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The foundation of the trading company

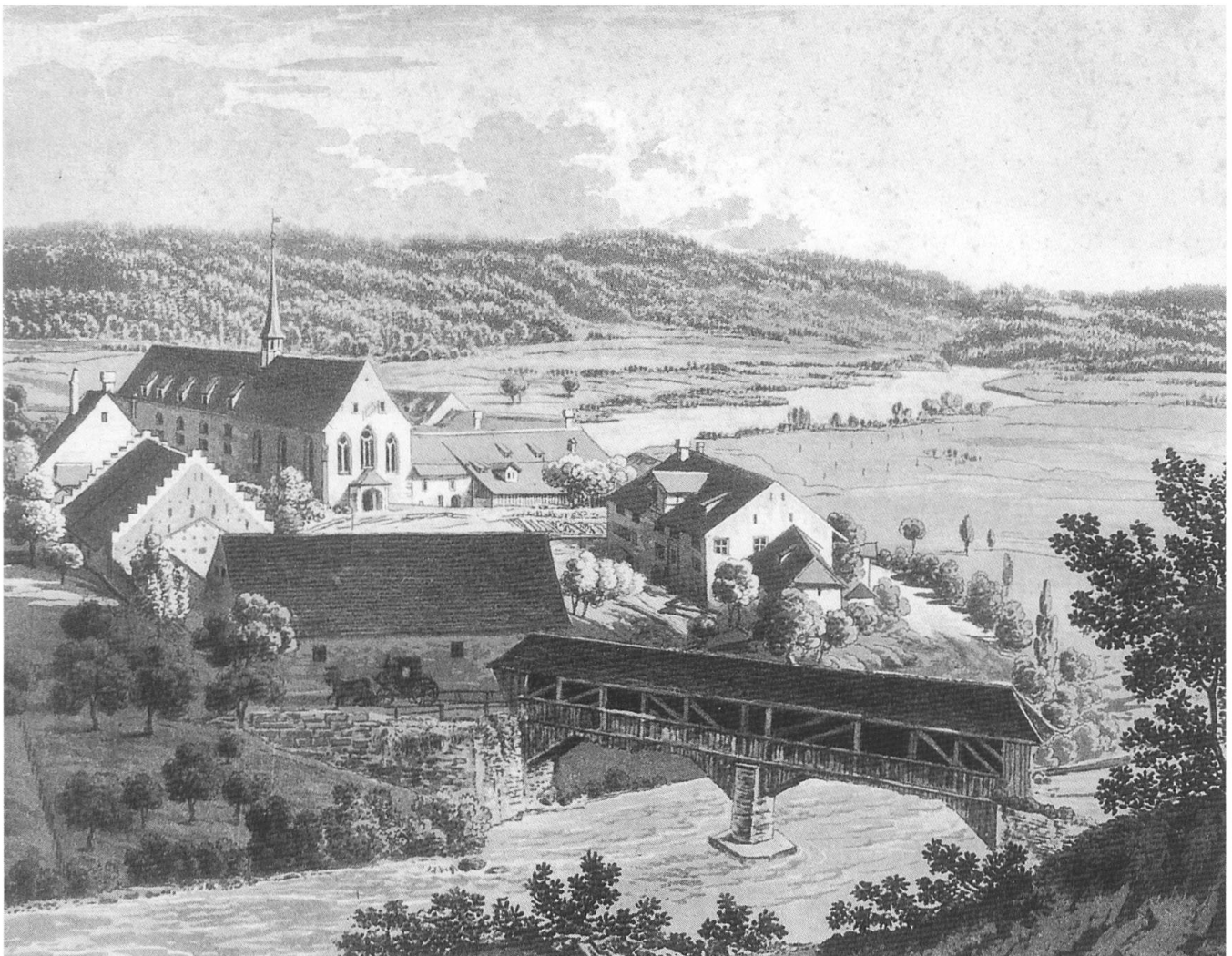
The political and economic environment

The Rieter trading company was founded in the closing decade of the 18th century, during which the impact of the French Revolution on the neighbouring countries was becoming increasingly noticeable. The end of the ancien régime with its arbitrary subject relationships was also looming in Switzerland. In Winterthur, the shackles which Zurich had zealously imposed on its subject city were already beginning to slacken. Ever since the disastrous pledging of the former Aus-

trian provincial town on the river Eulach to the powerful city of Zurich in the year 1467, the latter had been at pains both to deprive the people of Winterthur of political power and ruthlessly to restrict their aspirations to independent economic development. They were only allowed to pursue trades which had already existed in 1467 and in which the capital city showed no interest.

