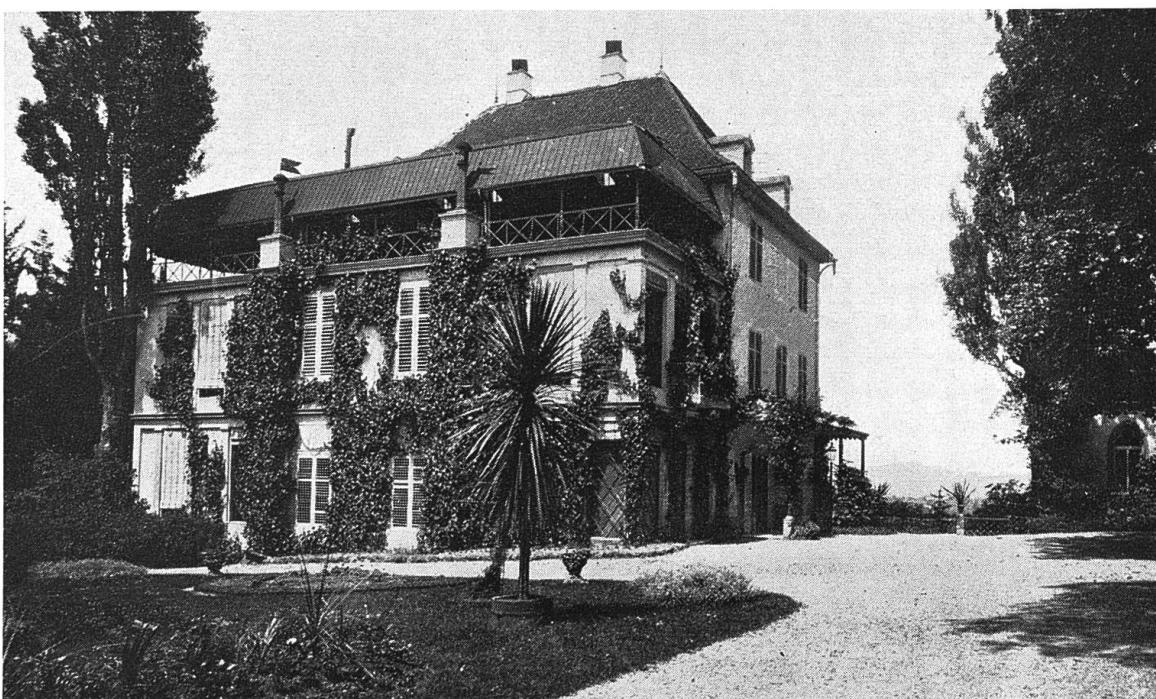
Konrad Ilg
1877—1954

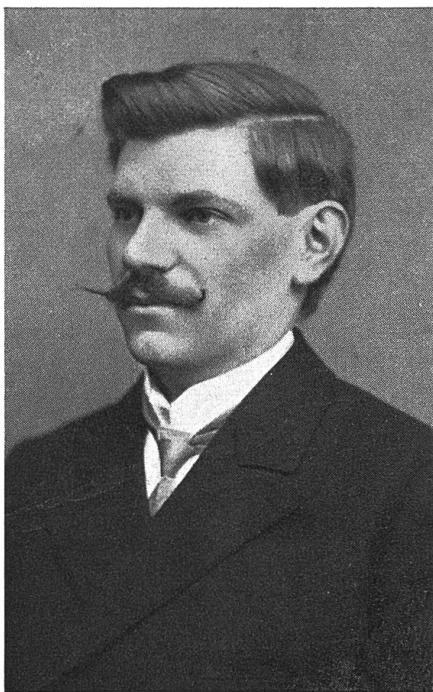
The picture dates from the years immediately preceding the peace agreement.



Konrad Ilg spent part of his youth in the "Unterhaus",
near Salenstein on the Untersee

Arenenberg Castle, which he often visited in his youth,
at that time had a large, roofed verandah.





Konrad Ilg as a young man during his stay in Lausanne (1903/09)



and as head of his family in Berne (about 1914/15)

Der
Generalstreik-
Prozess
in
Karikatur
39 farbige Lithographien
von
Lucifer.



1919.
Preis: Fr 1.50.



Nat.-Rat Jlg, Bern



Konrad Ilg as one of the accused in the General Strike Trial of 1919, in a caricature by Rolf Roth of Soleure, who, under the pseudonym of "Lucifer", published a pamphlet containing acutely-observed drawings of everybody concerned with the trial. The cover, shown above, depicts Federal Councillor Dé coppet, at that time head of the Federal Military Department.

„Sind aber Sie ein erregbarer Mann“
Sprach der Herr Richter Herrn Jlg treffend an.



The Swiss Delegation to the First International Labour Conference in Washington, 1919. Left to right: Konrad Ilg, Dr. Hermann Rüfenacht, Director of the Federal Bureau for Social Insurance, Dr. Heinrich Wegmann, Federal Inspector of Factories, behind him Minister Dr. Hans Sulzer, Swiss Ambassador in Washington, Dietrich Schindler-Huber, General Manager of the Maschinenfabrik Oerlikon, Emile Fontanelle, Attaché at the Washington Legation.



Konrad Ilg speaking at the May Day celebrations on Federal Square in Berne.
(Photo from the period 1920/1930.)



His study as it remained up to his death, showing the bust of the Frenchman Jean Jaurès, with whom he felt a spiritual bond.



Ilg's gravestone, by Gustave Piguet, in the Bremgarten Cemetery, Berne.

a severe crisis just at this time. Trends of syndicalism and anarchism, aimed at improving the lot of the workers by 'direct action' including a revolutionary general strike movement to overthrow the existing order, had flooded Western Switzerland, coming from France. As with similar trends during the second half of the nineteenth century, which were as removed from reality as they were dangerous to the development of the serious trade union movement, these ideas gained widespread attention. Lausanne was one of the places where they took root, especially in those craft organisations where the Italian workers had congregated. This situation caused differences of opinion within the 'Arbeiterunion' as to the objectives and aims of the workers' movement, making collaboration among the Italian, German and French speaking unions even more difficult. It was to put a stop to these dangerous trends and to eliminate differences rendered greater by personal friction that the 'Arbeiterunion' introduced a reform which consolidated its position and culminated in the election of Konrad Ilg as President in 1908.

But it was not only in the field of organisational expansion that Konrad Ilg looked to the interests of the Lausanne workers. He was just as successful when interests were to be defended against the employers. In 1904, and again in 1906 and 1908, he headed a wages campaign by the locksmiths. All three agreements, which resulted in considerable improvements in working hours and wages without the use of the strike weapon, bear the name of Konrad Ilg as one of the signatories for the workers' delegation. His experience and advice were placed at the service of other organisations, too, in their wages campaigns. The masons, the carpenters and the brewers brought him into their preliminary discussions or appointed him to their wages committees. Finally, he was also a member of the Lausanne Industrial Court, over which he presided for a short time.

All this intense activity of Konrad Ilg's in the service of the Lausanne workers could not pass unnoticed by the Berne headquarters of the 'Swiss Metalworkers' Union' (Schweizerischer Metallarbeiterverband). Even in his earliest Lausanne days August Huggler, the Association's Secretary for Western Switzerland, noticed the young man and did his best to promote his union activities by using him as agitator and speaker in forming new branches and at recruiting meetings, by co-opting him as correspondent to the Association's French language magazine, 'Le Métallurgiste'. These tasks provided Konrad Ilg with the opportunity to extend his trade union

experience further and at the same time give evidence of his abilities outside of Lausanne.

It took him only a relatively short time for his abilities to commend themselves to the heads of the Association. When, in 1909, they decided to intensify the activities of the Association in Western Switzerland, Konrad Ilg was called to Berne at the suggestion of August Huggler, and assigned the task.

In the service of the metalworkers and watchmakers

In Konrad Ilg, who took up his duties in Berne on April 1st, 1909, the 'Swiss Metalworkers' Union' had obtained an employee in keeping with its basic concept as defined by its then First Secretary and subsequent President, Oskar Schneeberger. Since becoming head of the Association in 1900, the latter had provided an example of sober, realistic trade union policy, eschewing demagogic excursions equally with unrealistic class struggle theories.

From practical experience he had long doubted the effectiveness of the strike as a successful means of social and economic betterment for the workers, holding the contrary view that the workers' interests could only be served by a powerful trade union organisation.

This, in his opinion, would create a situation in which the employers could no longer fail to concede the need for joint discussions with the unions. In this conviction he had, in 1905, overcome powerful opposition to form a sickness benefit fund. It was the same conviction that led him in 1907 to exploit adroitly an opportunity for discussions with leading personalities in the 'Employers' Association' to provide by oral agreement a basis on which the Association became recognised as representing the interests of the metalworkers towards this most important of all Swiss employers' federations.

