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Autor: Furrer, Alfred J.
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From trading to spinning

The end of trading activities

During the last ten years in the life of company founder Johann Jacob Rieter (1762–1826), trading activities gradually declined, and the transition was made to in-house manufacture and sale of the yarns produced by the company itself. This course of events reflects the development of European industry and at the same time provides a vivid picture of Swiss economic history. Sales of yarns and textile products using new, mechanical working methods originating from England developed out of the import and sale of produce from overseas. From this there arose in Switzerland – not least under the influence of Napoleon's Continental Blockade – the idea of installing spinning machines and looms in this country and – as a pioneering move for the course of industrial development in Switzerland – maintaining and ultimately assembling these machines, most of which came from England. That was the starting point for the establishment of the Swiss mechanical engineering industry, which was to become the country's main line of business.

As early as 1810, the spinning mill of Escher Wyss & Cie. in Zurich had manufactured spinning machines – which could no longer be obtained from England because of the Napoleonic embargo – for the first time in its repair workshops. Later came the decision to build one's own machines, due especially to the time factor. England itself had prohibited the export of textile machines after 1814 in the vain hope of putting a stop to the blossom-

ing textile industry on the continent. There was thus a serious shortage of textile machines everywhere until this ban was lifted in 1842.

Without being able in retrospect to identify the exact point in time, Rieter reduced his trading activities steadily after 1817 and turned his attention to a growing extent to his own machine manufacturing operations. The transition to the textile industry started a new chapter in the company's history which was of considerable significance for the further progress of the Winterthur economy.

The first spinning mills had already sprung up in eastern Switzerland in the early years of the new century. In Winterthur itself, far-sighted businessmen had formed a joint-stock company and opened a plant utilizing the water power of the river Töss in the 'Hard' at Wülflingen in 1802. Rieter subscribed for thirty shares in the company and sold its products until he started his own manufacturing operations. He also sought to invest in other companies which were being formed, since this young sector of industry was expanding rapidly everywhere as a result of the Continental Blockade. Spinning mills were springing up everywhere in eastern Switzerland, with the subsequent 'spinning king' Heinrich Kunz playing a special role in the Zurich uplands; he set up his first spinning mill at Oetwil am See in 1811. The transition from traditional hand spinning to factory operations signified a real revolution, of course, and did not come about without creating social tensions. Especially in times

of crisis the hatred stored up against the new production methods which economized on human labour was released, sometimes violently. Even disasters such as the fire of Uster were unable to slow down this development trend.