However, Winterthur's outstanding qualities developed from the ill-will of the «gracious lords» of Zurich. Instead of politics, enterprising citizens turned

The Töss convent ca. 1820, from a copperplate engraving by Franz Hegi (New Year print by the Winterthur Municipal Library, 1820)



their attention to contacts abroad; and first of all they were forced to exercise their ingenuity and always to keep their eyes on the most up-to-date and fashionable trends which had not yet found their way to the shores of Zurich's river Limmat. With increasing frequency, influential citizens of Winterthur sent their sons abroad to study modern branches of business, manufacture and innovations far away from Zurich. It was they who forged the first durable links with the outside world – behind the backs of the grudging Zurich guildsmen, so to speak – which even before the end of the century had already made Winterthur a centre of trading in colonial produce, coffee and cotton.

A number of new trades had gradually grown up in the town on the Eulach, such as the Pfau family's manufacture of cotton wool, Salomon Sulzer's brass foundry in the «Stadtgraben», or Clais and Ziegler's chemical laboratory in Wülflingen. Trading companies had also grown up to procure the necessary raw materials for the old-established cotton spinning and weaving activities conducted as a cottage industry in the river valleys of the Töss, Kempt, Murg and Thur. Yet the Zurich Factory Code of 1717 stipulated that cotton and yarn could only be processed raw outside the capital, and must only be sold to citizens of the city of Zurich. The cotton trade was the only one which the Zurich guildsmen had not retained as their exclusive privilege. The far-sighted Winterthur merchants took advantage of this fact and the diverse contacts they had already long cultivated with foreign companies in order to evade the restrictions imposed by Zurich and make imports from overseas and exports to regions outside Zurich.

In common with other Swiss subject cities, Winterthur found itself

freed completely from its shackles when the old federal structures collapsed as a result of the French Revolution and the French invasion in 1798. The achievements of the Helvetic Republic could no longer be reversed even in the subsequent period of restoration; they finally came fully into their own in the new federal state. The 19th century therefore also marked the beginning of a period of broad-based economic development for Winterthur.

The Rieter family

Johann Jacob Rieter (1762–1826), founder of the company of the same name, came from a distinguished family which can be traced back to the 16th century in the city of Winterthur.

The family tree can be followed back to Bartholomäus Rieter, a miller mentioned in documentary records between 1520 and 1542. He bought the «Werd» mill on the river Eulach, in what was to become the Arch quarter of the city, in the year 1525. This mill had been owned from 1277 until 1476 by the Töss convent, which had leased it out. The milling trade remained in the hands of the older branch of the Rieter family for over 300 years, from 1525 to 1858, and the building therefore soon became known as the Rieter mill. The millers at the Rieter mill were always respected citizens of Winterthur who stayed loyal to their trade. The older branch of the Rieter family also includes five artist-painters who were active in the 18th and 19th centuries: the best-known of these was Heinrich Rieter (1751–1818).

The younger branch of the Rieter family consisted of the three lines bearing the names of Blumengarten, Rothaus and Glocke. Coppersmith Hans Rieter (1596–1649) acquired the tenure of the lower bleaching-ground in Neuwiese. As far as guild member-

ship constraints allowed, he exercised his versatile talents as a blacksmith, bleacher and dyer. The lower bleaching-ground soon became known as the Rieter bleaching-ground, and remained in the family until 1860.

Hans Rieter's son Heinrich (1623–1670), also a coppersmith and bleacher, lived in the 'Eisberg' house on Metzggasse. He was a member of the High Council, but – like his father before him – did not live to old age. Perhaps the lack of sanitary facilities at the copper smithy and dyeing shop were responsible for his premature death.