This realistic attitude corresponded to what Konrad Ilg wrote of himself in his letter of application dated March 6th, 1909 — words which characterise his attitude as a trade unionist right up to his old age. 'As far as my knowledge of the major theoretical questions is concerned, I have already read several of the authors, but believe that trade union theory cannot be

learned once for all, as it alters with the situation and circumstances. The best proof that one is conversant with theory is the possession of a clear mind and a quick grasp of facts. And as regards this last, I think I may say that I have never had to grope in the dark for long to find my way around in any situation.'

A trade union theory based not on book learning but on the realities of the current situation — even at that time this was Konrad Ilg's basic principle in his activity on behalf of the workers. None the less he had, as he writes, 'read several of the authors'.

Having been a member of the 'Schweizerische Grütliverein' since the turn of the century, later joining the 'Swiss Social Democratic Party', he seems to have made himself acquainted while he was in Lausanne with the French exponents of utopian socialism, especially Proudhon and Fourier. He must also have spent much time on Jean Jaurès, whose great personality he admired all his life. But — and it was characteristic of him — he had only accepted those elements which struck a chord on his own non-doctrinaire nature and realistic concept of trade union work. Years later, looking back, he made a remark about the trade union movement of those days which applies equally to himself. His ideals were 'those of humanitarian socialism, a socialism that believes in and appeals to the good and noble forces in mankind and works towards a just distribution of material wealth, the development of human personality, peace and freedom'.

As had been intended, Konrad Ilg's Berne work was at first mainly concerned with Western Switzerland, and particularly with the Jura area, although he did not break off contacts with his old field of activity by Lake Leman. He aimed in particular at the workers in the small engineering works, large numbers of which had grown up in the region, mainly as suppliers to the watchmaking industry. He was able to recruit these workers passed over by the watchmakers' unions operating in the region and only locally organised in the industrial centres, and in September 1910 he organised them into their own section of the 'Swiss Metalworkers' Union', the 'Mechanics' Association of the Jura Area'.

Within the predominantly German-speaking Association this innovation did not everywhere meet approval, but it corresponded to Konrad Ilg's understanding of the special conditions prevailing in this watch industry dominated sector. Success was not wanting. Even during the early years up to 1913, twenty local and company agreements were signed without any

Lausanne, 6.3.1909

To the Central Committee of the Swiss Metalworkers' Union, Berne

Dear Comrades,

With reference to the advertisement for a trade union official in the "Metallarbeiter-Zeitung" I take the liberty of applying for the post in the Central Office.

My Union membership does not date from February 1903 as would appear from the member's booklet enclosed, but from 1898. In the Summer of 1898 I joined the locksmith group "Vorwärts" in Zurich, and one year later I was in the locksmiths' trade association in Biel, where I took part in the first wage agitations. In the following years of crisis I drifted about from place to place, in none of which trade unions existed, until I joined the section in Couvet in 1903, just after its formation. In the same year I came to Lausanne, where I soon found opportunities to take a more intensive part in trade union work. This mainly concerned the locksmiths' trade association as it then was, which was preparing for agitation put into effect in 1904 and which gave me plenty of opportunity to use my knowledge and ability as an agitator and administrator. In the same year I was placed at the head of the Lausanne "Arbeiterbund" as it then was, to which a whole series of trade unions belonged, and this had the further result that I was often called upon to give short lectures in the unions concerned. I was also recently called in on various occasions by the masons, carpenters, joiners, brewers, etc., in their wage disputes, either in the capacity of a committeeman or to advise during preliminary discussions.

Apart from the locksmiths' movement, of which I was at the head, a great deal of work was caused in 1904, 1906 and 1908 by the fusion of the metalworkers in Lausanne. Of course my powers alone were not enough to carry through the fusion, but it may be said that the initiative was mine in each case. Incidentally, I was a member of the Industrial Court in Lausanne, both as judge and on occasion as President.

So much for my minor work, i.e. during those years in which I devoted my free time to the workers' movement I did nothing other than minor work, but I am convinced that this is very often just as difficult as major work, and in any case more thankless.

Yet in regard to the first condition — a well-founded knowledge of trade union matters — I feel able to answer that I have acquired a thorough knowledge of these.

In regard to capabilities as an agitator, I cannot claim to have addressed large gatherings on deep theoretical questions. Yet I have always been able to command the necessary attention and believe I have in most cases convinced my listeners so far as it is in a man's power to do so. In regard to capabilities as an agitator, therefore, these are probably not fully matured in me, but I have no doubt that with an opportunity for constant practice the desired success could be achieved in a short time. As far as my knowledge of the major theoretical questions is concerned, I have already made the acquaintance of many of the authors, but believe that trade union theory cannot be learned once for all, as it alters with the situation and the circumstances. The best proof that one is conversant with theory is the possession of a clear mind and a quick grasp of facts.

And as regards this last, I think I may say that I have never had to grope in the dark for long to find my way around in any situation.

Regarding the journalistic capabilities also required, the situation is as follows in my regard. As long as 6 years ago I was corresponding in the "Grütlianer" and met with a good response from the then editor, Brand, but I had to give up newspaper writing when I found myself among French-speaking workers, in order to learn the foreign language. Today, therefore, I cannot claim to have a great knowledge of journalism, which does not however mean that I would not be in a position to write reports, inspiring suggestions or even articles on certain aspects. In regard to my general abilities, I think I may emphasise that in addition to German I can speak and write French. I would certainly be able to undertake translations from French into German and vice versa. Also, in negotiations with French firms or workers I would have no difficulty with the French language, though some might arise in case of scientific disputes.

On the strength of my knowledge of French, I could thus undertake the post for French-speaking Switzerland based on the Central Office.

I hope my application will be examined objectively.

Signed with comradely greetings
Ilg Konrad, locksmith St-Roch 10a

Konrad Ilg's application letter for the post of a Central Secretary to the Union (March 6th, 1909).
It indicates traits of character that remained typical in later years.

Lansanne den 6. 3. 1909.

Tit. Centralvorstand des Schweiz.
Metallarbeiter-Verbandes Bern.

Werte Genossen!

Gestützt auf die Gewerkschaftsbeamten-Hinsschreibung in der Metallarbeiter-Zeitung erlaube ich mir, mich um die Stelle im Centralbureau an zu bewerben.

Meine Aufnahme in die Gewerkschaft datiert nicht vom Februar 1903 wie aus dem beiliegenden Mitgliedsbüchlein hervor geht, sondern vom Jahre 1898. Im Sommer 1898 war ich dem Schlosserfachverein Kriens in Zürich beigetreten u. ein Jahr später befand ich mich im Schlosserfachverein Biel, wo ich die erste Lohnbewegung mitmachte. In den folgenden Krisenjahren trug es mich dann an mehreren Orten herum, wo keine Gewerkschaften bestanden, bis ich dann im Jahre 1903 als eine Gründung in Conset zu stande gekommen war, wieder Beirat. Im gleichen Jahre kam ich dann nach Lansanne, wo ich alsbald Gelegenheit fand, mich intensiver in der Gewerkschaftsbewegung zu betätigen. Da war es in erster Linie der damalige Schlosserfachverein, der sich gut einer Bewegung wistete, die im Jahre 1904 durchgeführt wurde u. es war mir somit von dieser Zeit an reichlich Gelegenheit geboten, mein Wissen u. Können sowie in agitatorischer wie in administrativer Hinsicht zu bereichern. Im gleichen Jahre wurde ich dann auch an die Spitze des damaligen Arbeiterbundes Lansanne gestellt, dem eine ganze Reihe von

Gewerkschäffer angehörten, das botte wiederum zur Folge, dass ich öfters gerufen wurde in den betreffenden Gewerkschäffer kleinere Referate abzuhalten. Ebenso wurde ich in den letzten Jahren, bei den Männer, Schaeiner, Zimmerleuten, Brauer usw. bei Lohnberatungen entweder direkt in die Lohnkommission gewählt oder wurde von den Arbeitern zur Vorbesprechung eingezogen. Nebst den Schlosserberatungen bei denen ich an der Spitze stand, im Jahre 1904, 1906 u. 1908 gab ebenfalls die Verschmelzung der Metallarbeiter-Lausanne sehr viel Arbeit. Selbstverständlich hätte meine Kraft nicht genügt, um die Verschmelzung durchzuführen, aber doch darf gesagt werden, dass es überall auf meine Initiative geschahen ist. Beiläufig mag noch bemerkt werden, dass ich dem Gerichtsgericht Lausanne, als Richter u. zeitweise auch als Präsident angehörte.

So weit also meine Kleinarbeit, das heisst in den Jahren, wo ich der Arbeiterbewegung alle meine freie Zeit opferte, machte ich eigentlich weiteres nichts als Kleinarbeit, bin aber überzeugt, dass dieselbe sehr oft ebenso schwierig ist, wie höhere Arbeit, allerdings weitans undankbarer.