Own spinning mills

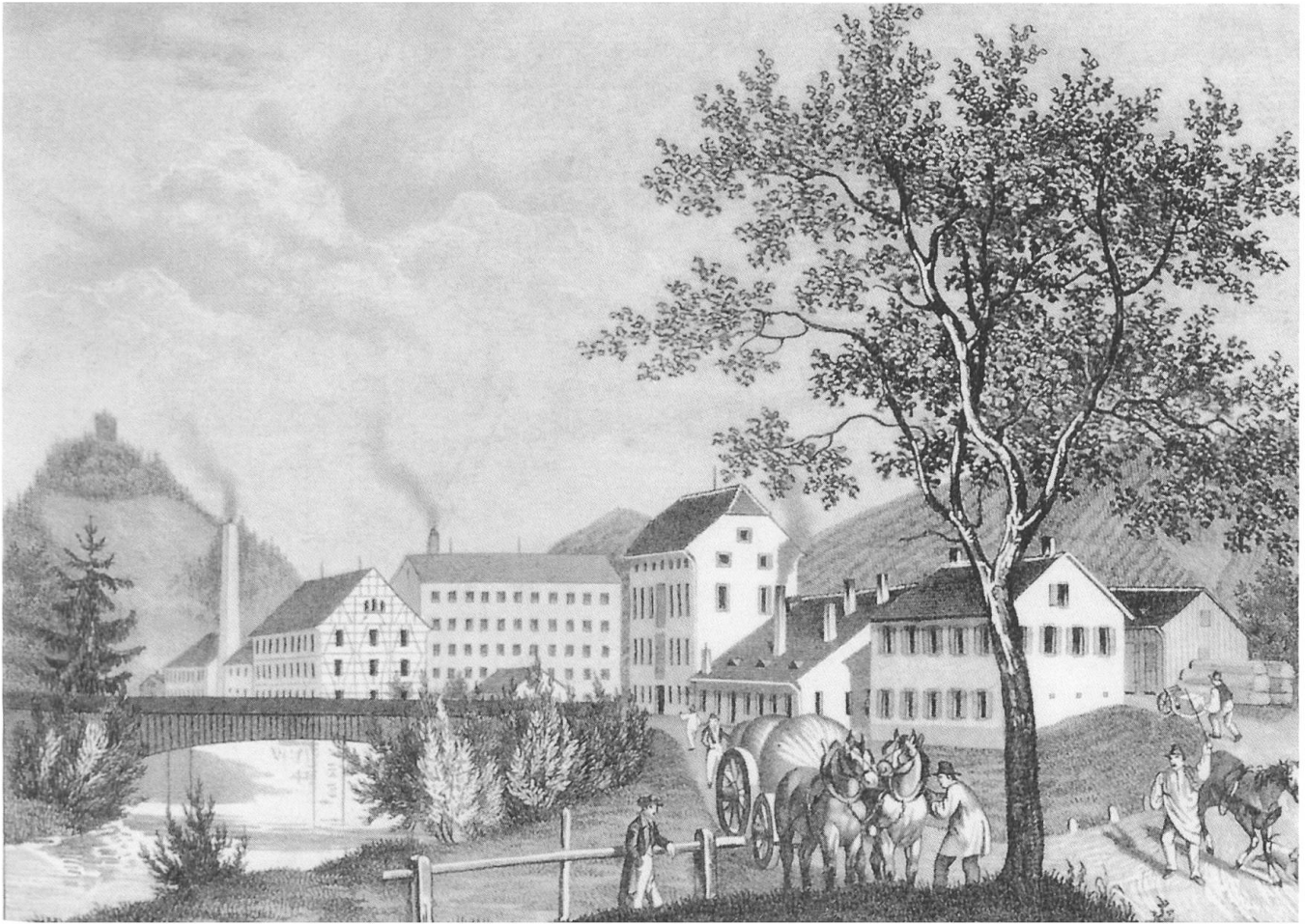
Around 1813 there were some sixty spinning mills in Canton Zurich, which did good business thanks to the Continental Blockade. Due to the favourable economic climate and his advantageous personal circumstances, Johann Jacob Rieter was then also reaching the point of deciding to set up his own spinning mills. Together with other members of his family, the Greuter & Rieter Bros. company and miller Heinrich Rieter, he founded the Wildbach spinning mill in Winterthur in 1812 as his first manufacturing enterprise. In 1817, Johann Beugger, former works mechanic at Hard, also built a large spinning mill near Wülflingen in

order to profit from the general economic boom. However, businessmen were not the only beneficiaries. As local author Jakob Stutz writes in his biography, 'people preferred sitting at the loom to sweating in the fields . . .'. The revolution of rural life was thus in full swing.

After the Continental Blockade was lifted, cheap English yarn began to flood Switzerland and brought the boom to an abrupt end. The Wildbach spinning mill therefore had to stop production in the summer of 1817. However, Rieter would not have been the astute businessman he was if he had not sought his fortune in other investments, for example in a new undertaking on the Steinach in St. Gall. Together with Hans Ulrich Graf, a major customer for Rieter's cotton, he established what was by the standards of the day a large spinning mill in the Augarten and Schönthal premises. However, this venture also fell victim to the crisis, since the fact that the mill