Heinrich Rieter (1652–1715), great-grandfather of Johann Jacob Rieter, was a coppersmith and bleacher, and a member of the Lower Council. Heinrich Rieter's younger son Jakob (1692–1727) was also short-lived. The grandfather of the company's founder was a coppersmith and bleacher in the

fourth generation. His son Hans Heinrich Rieter (1723–1790), who lived in the 'Eisberg' house, was a goldsmith by trade and a member of the High Council from 1760. He married Regula Rieter (1723–1781), daughter of Hans Heinrich Rieter from the Rieter mill, who was a miller and member of the Lower Council. The couple had seven children, five of whom died young. Heinrich Rieter (1752–1822) succeeded his father in trade and business.

The founder

The youngest son, Johann Jacob Rieter, was born on August 2, 1762. After attending the boys' schools in his native city, he probably served a commercial apprenticeship in a Winterthur trading house. Only just over twenty years old, he started to make his first transactions for his own account. He ordered spices abroad and supplied companies in the neighbourhood, including J. Koch at the Hirschen in Stein am Rhein. Apparently he was not satisfied with this occupation, probably because he did not have enough money to be able to plan on a large scale. Johann Jacob Rieter established trading links with Johann Ulrich Geilinger and Johannes Graf of Winterthur on October 1st, 1785; this association lasted for ten years. There was already a minor difference of opinion between the three partners in December of the same year. During stock-taking, Geilinger did not want to record his external goods before Rieter's invoices were settled. The Lower Council decided that the partnership would not be regarded as concluded until the stock-taking had been completed. Since the young Rieter only gradually put his own capital into the partnership, the firm was as a rule only referred to in the records as Geilinger and Graf. Johann Jacob Rieter's

The founder of the company, Johann Jacob Rieter-Frey (1762–1826)





The family house «zur Glocke» in Winterthur's Marktasse



House sign «zur Glocke»

Hans-Heinrich Rieter
1723–1790
Goldsmith («zum Eisberg»)

Melchior Ziegler
1763–1824
Treasurer («zur Palme»)

Heinrich Rieter
1752–1822
Bleacher («zum Eisberg»)

Jakob Melchior Ziegler
1801–1883
Teacher, cartographer
(«zum Palmengarten»)

Susanna Kleophea
1816–1851
m. Joh. Konrad Meyer
(Zurich, 1811–1847) 1835

Jakob Melchior
1811–1876
Music publisher
(«zum Schanzengarten»)
m. Luise Biedermann 1835