Was aber dennoch die erste gestellte Bedingung anbetrifft, nämlich gründliche Kenntnisse im Gewerkschaftswesen, so glaube ich kaum antworten zu dürfen, dass ich dieselbe gründlich gelernt habe.

Was die agitatorische Befähigung anbelangt, so kann ich mich allerdings nicht rühmen, in unzähligen grossen Versammlungen über tiefgehende theoretische Fragen referirt zu haben. Aber dennoch vermochte ich stets die nötige Aufmerksamkeit-

Tit. Zentralvorstand des Schweiz. Metallarbeiter-Verbandes Bern.

anrecht zu erhalten u. glaube auch in den meisten Fällen, die Zuhörer, soviel es in der Kraft eines Mannes steht überzeugt zu haben. Was also die agitatorische Befähigung anbelangt, so dürfte dieselbe, bei mir noch nicht vollständig ausgereift sein, zweifle aber nicht, dass dies bei der zur Gelegenheit stehender Übung, nach kurzer Zeit den gewünschten Erfolg gezeigt würde. Was die Kenntnis über grosse theoretische Fragen anbetrifft, so habe ich zwar schon mehrere Verfasser kennen gelernt, glaube aber die Gewerkschaftstheorie lasse sich nicht, ein für allemal lernen, sondern ändert sich ebenfalls je nach der Situation u. Gegebenheit. Um also zu beweisen, dass man bei der Theorie zu Hause ist, wird am besten ein klarer Verstand mit rascher Auffassung sehr, was letzteres anbelangt; so darf ich sagen, dass ich auch bei schwierigen Fällen, wie lange im Dunklen herumzutappen brauchte, um die Situation zu erkennen.

Was die journalistische Fähigkeit anbetrifft, die ebenfalls verlangt wird, ist der Sachverhalt meiner Person betreffend folgender. Sehon vor etwa 6 Jahren korrespondierte ich in den grüttianer u. fand beim damaligen Redakteur Brand gute Aufnahme, musste dann aber die Übung im Zeitungsschreiben, als ich mich mitten unter den franz. sprechenden Arbeiter befand aufgeben, um die fremde Sprache zu lernen. Große journalistische Kenntnisse wollte ich mir also keines nicht nachtrümmern, was allerdings nicht etwa heißen will, ich wäre nicht im Stande Berichte, Meldungen u. Anmerkungen, od. auch Artikel über bestimmte Faktoren

zu schreiben. Betreff meinen allgemeinen Fähigkeiten, glaube ich noch besonders hervorheben zu dürfen, dass ich neben der deutschen Sprache, ebenfalls der franz. in Wort u. Schrift mächtig bin. Übersetzungen vom franz. ins deutsche od. umgekehrt würde ich ohne weiteres auszuführen im Stande sein. Dañ auch bei Unterhandlungen bei man franz. Unternehmer u. Arbeiter, würde mir die französische Sprache keinerlei Schwierigkeiten bereiten, letzteres könnte vielleicht zu treffen bei wissenschaftlichen Auseinandersetzungen.

Gestützt auf meine Kenntnisse der franz. Sprache, könnte ich also auch den Posten für die Westschweiz versehen, innerhin mit Sitz im Zentralbureau. In der Hoffnung meine Anmeldung werde einer offiziellen Prüfung unterzogen,

gezeichnet mit Genossengruß,

W. Konrad Schlosser
St. Roch. 10. a.

labour disputes worthy of mention. And the fact that by 1916 there were 25 labour agreements in force was due to the preliminary work done by Konrad Ilg.

But a side effect was in fact of much greater importance subsequently. As a result of Konrad Ilg's activities in the Jura area, a growing community of interests arose between the Association of the metalworkers and the overall organisation of the watchmakers, which since its foundation in 1912 had only maintained loose relationships to the older organisation. A basis of understanding and solidarity developed, and this proved of worth in time of need, for when the 'Watchmakers' Union' entered into a grave dispute with the watch industry of the Canton of Soleure in 1914 and were approaching financial ruin as a result, the metalworkers were in the front rank of helpers. One year later the 'Swiss Metalworkers' Union', whose own finances were hard pressed as a result of the outbreak of the first World War and the cost of its support institutions connected therewith, decided to merge with its even harder-hit fraternal organisation.

The fact that in July 1915 it was possible for the 'Swiss Metalworkers' and Watchmakers' Union' (Schweizerischer Metall- und Uhrenarbeiter-Verband) to come into being, for German and French speaking Swiss to be able to join in an organisation for the common good, and for the Union to survive all the years of depression up to the present-day position — to all this Konrad Ilg made a considerable contribution. It was his task, as a German-Swiss with special ties to French-speaking Switzerland, to allay certain misgivings on the part of his East Swiss colleagues in 1915. He it was, too, who stood in person for the new unity through his many years of friendly collaboration with Achille Gospierre, that humane representative of the watchmakers on the Central Committee of the Union. Emile Giroud, who succeeded Gospierre and who himself died in 1963, found the right expression in a funeral oration for Konrad Ilg in 1954:

'As Konrad Ilg had lived for many years in French-speaking Switzerland and fought for his ideals, and as he had, during and after the first World War, devoted himself to the trade union organisation of the mechanics in the Jura area — a major contribution to the strengthening of the watchmakers' branches — he was well acquainted with the minds and mentalities of the West Swiss. He knew their faults — and who is without them? — but he also appreciated their good points. For him there were never two groups, German and French speaking, in the Union, nor was

there any favouritism as between metalworkers and watchmakers. For him there was just one Union, in which everyone had the same rights because they all had the same interests and obligations.'

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that in Spring 1917, when the worthy Oskar Schneeberger moved out to become member of Berne City Council, Konrad Ilg was elected his successor as Association President with the unanimous approval of his French-speaking colleagues. It was a demonstration of confidence in his upright, realistic trade union attitude, which in so many points resembled that of the watch workers.

As in the Jura, so in German-speaking Switzerland too, Konrad Ilg had had opportunities to demonstrate this attitude by collaborating in making important labour agreements. Among these was that arrived at in December 1911 in the sheet metalworkers' sector. His signature appears on this document, the provisions of which, the first of its type in the metalworking field at national level, still provide the basis for the regulation of labour disputes.

Soon after taking over the Presidency of the Union, his aims became even clearer. The trend towards directing trade union action mainly to negotiations and to arguing where possible with words instead of with force is expressed even in his first Presidential address. Pages are devoted to letters and minutes showing what had been achieved by refined negotiating tactics in direct contact with the 'Employers' Association of Swiss Engineering and Metalworking Industrialists'. And today it may be regarded as a confession of faith in what subsequently became reality, that Konrad Ilg in this same annual report printed a hitherto unpublished agreement between the two organisations 'regarding measures to prevent and if necessary regulate collective disputes', which dated from 1909 and which he referred to as 'an historic document'.

Given this attitude, it may seem to an outsider illogical that Konrad Ilg took a leading part in the General Strike of November 1918. First impressions support this view. Konrad Ilg was a member of the 'Olten Action Committee' which was to co-ordinate the forces of the individual political and union workers' organisations in a general protest campaign against the catastrophic economic and social situation. He took pride of place on this body after its Chairman, Robert Grimm, and as its Vice-Chairman played no small part in the leadership of the entire November movement, as well as in the fateful decision to pass from a limited duration protest strike to an unlimited general strike.

But it would be a mistake to believe that he fully approved of the movement as a whole as it developed, particularly the extremist tinge it took on increasingly from day to day and hour to hour. It is true that none of the few eyewitnesses reports of him that he gave expression to any misgivings during the strike itself. Even before the Court Martial (which, however, was only concerned with one facet of the matter, the alleged incitement to mutiny and military indiscipline), Konrad Ilg never by a single word dissociated himself from any of the decisions of the 'Action Committee'. But it is of decisive importance that both before and after November 1918 he ascribed only a limited role to general strike action. The official comments on the general strike by the Association, inspired by him on March 29th, 1918, describe movements of this kind as only acceptable to obtain recognition of clearly defined economic and social demands, emphasising, 'The Union rejects expressly any participation in a general strike of limited or unlimited duration in respect of demands that are the exclusive concern of individual associations and trade unions. Such campaigns must, as hitherto, be carried out by the unions themselves.'

It follows from this unmistakable declaration of adherence to existing trade union policy that in Konrad Ilg's mind there was no place for overthrowing the existing order. Even clearer are the words used after the November strike in dispute with those elements who were propagating revolution. The 'Comments on the Workers' Congress and the Action Committee', which an extraordinary meeting of the Association passed by a large majority on December 8th, 1918, declare, 'The Swiss Metalworkers' and Watchmakers' Union has stood since its formation, and still stands to-day, on a foundation of legal methods of action and the parliamentary system. The Union will make use of those weapons available to it which it regards as suitable for the defence of its interests. Facilitated by the War and the Revolution, mass strikes have appeared as an addition to conventional militancy weapons. The 'Swiss Metalworkers' and Watchmakers' Union' regards mass strikes as improper weapons in a democracy, suitable only as a last resort in forcing social measures upon backward or reactionary majorities. The 'Swiss Metalworkers' and Watchmakers' Union' can therefore only agree to the use of the mass strike as a weapon when all other means have been exhausted and where it is necessary to defend the honour and vital interests of the workers.'

