

Zeitschrift: Swiss textiles [English edition]
Herausgeber: Swiss office for the development of trade
Band: - (1951)
Heft: [1]: 25th anniversary of Textile suisses

Artikel: The clothing and underwear industry
Autor: Staehelin, C.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-798760>

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

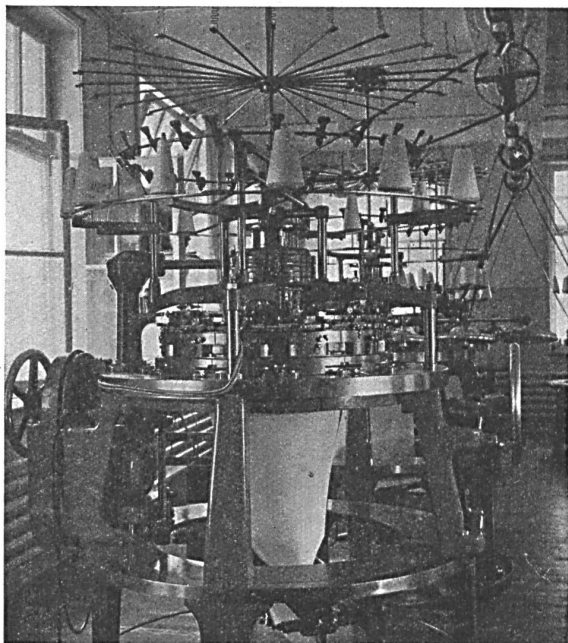
The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media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

Download PDF: 15.02.2026

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

knitted fabrics were subsequently introduced in all the different branches of the clothing industry.

The articles knitted nowadays include underwear for men and women, dresses for women, cardigans, pullovers, gloves, swimsuits, baby clothes, etc.



Cotton's knitting machine for knitting stockings, named after the inventor, possesses as many as 32 different appliances called needle-beds. On this machine fashioning is automatic which makes it possible to manufacture fully fashioned stockings.

Industrial knitwear was introduced into Switzerland in the middle of the last century, first of all in the Eastern part of the country, then in the canton of Aargau. This industry developed rapidly and spread to include all fields. After the first World War the manufacture of stockings developed still further because many embroidery manufacturers at that time were turning to this industry which is less affected by crises. It is not surprising therefore that stocking manufacture to-day is mainly carried out in the town of St. Gall and its surroundings, while the other

knitwear firms have developed more or less evenly all over Switzerland during the course of the last few years.

Very few knitwear factories are content to limit themselves exclusively to knitting for most of them also go in for the manufacture of clothing and underwear. By its structure therefore the knitwear industry is not only connected with textile production in the narrow sense of the word, but it also belongs to the clothing industry. Not only does it manufacture the basic material but also the finished article. This state of affairs calls for much flexibility on the part of the hosiery and knitwear industry and necessitates the carrying out of a great many different operations. Questions of fashion, which are within the province of the clothing manufacturer, are thus just as important to the hosiery and knitwear manufacturer as the industrial problems raised by the use of knitting machines.

Generally speaking, Swiss firms are usually medium in size. Factories with more than 200 employees are the exception rather than the rule. At the moment there are some 160 concerns in Switzerland coming under factory law, and these employ some 13,000 workers. They are mainly occupied to-day in satisfying the needs of the home market, but are nevertheless very interested in export. The highest level of exports reached was in 1920 and totalled 60.5 million Swiss francs. Total exports to-day amount to about 30 million Swiss francs a year but manufacturers are trying to increase this figure.

A comparatively young industry, by its very nature, is more easily affected by foreign competition. During the economic crisis of 1930, imports of foreign hosiery and knitwear products at times assumed alarming proportions. There was a similar experience recently when American nylon stockings flooded the Swiss market. Thanks however to measures taken by the authorities, it was possible to prevent Switzerland's hosiery industry from being deprived of its means of livelihood.

Generally speaking however, the Swiss hosiery and knitwear industry has already outgrown its growing pains and is now a sturdy and important section of Switzerland's economy. The demand for jersey and knitwear products is continually increasing. At the same time, this industry is making great progress in the manufacture of materials and their processing so that the prospects for the future of Switzerland's hosiery and knitwear industry may be considered as favourable.