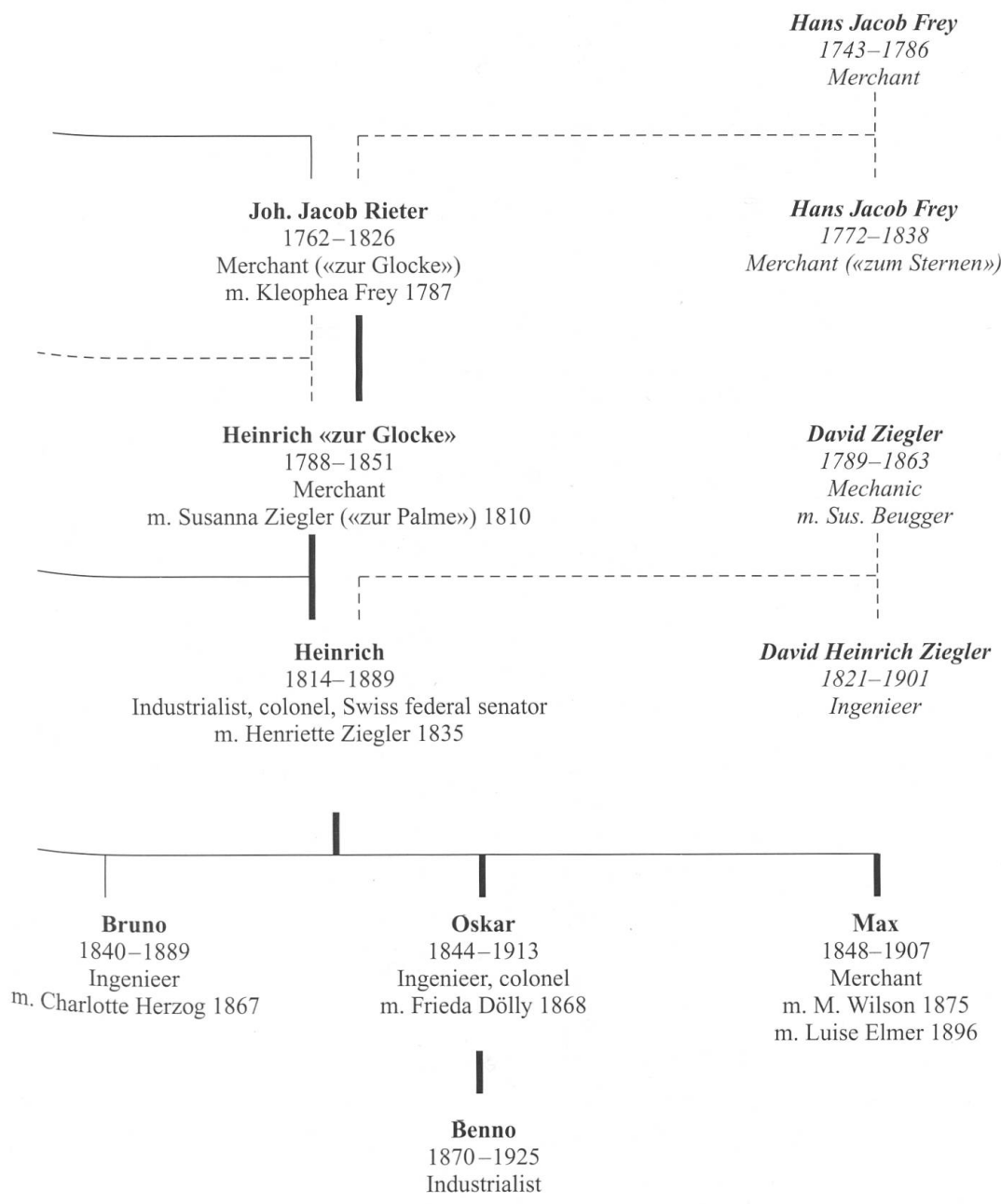
Karl
1839–1883
Manufacturer
in Glattfelden

Heinrich
1838–1901
Ingenieur
m. Berta Fenner 1866

*With God! A.D. 1795.
Joh. Jacob Rieter
founded his own trading
company on April 15,
1795. Accounts had
already been opened in
March 1795, and we see
on the right the first
item in the journal, the
opening of an account
with Caspar Schulthess
& Co., bankers in
Zurich.*

The Rieter «zur Glocke» family

(insofar
as they are
related to
J. J. Rieter & Cie.)



Wit Gott! Anno. 1795.
 Mary 20 Caspar Schüle besüens Compt. - in Zürich - Söllern
 No 1. ein vorkaufendes Pfund Stettin auf die Hälfte von
 1100. - } à vista Letter Roudeleux - - - - - / 1500. - - - - -
 500. -

financial situation improved considerably with his marriage to Kleophea Frey in 1787 and his father's death in 1790. As calm returned temporarily to Europe in 1795, Rieter decided to set up on his own and concentrate his import business on cotton. The first consignment, a bale of cotton, arrived at the weigh-house on Marktgasse on April 23, only 14 days after the peace treaty had been concluded between France and Prussia. This was Rieter's first commercial transaction for his own account.

It is difficult to establish what financial resources Rieter had at his disposal when he founded the company. Various investments on record lead us to suppose that some 20 000 guilders were available. A brother of the founder, the bleacher Heinrich Rieter (1752–1822), was probably already involved when the company was founded. In any case, he also joined the trading company in the summer of 1796, and the firm was now called 'Joh. Jacob Rieter & Comp.' The company's premises, which were located in their father's 'Eisberg' house on Metzggasse in the early years, were moved in 1800 to the better placed 'Glocke' house on Marktgasse; this is why the firm was generally known as 'Rieter at the Glocke'. It traded mostly in cotton, which was obtained mainly from London and Liverpool, as well as from Cyprus and overseas. Sugar and coffee were also important, and indigo and cochineal were imported for textile dyeing and printing. Yarn often had to be accepted in payment instead of cash, and Rieter conducted a brisk barter trade in this commodity. The continuing war between revolutionary France on the one hand and England and Austria on the other complicated the situation for the young company, which only survived the confiscations, plundering and blockades by virtue of

its spirited flexibility and ample resources. Finally, Switzerland itself was also drawn into the general maelstrom of war in the spring of 1798.