In other words — that was the basic thinking of Konrad Ilg — not strike action just to pave the way for revolution, but only in case of extreme need to promote an evolution he held to be right. He must still have hoped that in the course of that evolution he would realise his long-term hopes of achieving ‘a peaceful transformation of the economic and social conditions on a democratic basis of solidarity’ by means of suitable trade union action. But — and this is again characteristic of him — it was not just an idea that made him one of the leading figures in the November strike, but the social and economic grievances which had become ever more serious since 1914. His maiden speech in the Federal Parliament on November 13th, 1918, is evidence of this and makes it clear how far reform seemed to him to be overdue.

With the same conviction detectable in his parliamentary speech he had continued his trade union activity on the lines his experience had already shown to be suitable. In his relations with the employers successes soon emerged. In the years immediately following the war national labour contracts in almost every branch of metalworking ensured improved working conditions for a considerable portion of the metalworkers all over the country. An important break-through in the engineering and metalworking industries took place in 1919. In 1912 and 1916 informal agreements had resulted in stage-by-stage reduction of the working week from 59 to 54 hours. Now, in April 1919, an important agreement with the employers’ federation entrenched a working week of 48 hours in a contract.

But this result was clouded by other developments which were threatening the realistic trade union policy that Konrad Ilg stood for and on which his successes were based. As in the earliest days of his trade union work, there were extremist circles who regarded trade union activity in another light. Even before the general strike, voices had been raised from the extreme left inside the Union, demanding that the Union should go over to the absolute class struggle and use the tactics of revolutionary force. At first, the supporters of revolution had been tolerated as a minority. But when, after the general strike — under the influence of trends that had gained ground abroad — these forces grouped themselves and set out by means of clever demagoguery to transform the Union in accordance with their own ideas, a conflict became unavoidable.

The systematic undermining that threatened the unity and strength of the Association and its activity as a trade union was something that Konrad

Ilg could not watch idly. Supported by his colleagues in the Union executive and in the especially exposed local branches, he had in the course of years of struggle drawn a clear line and purged the Association of elements seeking to undermine his conception of a trade union. Open controversy began in December 1918, when the extraordinary congress forbade the formation of workers' councils as contrary to the statutes, and it lasted in full virulence until after 1930. The most spectacular peaks in this struggle were the attempt by extreme leftists to control the numerically largest branch of the Union, Zurich, in 1921/22, their campaign against the local leaders in Geneva (1919 and later) and an attempt to break up the Schaffhouse branch which culminated in unofficial strikes in 1924.

The Union survived all these diversions without much damage, although, especially at crisis periods, it was not always easy to take suitable measures against the threat of infiltration. Sometimes it proved necessary to combat it by tactical means. For example, to take the wind out of the sails of the left radicals, provisions were introduced into the statutes in 1920 to define the objectives of the Union as being, *inter alia*, 'in conjunction with the international proletariat, to prepare for the takeover of production by the workers and eliminate class rule'. It is significant that this formula, which was in one sense necessary but in another a handicap, was deleted from the statutes again in 1932. The important thing is that the Association remained intact and finally emerged strengthened from its trials — a circumstance due to Konrad Ilg and his colleagues. They have deserved well of their own Union and the Swiss workers as a whole. It is obvious that they also merit the thanks of the entire country for their often unrecognised front line work in this direction.

Although the controversy about the aims of trade union policy caused considerable difficulties, Konrad Ilg took the opportunity to strengthen the foundations of the Union further. In a number of stages spread over more than a decade and marked particularly by the formation of an old age fund in 1933, the welfare institutions of the Union were expanded under his influence. Apart from the sickness fund, which had proved its worth during the flu epidemic of 1918, the unemployment fund was expanded and improved. Up to his very last years, it was one of Konrad Ilg's main interests to promote this often unrecognised welfare side of trade union activity.

Like his predecessor Oskar Schneeberger, it was not only the idea of self-help he was interested in promoting. He was also concerned in creating

a material basis enabling the Association to fulfil its obligations to its members in any situation. His foresight contributed not inconsiderably to the fact that the Association survived the two major economic crises between the wars without much upheaval, although the metal and watch workers were among those most heavily hit.

Not that there were no setbacks. The decade following the first World War did not fulfil its early promise. Konrad Ilg's contract policy, by means of which he had been successful in 1919/20 in bringing regularised labour arrangements between employers and employed to a large part of the metal-working trades, was not put into effect uniformly in all cases, in spite of the efforts of the Association President. When they expired, most of the national labour contracts were not renewed, although they were often partly replaced by local or regional agreements. The position in the engineering and metalworking industries was difficult, the improved negotiating climate achieved with the 1919 contract rapidly giving place to new tensions with the economic crisis that set in after 1920. In the subsequent dispute over wage reductions and the 48-hour week positions became so rigid that general agreements even on restricted subjects seemed to have become impossible for a long time to come. In Konrad Ilg's view, trade union activity could only be carried on effectively, as had earlier been the case, at the level of each undertaking.

In 1929, towards the end of a short upsurge in the Swiss economy, Konrad Ilg's negotiating ability did enable him to resume concrete discussions with the employers' federation. But the atmosphere was not very encouraging. While a few important points were achieved, including the recognition of the right to holidays, agreement was only reached after many negotiations and resort to arbitration.

It is possible that if economic stability had continued the modest beginnings might have been built upon. But the world slump which submerged Switzerland shortly afterwards stultified all attempts for the time being. Yet it was the effects of this crisis that created the conditions which made possible the achievement marking Konrad Ilg as one of the great figures of twentieth-century Swiss history — the 'peace agreement' of July 19th, 1937, in the Swiss engineering and metalworking industries.

The peace agreement — a great achievement

Konrad Ilg was not only — in collaboration with Ernst Dübi, President of the ‘Employers’ Association of Swiss Engineering and Metalworking Industrialists’ (Arbeitgeberverband Schweizerischer Maschinen- und Metallindustrieller) — the creator of this agreement, which was to ensure industrial peace in the most important branch of Swiss industry. He was also the man who took the first initiative towards it when — as is recorded in the 1937 report of the employers’ federation — he referred in a discussion with Ernst Dübi on March 11th, 1937, to the ‘desirability of an agreement between the two Associations on general questions of labour conditions’.

This step was not the result of a sudden inspiration, but of a realisation driven home to Konrad Ilg by his long years of trade union experience. The basis of it was his conviction that a regulated relationship between employers and employed, anchored in contractual arrangements, was the best means of ensuring successful trade union activity.

From this conviction he had attempted as far back as the first World War to extend to the engineering and metallurgical industries the contractual policy that had proved itself in the watchmaking and metalworking trades. Following his first successes in April 1919 he worked out a detailed programme during the Summer of 1920 intended to serve as starting point for a one-year collective contract. Its provisions as to wage levels, piecework, shift working, shop stewards, apprenticeship facilities and arbitration would have brought it into line with the well-tried national contracts in the metalworking trades.

But Konrad Ilg had to acknowledge that the time was not yet ripe for such agreements. There were indeed progressive members of the employer groups who realised the value of contractual relationships. But just as, in the trade unions, there was widespread mistrust of the employers, so in the latter’s federations there were important personages who rejected trade unions as the legitimate representatives of the workers’ interests and who were thus not prepared to entertain a contract with them. His realistic appraisal of this situation, which did not change during the years immediately following 1920, led Konrad Ilg in 1928 to a step intended to create mutual confidence and bridge the distrust that existed on both sides. On November 17th of that year he represented to an Association conference —

in the course of an exposé of new guiding principles for contractual arrangements in the engineering and metalworking industries — a proposed condition under which 'during the period in which the contract is in force, unconditional economic peace should be observed'. In explanation he added, 'Thus, during the period of an agreement there should be no strikes, and on the other hand the employers may not carry out lockouts . . . During the life of a contract no open disputes must be engaged in . . . For we do not have the power to wrest from the employers an agreement which contains only obligations on their part . . . So if we really intend to enter into a contractual arrangement, we too must make concessions to the extent that we will not use the strike weapon during the term of an agreement.'

These views, which already show the marked traces of definite contractual conception and the seeds of the 1937 agreement, were not agreeable to everyone. In particular, the unconditional nature of the peace obligation aroused misgivings, and in some respects it was regarded as purely relative and retaining freedom of action in the case of national trade union campaigns. But the clarity with which Konrad Ilg set out the connection between unconditional undertakings to observe peace and the conclusion of agreements convinced the majority of the delegates, so that it was possible to include the new guiding principles in the 1929 negotiations with the employers' federation for the first time. As we have already mentioned, success was not achieved. Positions had not yet been softened up sufficiently, and especially on the side of the employers distrust was still too great.