THE CLOTHING AND UNDERWEAR INDUSTRY

by Dr. C. STAEHELIN, Secretary of the Swiss Association of Clothing and Underwear Manufacturers, Zurich

The clothing and underwear industry to-day is one of the most important of the clothing and textile groups in Switzerland. The last industrial census (1939) showed for these branches a number of 34,198 firms employing 172,366 people, 63,560 of these being employed in the manufacture of clothing and underwear; the many men and women working in the home are not included in these figures.

The size of these firms varies considerably. Some are small employing only a few workers while others are

real factories employing as many as 500 workers or more. They are not confined to any particular region but are spread all over the country.

Wages are regulated by compulsory collective labour contracts, concluded with the respective trade unions and based on the minimum wages compatible with living conditions to-day.

As opposed to what was formerly the case, women working at home receive, for the same work, the same wages as those who are employed in the factories. It

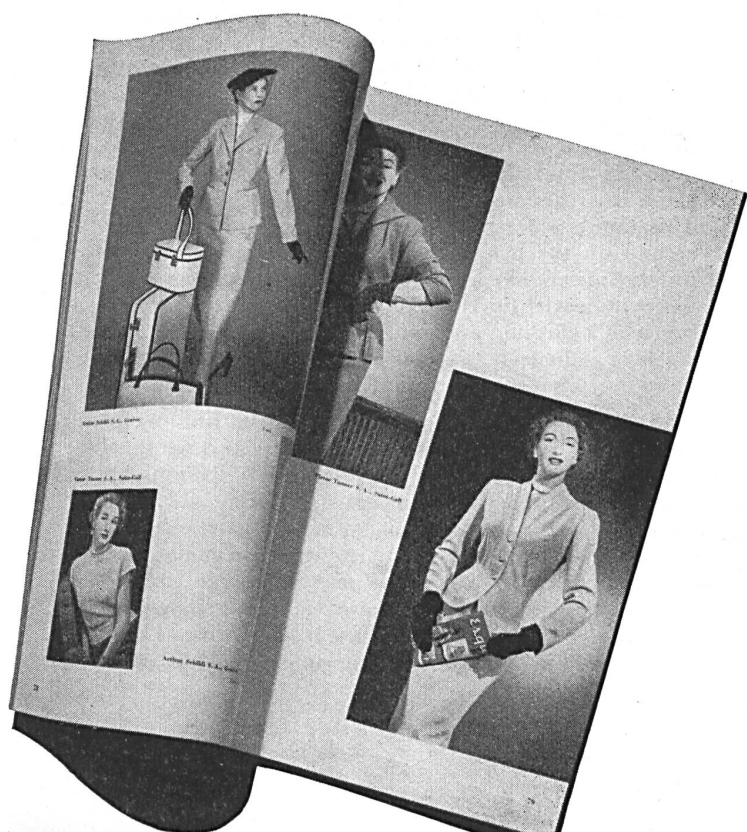
THE TEXTILE INDUSTRIES IN SWITZERLAND

must be added of course that when business is slack, employers always try, for obvious reasons, to ensure full employment first of all for those working in the factory itself. Furthermore, the continually increasing mechanisation of the industry has resulted in a decrease in the amount of work done in the home as compared with that done in the factory.

The clothing industry was able to satisfy the needs of the Swiss market for clothing and underwear not only during World War I but also during World War II, and, thanks to the excellent quality of its products, was able to continue with its exports on the cessation of hostilities, in spite of the great difficulties which nowadays hamper trade with almost all countries in the world, so that in 1949 imports and exports of clothing and underwear roughly balanced each other with an amount of about 60 million Swiss francs. Thus it was that this industry was able to endure without too much hardship the vicissitudes that marked the passage from the war years to the post-war period, while at the same time retaining its man-power.

The perpetual shortage of skilled workers in this industry must be attributed to the fact that it employs as many as 95 % women, and that as experience has shown they remain much less time at their jobs than men. The question of recruitment of labour is therefore one of the most important problems facing clothing and underwear manufacturers, who have repeatedly tried different means of finding a rational solution to the problem. The raw materials used (wool, silk, rayon and cotton) have a tendency to be steady and wages have also remained stable.

The Swiss clothing and underwear industry manufactures mainly high quality articles. Whether producing articles in the lower, medium or higher price ranges, manufacturers always devote the greatest attention to ensuring an impeccable cut to their products, which is recognised not only by Swiss customers at home but also by customers abroad.