Monetary values – then and now

The young Johann Jacob Rieter had more than 20 000 guilders at his disposal when the company was founded. Shifts and changes in valuation yardsticks make it impossible to convert this sum directly into current monetary values. According to the 'Zurich currency' of that time, the accounting guilder was equivalent, for example, to 16 'Batzen' of 10 'Rappen' each. In those days, 5 kg of bread cost one guilder. If this price is taken as a guideline, 20 000 guilders in 1795 were equivalent in purchasing power to 500 000 Swiss francs today. The founder of the company was therefore a wealthy businessman, which was very useful for major contracts.

Solidly founded trading company in the years of the Helvetic Republic

Only two months after the fall of Berne on March 5, 1798, and the subsequent proclamation of the Helvetic Republic, the French marched into Winterthur to be welcomed ecstatically by the majority of the population with dancing and a 'liberty tree' in Steinberggasse. It goes without saying that the overthrow of the Swiss confederation and the subsequent confusion had a very adverse effect on trade and commerce, and brought serious drawbacks especially for a young business such as Rieter's, particularly since eastern Switzerland soon afterwards became a battlefield between the Russians, the Austrians and the French.

On the other hand, the liberation from the humiliating tutelage of the city of Zurich, together with the new freedom of commerce and trade guaranteed in the constitution, were a great relief. Rieter sought to recoup his losses by obtaining supplies from eastern Europe and increasing trade in cotton fabrics, while imports from overseas again became possible as the French troops advanced across Europe. Nevertheless, times were difficult enough, even after the withdrawal of the foreign armies. Consignments of sugar, coffee and cotton from America had to overcome many obstacles between Antwerp and Winterthur. Deliveries were often on the way for more than three weeks, if indeed they ever reached their destination.

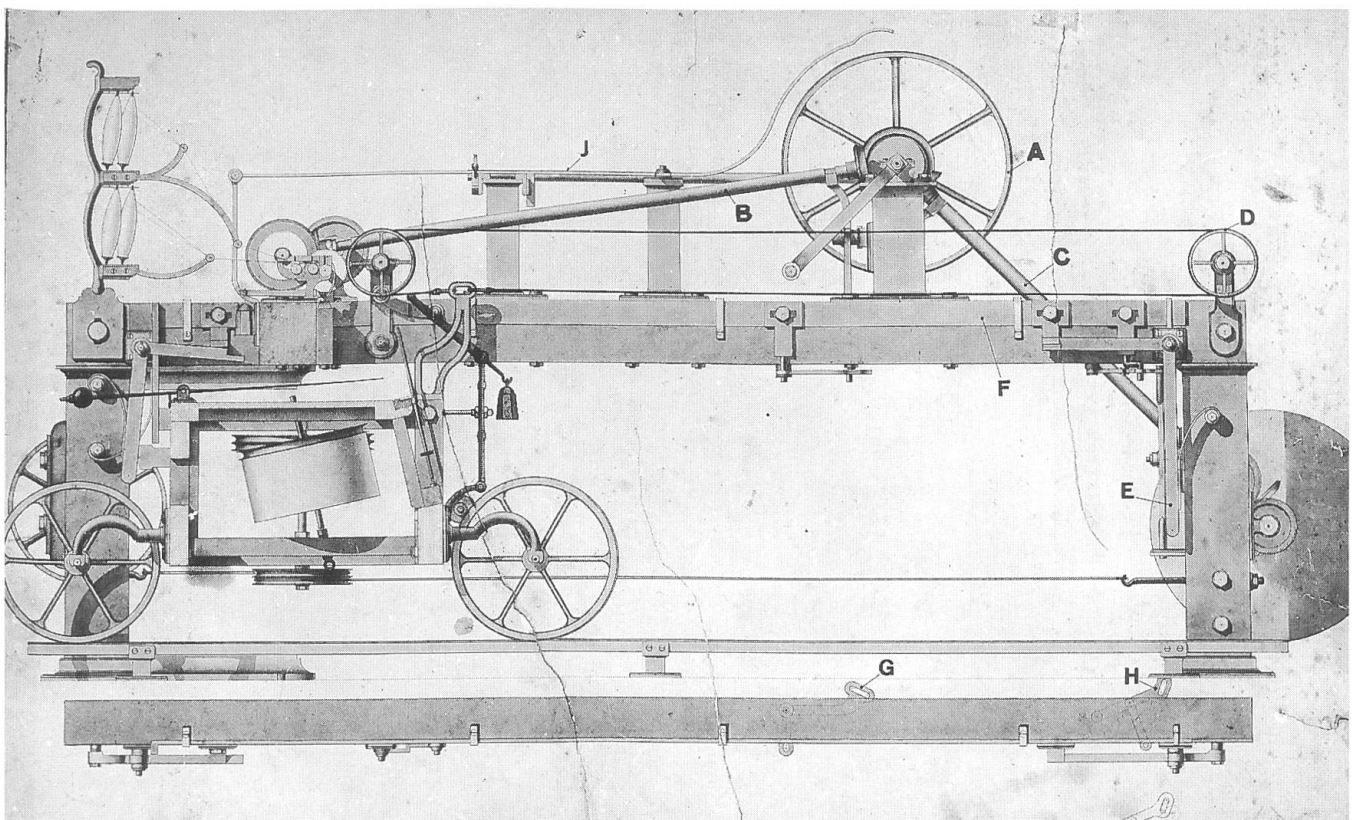
Although basically apolitical, Rieter readily placed himself at the disposal of the new authorities. Without becoming involved in the political unrest which racked the country until the end of the Helvetic Republic, he accepted various political offices. When the