In spite of this first failure, Konrad Ilg did not allow himself to be diverted from his aims. His conviction that he was on the right lines was, on the contrary, soon strengthened by other events. The great economic crisis which set in in 1929 and brought severe difficulties for many years to the Swiss economy in general and to the watch, engineering and metalworking industries in particular, gave new shape to his basic thinking on contracts. It is true that it was unemployment and its results that of necessity became the Association's main concern. But Konrad Ilg, who as far back as 1928 had been drawing attention to the especially unstable position of the engineering and metal industries, with their dependence on foreign trade and their sensitivity to competition from abroad, looked beyond this urgent task. The longer the crisis lasted the deeper he became convinced that more must be done than simply supporting, as he did, the economic measures

taken by the State. It seemed to him that only by collaboration among all those interested — in the manner long since proposed for the watchmaking industry — would it be possible to assist the exposed engineering and metal industries and thus again secure a livelihood for Swiss metalworkers and restore their depression-shattered standard of living.

Here Konrad Ilg was not thinking of the immediate future alone, with its overriding need to combat the economic crisis. To him, collaboration in the future seemed even more important. He foresaw a pitiless competitive war on the sales markets, with Germany — since 1933 dominated by the Nazis and its industry State-controlled, wages drastically reduced and economy artificially boosted by re-armament — as a dangerous adversary of Switzerland. In this position, Konrad Ilg felt that there could be only one solution for the industries of a small country without raw materials of its own — the elimination of internal social and economic strife and the setting up of contractually governed relationships between employers and employed.

But it was not only the economic factors that swayed Konrad Ilg in his thinking on contracts. The political situation also pushed him in the same direction. The take-over of Germany by the Nazis in 1933 brought especial danger to the system of freedom and democracy in neighbouring Switzerland. To keep this threat under control and face up to the flood of totalitarianism, there was only one possibility. This Konrad Ilg realised in common with every clear-thinking person. To combat the disaster that began to loom over Switzerland from 1933 onwards, it was a political duty to sink differences between the individual strata of the population, to eliminate points at issue by means of objective discussion and above all to collaborate in a common determination to defend the recognised values of freedom and democracy against the attacks of the new ideology. It was therefore a matter of course to him to give his support to the 'Richtlinienbewegung', a grouping of progressive forces formed to protect Switzerland against internal decay and external threats.

In the same direction, he became one of the most important promoters of the weekly newspaper 'Die Nation', which from 1933 onward waged war with increasing success and without regard to party against the 'fronts' influenced by the Nazis, and thus helped to defend democratic culture against the totalitarian danger. Konrad Ilg never ceased striving to strengthen this will to self-defence and to draw attention to its necessity.

An example was his address as newly-elected President of the Cantonal Parliament of Berne on July 8th, 1935:

‘Switzerland, our country, can only exist on a democratic basis. Any regimentation or application of the authoritarian “Führer” principle would inevitably result in the end of the ancient Confederation with its high level of culture. The forcible methods that have been chosen by various countries as their system of government can in no way solve or even alleviate the deep-seated problems of the crisis. Depriving citizens of their rights will not ensure them a livelihood or solve social problems . . . The chief effect in these countries has been the flowering of the spirit of force and of war, with the result that the whole of mankind is threatened with destruction. It is in keeping with our Swiss way of life if, in spite of all the blemishes of the present era, we remain loyal and devoted to our Democracy.’

But notwithstanding the extent to which his thinking on contracts was influenced by economic and political circumstances, the atmosphere in which his aims could be realised was still lacking. It is true that in 1934 employers and workers had again met for negotiations, but the explosive subject of wage reductions was not calculated to eliminate differences of opinion at the height of the crisis. Not until 1936 did a turning-point come. The point of departure was provided by a Federal Council decree to introduce compulsory State arbitration for all industrial disputes which might arise as direct consequence of the crisis measure of devaluing the Swiss Franc. This threat of State intervention created the missing link in promoting contractual-mindedness — the genuine basis of a community of interests in warding off a development which would permanently have robbed both employers’ and workers’ organisations of their freedom of action in favour of an outside agency.

Penetratingly, Konrad Ilg grasped the situation. In January 1937 he had already revealed some of his ideas to Federal Councillor Hermann Obrecht, who as head of the Economics Ministry was responsible for the Federal Council resolution. He declared it would be better to regulate the relations between employers and employed in the engineering and metal-working industries by contractual arrangements between the respective associations, rather than rely on State regulations. This outstanding member of the Soleure ‘Radical-Democratic Party’, whose progressive wing was strongly influenced by the marked socio-political ideas of his fellow-partisan Adrian von Arx (1879—1934), showed lively interest in his views, which

would render State intervention superfluous. As a result of Konrad Ilg's exploratory talks, it is conceivable that Hermann Obrecht prepared the ground for the important discussions between Ernst Dübi and the President of the Metalworkers' Association.

Following preliminary indirect contacts in February, there took place that memorable meeting of March 11th when the basis of the peace agreement was created. Since by this stage it was already obvious that both sides were agreed on 'the desirability of an arrangement', this influenced the rate of negotiations considerably. But in the long term, it was of far greater importance that these two diametrically different characters, Konrad Ilg and Ernst Dübi, immediately felt a mutual confidence that lasted throughout the many years of their close acquaintance.

It is this relationship of trust that made it possible for the two creators of the peace agreement, each on his own side, to throw their full personal influence behind their achievement. It was this that enabled the basic thought of the contract, collaboration as partners on a foundation of mutual faith and trust, to develop and survive in effect till today, in spite of all that has intervened. It was this that made the peace agreement a milestone in the economic and social history of Switzerland.

For Konrad Ilg himself, July 19th, 1937 — twenty years after he had assumed Presidency of his Association — brought the fulfilment of an aim for the realisation of which he had worked untiringly for decades. In conjunction with the watch industry agreement signed a few weeks earlier, on May 15th, 1937, and with the system of national contracts that was reforming at this period throughout the metalworking trades, the peace agreement brought the 'Swiss Metalworkers' and Watchmakers' Union' complete recognition as a social partner by all elements among the employers. Thus conditions were created, the fruit of collaboration between employers and workers, under which an important section of the Swiss economy was able to develop on a steady path, to the benefit of land and people alike.

Konrad Ilg was the very man to see that the Association would only be able to carry out this high obligation of partnership in forming the economic life of Switzerland if the 1937 contract proved to be a solid enough foundation. His trade union activity in his later years was therefore devoted mainly to ensuring that this condition was met. Certainly he also took part in other facets of Association activity during this period. The Association-owned holiday homes in Wergenstein and Lenk came into being through

his initiative, as did the best-known of them at Vitznau. He also turned his attention to adapting the welfare institutions of the Association to modern conditions. But he saw his main task in winning the widest possible understanding for his life's work. He gave numerous lectures and speeches in pursuit of this aim. An example is provided by the words he addressed in 1943 to the 'Zürcher Volkswirtschaftliche Gesellschaft':

'The considerations which led us to the agreement securing industrial peace in the Swiss engineering and metalworking industries rested on the belief and conviction that in this country it must be possible to reach agreement on relations between employers and employed, while maintaining freedom and independence for both sides and taking account of the emotional and intellectual attitudes of our people and our democratic tradition. But an arrangement of this kind demands good will and loyal application from the members of both the contracting organisations.'

He had, in 1942, already explained this prerequisite in terse and pithy language to the works delegates of the Swiss engineering and metal industries. 'A condition of collaboration between employers' and workers' organisations is that selfish factors must not take first place; joint endeavours must be directed at safeguarding the economic and social interests of the industry and the workers in it, and at serving the good of the country.'

Granted the importance of this direct personal campaign by Konrad Ilg on behalf of the peace agreement, another circumstance played the decisive part in facilitating acceptance of the agreement by the community. This was the uncompromising attitude of Konrad Ilg and the Association of which he was President before and during the second World War. The political credo he pronounced before the Bernese Cantonal Parliament will alone have played its part in reducing the prejudice of those sections of the population still sceptical of the trade unions. The demonstration provided by the extraordinary congress of the Union on November 5th, 1938, confirmed this attitude and created a foundation for the Association's share in the psychological and material defence of the country between 1939 and 1945, for educating the Association's members in war policies and for making a valuable contribution to the 'Dig for Victory' campaign. This clear attitude, together with the Association's understanding of the special value of contracts during politically threatening periods, kept the opponents of the peace agreement to small numbers from the very start. But there were voices, surprisingly enough from the side of the workers

and from trade union circles, which were raised in doubt. For Konrad Ilg it was neither astonishing nor particularly interesting that the radical left should make itself heard in polemics and transparent propaganda, especially towards the end of the second World War. But he paid more serious attention to those who, basing themselves on their interpretation of labour law, regarded the fully-fledged collective agreement as the only feasible means of regulating relations between employers and employed. It was with the greatest emphasis that he defended his work against critics who questioned its validity as a contractual instrument.