«Wildbach» spinning mill in Winterthur, founded in 1812





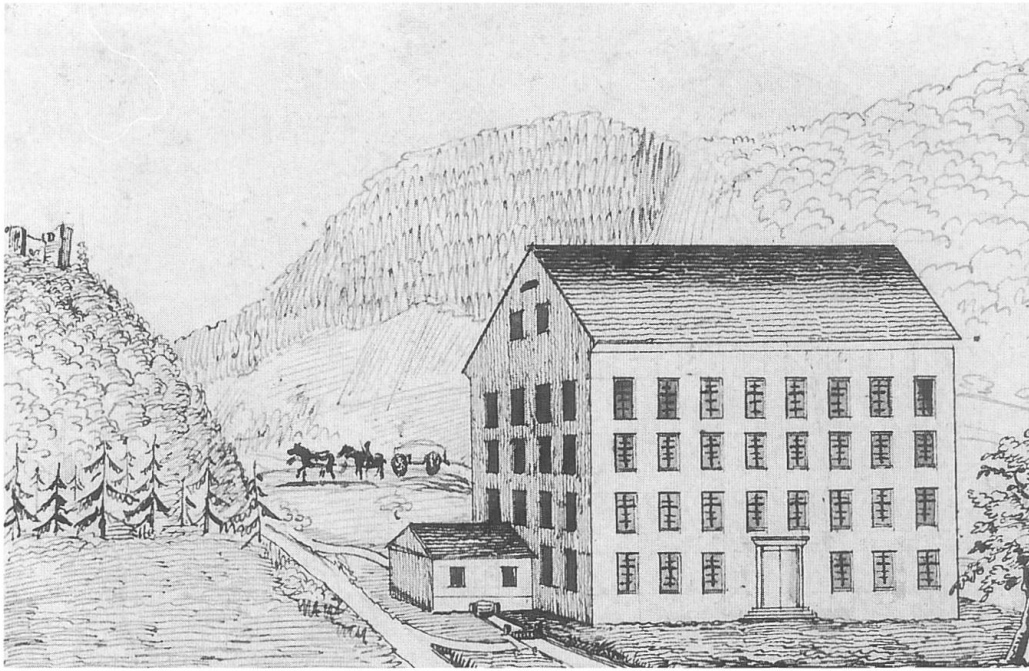
Spinning mill and workshops of J. J. Rieter & Co. in Niedertöss ca. 1845

was only partially mechanized made operations uneconomic. Undaunted by this setback, Rieter and Graf transferred the spinning equipment to new premises at the Buchenthal spinning mill (near St. Gall/St. Fiden), which enjoyed better fortune. From 1823 onwards the two men also managed the St. Georgen spinning mill, which had been founded in 1810 and experienced difficulties in 1817. While the changed economic conditions took their toll of other undertakings in which he had invested, Rieter sought to establish links with the weaving industry in order to be able to continue employing his spinning personnel in vertically integrated operations. During all these vicissitudes, Rieter demonstrated decision-making ability and acumen, and did not allow himself to be distracted from correctly identifying future development trends, even by losses and setbacks. He had actually devel-

oped into something of an authority on spinning whose advice was widely sought. After a brief new crisis in 1820 had again shaken all manufacturing operations, he laid the actual foundations of today's company together with his son Heinrich in 1824.

Spinning mill and mechanical workshop at Niedertöss

The formation of the new company signified at the same time a handover between the generations in the house of Rieter. Johann Jacob Rieter, who had brought the company into being in 1795 and built several spinning mills after 1810, began to take a back seat. His only surviving son Heinrich (1788–1851) discontinued trading activities in cotton and colonial produce and moved completely into the spinning business. He was a worthy successor to Johann Jacob Rieter, who died in 1826, and a pioneer of equal



Spinning mill in Nieder-töss (contemporary pen-and-ink drawing)

rank in the early days of Switzerland's industrialization.