stormy years of the Helvetic Republic approached their end in 1803 after the conclusion of the War of the Second Coalition, Rieter was able to view with satisfaction a largely intact and solidly founded trading business, especially since the Mediation Act of Napoleon I promised a period of calm, consolidation and economic recovery for Switzerland. The achievements of the Helvetic Republic were an especially important factor, above all of course the freedom of commerce and trade, which was also upheld under the new regime.

The Continental Blockade

The historical fact of the so-called Continental Blockade, which the victorious Napoleon imposed on England at the end of 1806, was of decisive importance. Europe had to bow to the dictates of the Corsican after the Battle of Austerlitz on December 2, 1805. This put a stop to Rieter's direct imports of coveted English machine yarn, and supplies of cotton from

Rieter hand mule around 1835, based on English machines dating from the beginning of the 19th century



America came to a standstill. Probably with these supply problems in mind, Johann Jacob Rieter had already made changes to the holdings in his firm in 1804. The founder's brother left the company, but retained his financial stake in the business. Jacob Rieter's son Heinrich (born in 1788) joined the company in his place in 1809, by which time the links with brother-in-law Hans Jakob Frey had also been consolidated.

In order to circumvent the difficulties caused by the Continental Blockade, Rieter established contact with suppliers in as many cities as possible, including Genoa, Trieste, Marseilles and many others. He also turned increasingly to the export of fine cotton fabrics, mainly from the Toggenburg and the St. Gall region. However, supplies from overseas could not be forgone indefinitely; efforts were therefore made to obtain cotton and English yarn indirectly, despite the Continental Blockade. Rieter kept devising new schemes to bring the coveted merchandise via the English territory of Heligoland through Germany, or via Sweden and the Baltic ports to Switzerland. However, deliveries were not immune to confiscation and theft; even journeys in person, permits and bonuses for success were little help against these hazards. Detours via ports further and further east, such as Riga, St. Petersburg or Odessa, made the goods disproportionately more expensive, of course; and forwarding them along the Danube and over smugglers' trails from Fiume (today's Rijeka in Croatia) over the Alps brought little relief. The long-awaited normalization came only as the fall of Napoleon approached and the Continental Blockade was lifted in 1814. Supplies from overseas now revived again, and the prolonged economic crisis was succeeded by a recovery in



many sectors which was overshadowed by the political stagnation of the restoration period.

Heinrich Rieter-Ziegler (1788–1851), son of the company's founder