He answered them by opposing practical arguments to those of theory:

'When we were striving to achieve a contractual agreement with the employers in the engineering and metalworking industries, we made no attempt to press for a collective or tariff arrangement, but contented ourselves with the simple demand that the arrangement should be built on the basis of mutual faith and trust. For if we had stood firm on formulating the agreement as a collective or tariff contract, we should have met with insuperable objections on the part of the employers for purely formal reasons of organisation. But it was, and remains today, our firm conviction that the main strength of an agreement does not lie in legal wording; an agreement of this nature will remain the more stable, and have the greater success, the more solid the moral basis on which it is built.'

This appreciation by a sober practical man of what could in reality be achieved by means of trade union activity has been proved right by history. Despite all the changes in external conditions, the peace agreement has maintained its value up to the present time. The industrial peace which it created and which has benefited not only the engineering and metalworking industries but also the Swiss economy as a whole, is the most impressive and valid proof that could be asked for.

The importance of the peace agreement was rendered even clearer by the honour, unique for a trade union leader, accorded its initiator and creator Konrad Ilg in 1942. Together with Ernst Dübi the University of Berne granted him the title of honorary Doctor of Economics in recognition of his service to industrial peace in Switzerland. This honour shows the broad agreement obtaining even in Konrad Ilg's lifetime that the peace pact was not just another labour contract, but was the expression of a will to peace and collaboration which had succeeded in creating something great and lasting. Subsequent to 1942, the importance of Konrad Ilg's work has often been

referred to by leading personalities in economic and public life. One testimonial may serve as example for all — the words of Walther Stampfli, that great Federal politician and Councillor, speaking after Konrad Ilg's death:

‘The news of the decease of your Association's President of many years' standing, ex-National Councillor Dr. Konrad Ilg, has aroused in me not only a feeling of heartfelt sympathy; it has also recalled to me the work of a great labour leader of genuine Swiss stamp, an important member of the Confederation who went his way courageously and earned immortal gratitude for his promotion of industrial peace and his efforts to raise the social standing of the wage-earner. He was a good patriot, and during the last war his understanding of the requirements of a dangerous situation contributed in exemplary fashion to our ability to hold out.’

In the International Metalworkers' Federation

The main influence of Konrad Ilg's activities bore on the economic and social life of Switzerland, and it was this, too, that made him a person of historical importance. But aside from this field, he carried on activities beyond the frontiers of Switzerland, and these formed no insignificant portion of his life. From 1920 to 1954 he managed the affairs of the international parent organisation of the metalworkers — the ‘International Metalworkers' Federation’.

The office of Secretary of this organisation, founded in Zurich in 1893, fell to him more or less unexpectedly immediately after the first World War. The Federation congress, convened in 1920 for the first time for seven years, was unable to bring itself, under existing political conditions, to restore the conduct of business to the ‘German Metalworkers' Union’ (Deutscher Metallarbeiter-Verband), which since 1905 had carried on the Secretarial duties with success under the leadership of Alexander Schlicke. The majority of the delegates took the view that a neutral country should have preference and, after the Central European countries had objected to the Danish candidature, elected Switzerland. But the decision was not regarded as final. The Swiss delegate present, Konrad Ilg, was at first only elected provisional Secretary. Yet after only one year, the arrangements made had proved so satisfactory that the 1921 congress confirmed the appointment.

Right from the outset, Konrad Ilg was faced with major tasks awaiting completion. As in Switzerland, the main problem was the combating of Communist infiltration which threatened to undermine the unions. In his very first report, the new Secretary made it clear that the tendency to disintegration introduced by extreme left infiltration into every one of the member organisations was making a major contribution to weakening the interests of the workers. In the struggle for improved working conditions he therefore regarded it as essential to consolidate the trade union spirit in the face of the 'united front' propagated by Moscow as an instrument of disintegration. His determined attitude had a clarifying effect, as had been the case in Switzerland, even though the success of the lengthy defence operation varied from country to country — being considerable in some, in others shamefully small.

The same decision with which he opposed the Left he also presented in regard to the Fascist coup d'état in Italy in 1922, when the first right-wing threat to Europe took clear shape. This event was for him a grave blow to all the hopes aroused in Europe after the first war. The idea of international solidarity seemed to him to be seriously shaken, and his sense of impotence in the face of the spreading system of 'might is right' led him, in 1923, to describe the political and economic situation as 'wretched', and to regard the forces of progress as repulsed for a long time to come.

But the subsequent years of economic expansion extended their stabilising effect to the 'International Metalworkers' Federation'. From 1925 onward, Konrad Ilg was able to issue a printed monthly information bulletin, thus cementing the relations between the member organisations. It became possible to expand considerably the Federation's actual field of activity — the co-ordination of trade union welfare activity and the collection, exchange and publication of economic and social information. And so in 1930 Konrad Ilg had good reason to believe that the Federation, in spite of all setbacks, was developing well. 'The fact that our organisation has almost everywhere survived the chaotic strife is of great historical importance for the Federation. Our organisations have not only continued to exist, they have at all points advanced the movement considerably.'

He rested his hopes on the Scandinavian and British, but above all on the block of Central European — Czech, German and Austrian — national organisations, with the leading personalities of which he was on good personal terms. He had particular regard for the 'German Metalworkers'

Union'. Although his personal sympathies were more French-oriented, he admired the well-oiled organisation and the trade union successes that his colleagues across the Rhine had achieved, especially in contractual matters. This made the blow the more severe when in the Spring of 1933 the trade unions were swept away with the rest of the democratic structure of Germany. He had indeed realised the danger. In 1932 he had, both publicly before the congress of the German metalworkers' organisation and privately in discussion with leading colleagues, warned of the disaster that threatened. But he had never thought it possible that this union, with its imposing size and organisation, would simply abdicate.

For Switzerland, the conclusions Konrad Ilg drew from these events were of important and positive significance. His realisation that even a perfected trade union organisation — if left to its own resources — would not provide adequate insurance against brute force played a not unimportant part in promoting the peace agreement. For the 'International Metalworkers' Federation', however, the 1933 events meant the beginning of the end for the build-up started so energetically in 1920. Yet, mainly through the influence of Konrad Ilg, the idea of international collaboration remained alive despite the extension of extreme right-wing trends to Austria and Spain. At the 14th congress of the Federation, held at Prague in July 1938, there was once again a powerful demonstration in favour of this concept. But it took place before a clouded backdrop. A year later, everything fell into insignificance before the onset of war.

As during the first World War, however, the international links did not break completely. Although conditions were materially less favourable, Konrad Ilg was able, by means of his personal efforts, to maintain a major portion of the relationships through neutral Switzerland. Thanks to his foresight, the 'International Metalworkers' Federation' was able to resume its activities as early as 1945 and apply itself to the problems occasioned by the war and the widespread destruction. Konrad Ilg was a powerful factor in quickly re-establishing the bases on which the parent organisation of the metalworkers could again expand to its present world-wide size and importance.

The part he played consisted, especially during the early years, in combating the renewed danger of extreme left infiltration into the free trade unions. Konrad Ilg used all his energies against the attempts made after 1945 to change the objectives of the 'International Metalworkers' Feder-

ation' and to integrate it as one of the trade divisions into the Communist-controlled 'World Federation of Trade Unions'. At the 1947 Federation congress in Copenhagen, he condemned these trends as an obvious attempt to force the metalworking unions into the good old paths of revolutionary class struggle. His speeches enabled resolutions to be passed which dammed totalitarian infiltration.

Konrad Ilg had expressed the intention of passing on his responsible office to a younger man during this same congress. But his colleagues felt that this was just the time when they could not afford to lose the services of their septuagenarian Secretary, whom they again confirmed in the post. Their decision was proved to be right, for in 1948 Konrad Ilg gained another success in strengthening international collaboration. He was able to bring back the German metalworkers' organisations, which in 1949/50 merged into the 'Industrial Union of Metalworkers of the Federal Republic of Germany' (Industriegewerkschaft Metall für die Bundesrepublik Deutschland), today, with about 2 million members, the biggest metalworkers' union anywhere, into the 'International Metalworkers' Federation'.

With this achievement, which he had worked for uninterruptedly since shortly after the war and which he carried through against the grave and understandable misgivings of many of his colleagues, he had not only made a contribution to re-establishing European solidarity. His work also benefited the development of the German trade union movement itself. It is therefore hardly surprising that on his death the German metalworkers' organisation referred specifically to this feat. 'The achievements of the deceased following the two World Wars — but especially after 1945 — on behalf of those in Germany, will ensure that Konrad Ilg will remain a memory among us.'