Heinrich Rieter, educated in commerce and the humanities, was initially unprepared for new technical developments, and first had to acquire the necessary knowledge through untiring study in order to be well equipped to take the risks involved in becoming an independent manufacturer. The inheritance of his father-in-law, Treasurer Melchior Ziegler zur Palme, who died in 1824, made the decision easier for him. With two partners, the Winterthur company of Ziegler and Sulzer, cotton wholesalers, and his brother-in-law, the young Jakob Melchior Ziegler, he proceeded to found the fine spinning mill in Nieder-töss, as recorded in a 'treaty' dated April 1st, 1825. Construction of the workshops and spinning mill building was started in July 1825; Heinrich Rieter utilized the experience gained in other spinning mills and far-sightedly incorporated emerging development features. This gave the new manufacturing operation the character of a model plant. The buildings were finished at the end of 1827, and full operations commenced with 7500 spindles in March 1828.

Heinrich Rieter himself had assembled most of the spinning machines he needed. The spinning mill employed about 60 to 80 personnel. 14 workers and 9 labourers were incidentally mentioned in the workshop, which was the proprietor's personal responsibility. He felt himself drawn most strongly to this pioneering department, and it was indeed to be the starting point for the development of the machine works.

The boom years (1830–1848)

The opening of the Nieder-töss spinning mill was followed only two years later by a political upheaval in Canton Zurich with far-reaching consequences. The liberal ideas originating in the countryside made a breakthrough; the canton was given a new, liberal constitution which finally dispensed with the privileges of the capital city and granted all citizens equal political rights. Committed to democratic ideas from the outset, Heinrich Rieter had been elected to the Winterthur City Council in 1827, but he soon saw that the expansion of his company was hardly compatible with the simultaneous demands made on him by public

service. He resigned all his public offices in 1831. Heinrich Rieter was married to Susanne Ziegler zur Palme; three of their children lived to old age, among them Heinrich Jr. (born 1814), his successor. The latter became generally known as Senator Rieter in recognition of his high federal office.

After the revolution of 1830, industrial growth reached a first peak in the regeneration period, and this continued with some fluctuations until the crisis of 1847. Especially overseas trading, with increasing sales in the New World, generated a new boom in the Swiss spinning industry. This was also sustained by the industry's sound base in the markets of Austria and the territory of the German Customs Union, which promoted the unification of Germany through the abolition of customs duties between the German territories. As a consequence of this advantageous economic development trend,

*Heinrich Rieter-Ziegler
(1788–1851)*



various extensions were made to the premises in Niedertöss between 1836 and 1841. Not least the march of technical progress and the rising demand for power forced businessmen to modernize and replace equipment. It is assumed that some 140 people were employed in Niedertöss at that time, about half of them adolescents. Rieter overcame the economic slump which followed the Zurich coup d'état of 1839 by adjusting prudently to the needs of the market and making continuous improvements to his machines. Furthermore, Rieter was one of the first spinners to use steam engines to smooth out the fluctuations of water power in his operations. One acquisition, indicative of the future, initially had no influence: the purchase of land and buildings from the Töss convent.

Rieter in sole ownership

After the boom of the preceding years, a calculation of the company's value was long overdue, together with – after a number of changes in personnel – a reorganization of partnership interests. Heinrich Rieter took advantage of the crisis in the early eighteen-forties to deal with both these matters. First the parent company was liquidated, then the family of his late partner Hans Ulrich Graf withdrew from the business, and Rieter took over the St. Gall mills, which were subsequently managed by the son of the same name of his former partner Graf. Through further debt repayments Heinrich Rieter became sole owner of the company.

The good years following the crisis resulted in new buildings and extensions, both in Niedertöss and in St. Gall. A modern coarse count spinning mill with 2040 spindles was set up in the buildings of the Töss convent acquired in 1833, which initially had

only accommodated stores and a workshop for plastering work on carding cylinders. The first steam engine was installed and a boilerhouse built in 1845.