It is to this factor of quality that this relatively young industry owes the extraordinary progress it has made during these last few decades. Whereas previously ready-made clothing and underwear were inferior to those made to measure, this is no longer the case and they are able to compete on an equal footing.

The products of this industry are divided into two main categories, clothing and underwear. Each of these two groups shows an extraordinary diversity in its composition. This diversity is not only apparent in the raw materials used and in their combinations, but fashion, which plays a role of the greatest importance in the creation of clothing and underwear for women, compels every manufacturer to establish a very rich and varied collection and to renew it every season, according to the trends of fashion.

These dictates of fashion still emanate to-day from Paris. What is worn in Paris is also worn, with a few modifications, the world over, and clothing and

underwear manufacturers are therefore obliged always to be well informed of the developments in Paris fashions as soon as possible in order to be able to use this inspiration in the creating of their own collections.

At the head of this group of industries we find the women's clothing industry which mainly produces coats and suits, blouses, aprons, dressing gowns and particularly dresses, from the most sumptuous ball gowns to the simple little dress for everyday wear; this industry has achieved some remarkable results. We must also mention the manufacture of sportswear, the products of which, including raincoats, are always abreast of the latest trends of fashion which reigns in this field too. The manufacture of underwear is on a level with that of clothing; it is also divided into two sections: women's underwear and men's

underwear. Here too, Switzerland manufactures high-grade products whose international reputation is based on the extraordinary quality of the workmanship as well as on the taste shown in their cut and trimmings. It should be said in passing that the influence of fashion is becoming more and more marked in underwear for women and even for men. Besides these main branches, there is the manufacture of corsets, belts, brassieres, etc. which are always in great demand, as well as the manufacture of ties (see page 83). In addition to these, the Swiss clothing and underwear industry produces working clothes of all kinds, braces, garters, dress shields, etc. We shall not speak here of the products of the hosiery and knitwear industry (see page 80) and clothing for men (see page 82) which are the subject of separate articles.



THE MEN'S CLOTHING INDUSTRY

by Dr. H. WALDER, President of the Union of Swiss Manufacturers of Men and Boys' Clothing, Zurich

The development of the men's clothing industry in Switzerland goes back to the last two decades of the last century. The first firms founded in Switzerland were created by manufacturers full of initiative, who had learnt to know this branch thoroughly in Germany, at that time Switzerland's principal supplier of men's apparel. The adoption by a general vote on March 15th, 1903 of a new general customs tariff increased the interest felt in this new industry and encouraged its development. During the first few decades of its existence it was exclusively based on piece work in the home, that is to say the garments, already cut, were handed over with the accessories to tailors who finished them in their own workrooms with their own workers. This method has completely changed during the last thirty or forty years. To-day only a very small part of Swiss men's wear is produced in the home; most of it comes from factories using the division of labour system. A great number of factories have sprung up, particularly since the crisis of 1930, and they are equipped with the latest machinery and equipment and work according to rational methods, thus ensuring high quality production. While before the last war it was sometimes said that the Swiss men's clothing industry did not come up to the standard of foreign high-grade competition, these criticisms are no longer heard to-day and it is recognised everywhere that most Swiss factories make suits and overcoats which, with regard to regularity in execution

and quality of manufacture, are second to none. Great progress has also been made as regards style and choice of design. In the latter field the improvement is partly due to the Swiss weaving mills whose collections have become more abundant and richer in fancy fabrics, and partly to the fact that the Swiss manufacturer of men's apparel is much freer in his purchasing of fabrics than most of his foreign colleagues. Lastly, very strong competition, even a little exaggerated at times perhaps, has led to improvements in quality, for it is only with quality that the Swiss market can be conquered.

The figures for the number of workers employed by the Swiss men's clothing industry give a good idea of its importance. We must consider here the figures for the whole of the Swiss clothing industry, as the different qualities were not formerly specified in the statistics; these figures then also refer to the manufacture of women and children's clothing, to the lingerie, hosiery, knitwear and footwear industries, hatmaking, etc. The total number of people employed in all of these branches was 4,499 in 1882 and 60,739 in 1947. This figure places the clothing industries as a whole second on the list of Swiss industries as regards the number of employed, even ahead of watchmaking. In the figure indicated for 1947, 10,336 were employed in making men's clothing and uniforms, so that in the Swiss clothing industries taken as a whole, the men's clothing industry comes second, just after the footwear industry.