Equally important in strengthening the 'International Metalworkers' Federation' were the subsequent years, during which Konrad Ilg was able to win the collaboration of the metalworkers' organisations of the United States. Some decades previously, in 1926, when the Federation Secretary was on a visit to the United States, he had made a first close contact with the association of machinists which — with a break just before the war — had continued after 1945. But it was only now, after long negotiations and many journeys to America by Konrad Ilg, that the mighty organisations of the automobile, steel and shipbuilding workers decided on international co-operation.

Parallel to these events, which strengthened the 'International Metalworkers' Federation' materially and extended its activities beyond its traditional, European field, current trends brought an increase in scope. The numerous problems entailed by the increased workers' participation in shaping the economy brought the metalworkers' international organisation major new tasks in the years following 1950. In spite of his advanced age, Konrad Ilg took an active part in discussing these questions, which mapped out the path of the 'International Metalworkers' Federation' for the future. Lively evidence of this is contained in his remarks of July 12th, 1953, to the 1st International Economic Conference of Metalworkers at Stockholm — the testament of a great labour leader to those who were to carry on his work: 'Today we can take note that within the framework of private enterprise not only undreamed-of technical development, but also great socio-political progress has been achieved and — a point of especial significance — that today it is recognised that the man who does the work is the focal point of all technical and social efforts. In recent years a great deal has been written and said about human relations. Not long ago, the International Labour Office in Geneva had on its agenda for a conference of businessmen and workers in the engineering and metalworking industries the subject 'Human Relations', and it was treated in detail in a lengthy report . . .

'It will not have escaped us trade unionists that the advocates of "human relations" would like to direct their efforts mainly at individual works, operating through factory organisations rather than through trade unions. But it should not be overlooked that the concept of "human relations" is an extremely important matter. I believe that sooner or later the trade union movement will have to devote its full attention to this question of "human relations". The use of the term "human relations" can only mean that the worker must be recognised as an equal partner both in the works and in society . . . As the individual worker cannot exercise his democratic rights in the works, it must be the task of the trade unions to obtain this right for him collectively.'

Konrad Ilg served both the 'Swiss Metalworkers' and Watchmakers' Union' and the 'International Metalworkers' Federation' up to his death. During more than three decades he had been able — overcoming all political and economic setbacks — to maintain the idea of international collaboration and to work for it incessantly. Lincoln Evans, the British trade union leader, fittingly summed up the work of his friend in 1947:

INTERNATIONAL METAL WORKERS FEDERATION

Sekretär: Konrad Ilg

BERN, March 25th, 1948
Monbijoustrasse 61

This letter is being sent to:

Max Bock, Frankfurt,
Franz Bronner, Tuttlingen,
Hans Brümmer, Stuttgart,
W. Freytag, Mühlheim a. Ruhr,

Wilhelm Petersen, Hamburg,
Oskar Schulze, Bremen,
Paul Weh, Köln,
Alois Wöhrle, München.

Dear Colleagues,

I am glad to be able to inform you that at its meeting on March 16th—18th, 1948, in Switzerland the International Metal Workers' Federation resolved unanimously to instruct the Secretariat to invite the "Industriegewerkschaften Metall" of the American, British and French Zones of Germany to join the International Metal Workers' Federation.

At the same time it was agreed to send a delegation from our Federation to Germany in May. May I therefore urgently request you to examine whether it would be possible to arrange an interzonal conference of representatives of the metalworkers of the three zones referred to. My personal preference for meeting-place would be Frankfurt. Mention has also been made of Dusseldorf. But we will leave it to you to decide on the venue.

Regarding permits for entry and exit for the various zones, our English, American and French colleagues have stated that they will apply to the competent authorities for the necessary permits for you, if you are unable to obtain them yourselves.

For reasons you are aware of we cannot go to the Eastern Zone. On the other hand I would be very pleased if we could take this opportunity to visit our friend Alwin Brandes, either in Berlin or at some point nearby.

I would again emphasise that I should be very pleased if it were possible to meet my friends and colleagues in your "Industriegewerkschaften Metall" at a joint meeting.

At present I do not know, having regard to recent events, whether it will be possible for our delegation to procure entry permits for Germany. I believe, however, that the recommendation of our organisation will suffice to this end. But before we can apply for permits, we must know whether it would be possible for you to organise such an interzonal conference between May 20th—30th, 1948. We would be grateful for a report by return stating precise dates.

We hope that no new difficulties will arise for you as a result of our invitation. I would greatly appreciate your informing me to this effect.

We are sending you enclosed the resolution passed unanimously by the Central Committee, which will no doubt interest you.

With kind regards,
International Metal Workers' Federation
BERN

Enclosures mentioned

Konrad Ilg

Konrad Ilg as Secretary of the International Metalworkers' Federation:
This historic letter of March 25th, 1948, addressed to leading German metal industry trade unionists, was the first step towards the admission of the predecessors of "Industrial Union of Metalworkers" of the Federal Republic of Germany" into the international parent organisation of metalworkers.

INTERNATIONAL METAL WORKERS FEDERATION

FÉDÉRATION INTERNATIONALE DES OUVRIERS SUR MÉTAUX

INTERNATIONALER METALLARBEITER-BUND

Sekretär: Konrad Ilg

30.3.48
BERN , den 25. März 1948,
Monbijoustrasse 61

Dieses Schreiben geht an die Kollegen:

Max Bock, Frankfurt, Wilhelm Petersen, Hamburg,
Franz Bronner, Tuttlingen, Oskar Schulze, Bremen,
Hans Brümmer, Stuttgart, Paul Weh, Köln,
W. Freytag, Mühlheim a.Ruhr Alois Wöhrle, München.

Werte Kollegen,

Es freut mich, Euch mitteilen zu können, dass das Zentralkomitee des Internationalen Metallarbeiterbundes an seiner Tagung vom 16.- 18. März 1948 in der Schweiz einmütig beschlossen hat, das Sekretariat zu beauftragen, die Industriegewerkschaften Metall der amerikanischen, britischen und französischen Zone Deutschlands einzuladen, dem Internationalen Metallarbeiterbund beizutreten.

Gleichzeitig wurde vereinbart, im Monat Mai nächst- hin eine Delegation unseres Bundes nach Deutschland zu entsenden. Ich möchte Euch daher dringend ersuchen, die Frage zu prüfen, ob es möglich wäre, eine Inter-Zonen-Konferenz der Vertrauensleute der Metallarbeiter der drei erwähnten Zonen zu organisieren. Als Tagungsort würde mir persönlich Frankfurt sehr gut passen. Es wurde auch von Düsseldorf gesprochen. Wir möchten es aber Euch überlassen, den Ort zu bestimmen.

Was die Bewilligung zur Ein- und Ausreise in die verschiedenen Zonen anbetrifft, so haben sowohl unsere englischen wie amerikanischen und auch französischen Kollegen erklärt, dass sie bei den zuständigen Behörden die entsprechende Bewilligung für Euch nachsuchen werden, sofern Ihr dies nicht selber erreichen könnt.

Nach der Ostzone können wir aus Euch sehr bekannten Gründen nicht gehen. Dagegen wäre es mir sehr lieb, wenn wir bei dieser Gelegenheit unsern Freund Alwin Brandes besuchen könnten - sei es in Berlin oder in einem Berlin nahe gelegenen Ort.

Ich unterstreiche nochmals, dass ich es sehr begrüßen würde, wenn es gelingen würde, meine Freunde und Kollegen Zurer Industriegewerkschaften Metall an einer gemeinsamen Tagung zu treffen.

Wie es unserer Delegation nach den neuesten Ereignissen möglich sein wird, das Visum für die Einreise nach Deutschland zu erhalten, weiss ich zur Stunde noch nicht. Ich glaube aber, dass wir mit Anempfehlung unserer Organisationen die Bewilligung zur Einreise erhalten werden. Bevor wir aber das Visum nachsuchen können, müssen wir wissen, ob es für Euch möglich wäre, in der Zeit zwischen dem 20. - 30. Mai 1948 eine solche Inter-Zonen-Konferenz zu organisieren. Für einen umgehenden diesbezüglichen Bericht - unter Angabe der genauen Daten und des Tagungsortes - sind wir Euch dankbar.

Wir hoffen gerne, dass Euch durch unsere Einladung nicht noch neue Schwierigkeiten erwachsen werden. Ich würde es sehr begrüssen, wenn Ihr mir in dieser Beziehung noch Mitteilung machen würdet.

In der Beilage übersenden wir Euch noch die vom Zentralkomitee einstimmig angenommenen Resolutionen, die auch Euer Interesse finden werden.

Beilagen erwähnt.