The growth of the spinning operations was accompanied by continuous expansion of the engineering workshops. Although certain parts were still obtained from elsewhere, entire machines were increasingly being produced in the company's own forge. Which way the scales would tilt between spinning operations and engineering workshops could not be predicted as long as Heinrich Rieter was alive. But before a decision could be made, another setback brought the entire company to the brink of collapse.

The crisis of 1847

This crisis was related to the political events of the years 1847 and 1848, the confusion of the Separatist League in Switzerland and the revolutionary events first in France, and then in numerous other countries. The break in economic relations with Vienna, Budapest, Baden and Berlin was an especially severe blow to the Rieter company, since it had turned its attention increasingly to foreign business, not least due to the confusion in Switzerland. In April 1848 Rieter, now insolvent, had to apply to his creditors for a respite in payments. Operations in Niedertöss, the Töss convent, St. Georgen and Buchenthal had to be severely curtailed. The worst was averted by disposals and thanks to the understanding attitude of his creditors, and the situation already started to improve in May 1849. In the following year substantial orders were received for spinning machines, which signified the start of a new boom in both spinning and machinery operations.

In March 1851, Heinrich Rieter became ill during a business trip in Aar-

gau, and initially stayed with his married daughter in Windisch. When he appeared to have made a good recovery, he returned home. During a holiday stay in Gais (Canton Appenzell-Ausserrhoden) he died completely unexpectedly of paralysis of the lungs at the age of 63 on August 1st, 1851.

While Johann Jacob Rieter had laid a secure foundation for the company's future with daring commercial transactions and investments in mechanical spinning mills, his son and successor expanded the Niedertöss spinning mill into an efficient specialist company for fine yarns and thus created the basis for the mechanical engineering workshops which subsequently developed into a major machine works. The second chapter of the company's history closed with the death of Heinrich Rieter Sr.

His younger son Heinrich (1814–1889) followed in his footsteps a versatile, restlessly active personality, a business pioneer who opened a new epoch in the company's history when he succeeded his father, and who was also to put his stamp on the industrial development of the city of Winterthur in a manner matched by few others.

After attending the local schools, the young Heinrich had gone to Lausanne at the age of sixteen in order to learn French. After this brief stay in French-speaking Switzerland, Heinrich Rieter served a commercial apprenticeship in St. Gall at the Bourry company. In order to broaden and deepen his specialist knowledge, he then worked first in the French port of Le Havre and then at Ed. Gaddum in Manchester. During these periods abroad he sought primarily to round out his knowledge of spinning.

In 1836 Heinrich Rieter was instructed to commission a spinning mill for Math. Näf in Niederuzwil and at

*Heinrich Rieter-Ziegler
(1814–1889); portrait of
the future Swiss federal
senator in his youth*