Mit kollegialen Grüßen:

Internationaler Metallarbeiter-Bund
International Metal Workers' Fédération Internationale des
Fédération Ouvriers sur Métaux

— B E R N —
Konrad Hig

‘The name of Konrad Ilg will not easily be forgotten by those who have had to do with the “International Metalworkers’ Federation” . . . At all times between the wars, whenever it was necessary, Konrad Ilg appealed to the spirit of fraternal solidarity among metalworkers all over the world. He was aware that the international trade union movement can have no future unless it is built on democratic foundations. His belief in democracy was from the beginning strong and unshakable, and it was this, together with his elevated, humanitarian attitude, that caused us in Great Britain to value our colleague Ilg so highly.’

His personality

It is not without good reason that Konrad Ilg’s biography, from his period in Lausanne onwards, is taken up solely with his work as a trade unionist. This is not due to distortion but to the character of the man.

From his earliest adult years, Konrad Ilg’s life found fulfilment in the task of a trade union official. He was so bound up in it that it became a part of his existence in the shadow of which other fields — family life and leisure, for example — fell into the background and retained little significance. It was only by ordering his life thus that Konrad Ilg was able, during the course of more than half a century, to devote himself to union work with an intensity at which the observer can only marvel. It also explains why — even in the years of his old age — he was incapable of retiring from his field of activity. Rooted in it as his whole personality was, he could not imagine life without it.

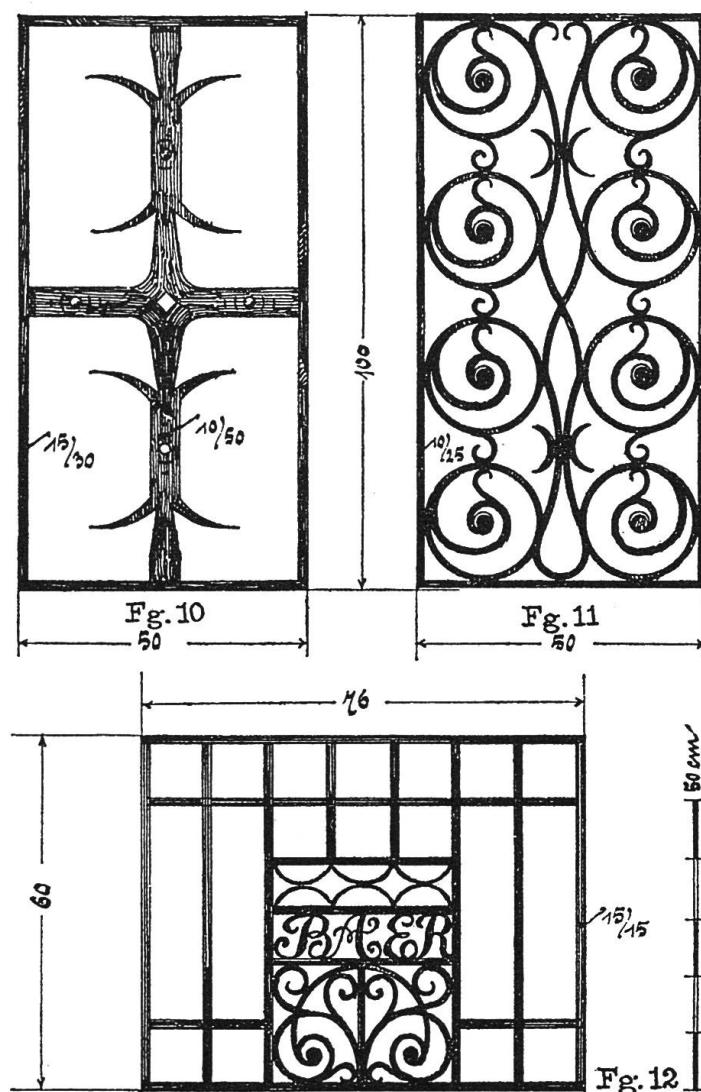
But it was not that his interest was turned purely to trade union concerns as they are generally understood. This was something that he always maintained with conviction. His aim was not merely to improve the material lot of the workers, but to introduce them to the world of the intellect and of culture. Yet however much he valued and understood these things, he himself never had much to do with them. True, he did — for reasons of sympathy — repeatedly support artists by buying their pictures, but he did not concern himself closer with the arts. In the little leisure he allowed himself, he preferred the company of his immediate circle of friends and colleagues where he could relax in a political argument or a game of cards.

How much Konrad Ilg felt himself bound to his trade union duties is shown by his political activity. As already mentioned, from about the time he was in Lausanne he had been a member of the 'Swiss Social Democratic Party' and represented it for many years in the legislative bodies of the City and Canton of Berne, and in the Federal Lower House. But from the first he regarded himself as representing more than just his party; he looked upon it as his prime task to act within the framework of his trade union ideas in these bodies as well. He therefore concentrated his parliamentary activity mainly on questions which in some way affected the interests of trade unions. In doing so he steadily held by the opinions he had formed of their purpose and aims. For this reason he not infrequently met with opposition within his party, especially after his thinking on contractual matters began to take increasingly clear shape.

There can be no doubt that it was Konrad Ilg's close ties with his trade union work which provided an ideal basis for his activities in the service of Swiss workers. But it was not given to him, with his somewhat atrabilious ways, to meet without effort the demands made on him by this task. Yet a series of fortunate characteristics contributed materially to compensating for his lack of facility. His realism enabled him at all times to assess the facts of a situation as they really were. He was able to sense coming trends and events, and prepare for them before others had realised their existence. He was a clever tactician who was able to find a viable method in even the most difficult and confused situation. All these qualities proved their worth both within the union and towards outsiders, to the benefit of the cause he served.

Even those of his features which would seem bound to have been a hindrance to his work, Konrad Ilg was able — in his constant mood of self-criticism — to apply positively. Thus, although he was a man of action when the position demanded one, he was no friend of hasty decisions. Even on questions of secondary importance he was inclined to weigh up the pros and cons in detail before he could bring himself to a decision. In some situations this procedure was not without danger. But only this deliberation could provide Konrad Ilg with the inner security and conviction which enabled him to support what he recognised as right with his full weight, even against opposition from within his own ranks.

He did not, it is true, have the faculty of shaping his thoughts into electrifying words and explaining his decisions in polished phrases. When lec-



Viehweger, Schlosserarbeiten. II.

Drawings from a small manual in the Göschen collection "Wrought-iron work" by E. Viehweger. Konrad Ilg, a lover of artistic ironwork — how could it be otherwise? — took this book with him wherever he went.

turing, debating or negotiating he did not impress with brilliant phraseology, pointed wit or compelling energy. But when Konrad Ilg, who almost always spoke impromptu, had got over the first hesitant stage of finding his formulas, he was capable of achieving many times more with his hearers by his individual mode of expression than would have been possible by well-chosen words alone. His speeches were sober and objective — a mirror of his personality and evidence of the fact that he did not think much of theories and that what he could see and influence by his actions was what mattered to him.

This scepticism towards all things intellectual also affected — as already mentioned — his reactions to socialism. From the start he never acknowledged it as the guiding principle of his activities, but rather as the embodiment of what could be attained by trade union activity and by improving the economic and social position of the workers. Konrad Ilg's mistrust did not even stop at science. Everything intellectual he regarded on principle as suspect, and he would only accept the results of scientific research to the extent that they could be used directly to the advantage of trade unions and their objectives. He had some understanding for creative thinking, but in his own field of activity it was experience that was decisive.

It was precisely this tendency to realism and objectivity that lent weight and significance to Konrad Ilg and his work. But being naturally somewhat reserved and not especially quick-talking, he was never able to arouse the masses or fascinate them with a magical personal radiation. Yet the magnitude of his personality made him the more effective for that, a personality which always presented itself as it really was and which his whole life long led him to say and do what he thought was right.

This constancy of character it was that enabled him to gain the confidence of wide circles, reflecting to the advantage of his work and enabling his successors to continue, under new conditions, on the road he had pioneered.

Walter Ingold — Rudolf Wüthrich

Chronological table

1877	(January 25th) born at Ermatingen
1894	Start of a three-years' locksmith apprenticeship in Frauenfeld
1898	First contact with the Swiss Metalworkers' Union as member of the Zurich locksmiths' group 'Vorwärts'
1903	Start of six years of trade union work in Lausanne
1909	Appointment as Central Secretary of the Swiss Metalworkers' Union in Berne
1911	Member of Berne City Council (until 1939 — President 1921)
1917	President of the Swiss Metalworkers' and Watchmakers' Union
1918	Member of Canton Berne Parliament (until 1946 — President 1935)
1918	Member of National Council (until 1919, and again from 1922 to 1947)
1919	Member of the Swiss delegation to the first International Labour Conference at Washington
1920	Secretary of the International Metalworkers' Federation
1937	Signature of 'Peace Agreement' with the Employers' Association of Swiss Engineering and Metalworking Industrialists
1942	Honorary Doctor of Berne University for services to industrial peace in Switzerland (contemporaneously with Ernst Dübi)
1954	(August 12th) died at Berne