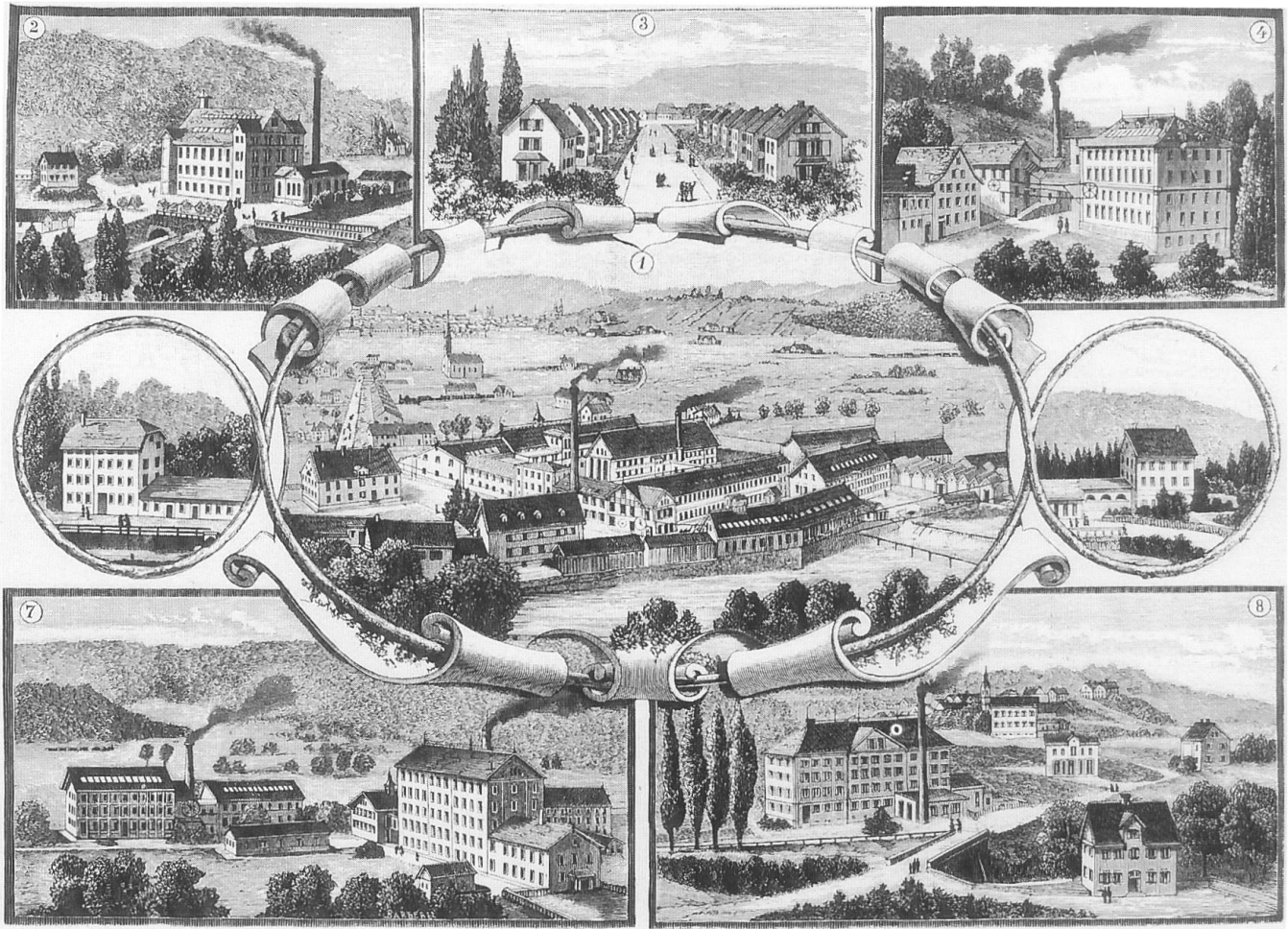


the same time to train the owner's daughters and foremen in the relevant technology. During the structural alterations in St. Georgen he had to test the new machines and was not allowed to return to Winterthur until he managed to produce good yarn, which he succeeded in doing after six months of endeavour. His father steadfastly refused to place employees from Töss at his son's disposal for this nerve-wracking work.

On military service, Heinrich Rieter served as the ordnance officer of the cavalry of Canton Zurich, but already withdrew from active service at the age of 45 in 1859 in order to devote himself to other public duties. In 1869 he was dispatched to the opening of the Suez Canal as the Swiss government's representative. He was also Secretary General of the World's Fairs in Vienna in 1873 and Philadelphia in 1876. Closer to home he served as

Winterthur school inspector, member of the industrial museum commission and cantonal councillor.

A new chapter of public service began for Rieter with his election to the upper house of the Swiss Federal Parliament in 1878. Here he held the difficult and responsible office of chairman of the senate customs tariff commission. In the same year the federal government entrusted him with negotiating a commercial treaty with Italy. His many and varied duties also included being chairman of the board of the Gotthard Railway from 1882.



Rieter production sites in the exhibition newspaper for the 1883 Swiss National Exhibition. In the centre the machine works, and above it the workers' housing estate built by Rieter in Töss