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The first century of the Zurich Association of the Silk Industry



by Dr. U. Geilinger

Secretary of the Zurich Association of the Silk Industry

ON February 26th, 1954, it was exactly a hundred years since the silk industrialists of the canton of Zurich made the decision, a remarkable one for the time, of grouping themselves into an association for the purpose of defending their common economic interests. The task of this association was defined in the following laconic manner :

« The purpose of the association is to promote the interests of the silk industry as a whole and to contribute at the same time to the welfare of the workers it employs. »

This decision was remarkable for more than one reason. First of all because the period was one of liberalism and opposed in principle to all groups possessing the character of an association. Moreover, the silk industrialists of Zurich were men of action, particularly individualistic in character ; men for the most part of humble origin who had risen in the world by dint of hard work and a spirit of enterprise, or who were on the threshold of a promising career and neither desired nor expected any form of protection either from the state or a collective organisation ; they were men who accepted the advantages and disadvantages of a free economy as an irrevocable law of nature and who were not exactly influenced in their commercial undertakings by any excessive regard for others. Among the many outstanding men who influenced the course of the silk industry and its professional organisation at the time of the foundation or later, we mention but one, perhaps the most determined and ardent defender of economic liberalism — Robert Schwarzenbach-Zeuner, the grandfather of the present chairman of the association.

One fact providing food for thought for the men of today is that the Association of the Silk Industry was certainly one of the first professional groups in Switzerland. In certain cantons there were, it is true, commercial societies or chambers of commerce whose origins went back, in part, to the time of the old regime, that is to say the years before 1798. But the Swiss Union of Trade and Industry was not yet in existence and trade unions were still a thing of the future. Today when an association is founded, it is generally either with a view to obtaining a certain measure of protection from the State, or in order to restrict free competition by taking collective measures with respect to the consumer. The founders of our association were innocent of motives of this kind and the group was formed a century ago for particular reasons peculiar to the silk industry.

The need to be able to determine, in Zurich too, the exact commercial weight (dry weight) of silk caused Zurich industrialists in this field to establish a silk conditioning centre as early as 1846. The frequent thefts of silk committed by the cottage workers led to the creation of a special commission offering rewards for information leading to the discovery of the culprits. This commission constituted the starting point of the association, and was absorbed by the latter and finally done away with when weaving in the home was no longer carried on. On the other hand, the Silk Conditioning Centre remained an independent society which has today extended its field of action to the testing of textile materials. It was also found necessary to create a common organisation for planning collective participation in international exhibitions abroad.

As the silk industry was going through a period of considerable industrial development and expansion during the 19th century which, keeping pace with an ever increasing mechanisation of industry, reached a peak at the beginning of the 20th century, the association had to deal with

various technical problems right from the start. The crowning achievement of this period was the foundation of the School of Silk Weaving in Zurich in 1881, which was the work of the Zurich Association of the Silk Industry. Together with the town and canton of Zurich as well as the Federal authorities, the silk industrialists took a permanent and active interest in the continual development of this institution and each year made up the deficit in the school's finances with their own contributions. After being expanded and reorganised, this school was transformed in 1945 into the Textile Vocational School of Zurich.

The Association of the Silk Industry, in a remarkable spirit of progress, began to keep regular statistics on the output of various branches of the silk industry and to publish them. There is probably no other Swiss industry possessing such complete statistics extending over a period of a century. We are reproducing here, by way of example, the details concerning the number of looms and the output of silk fabrics.

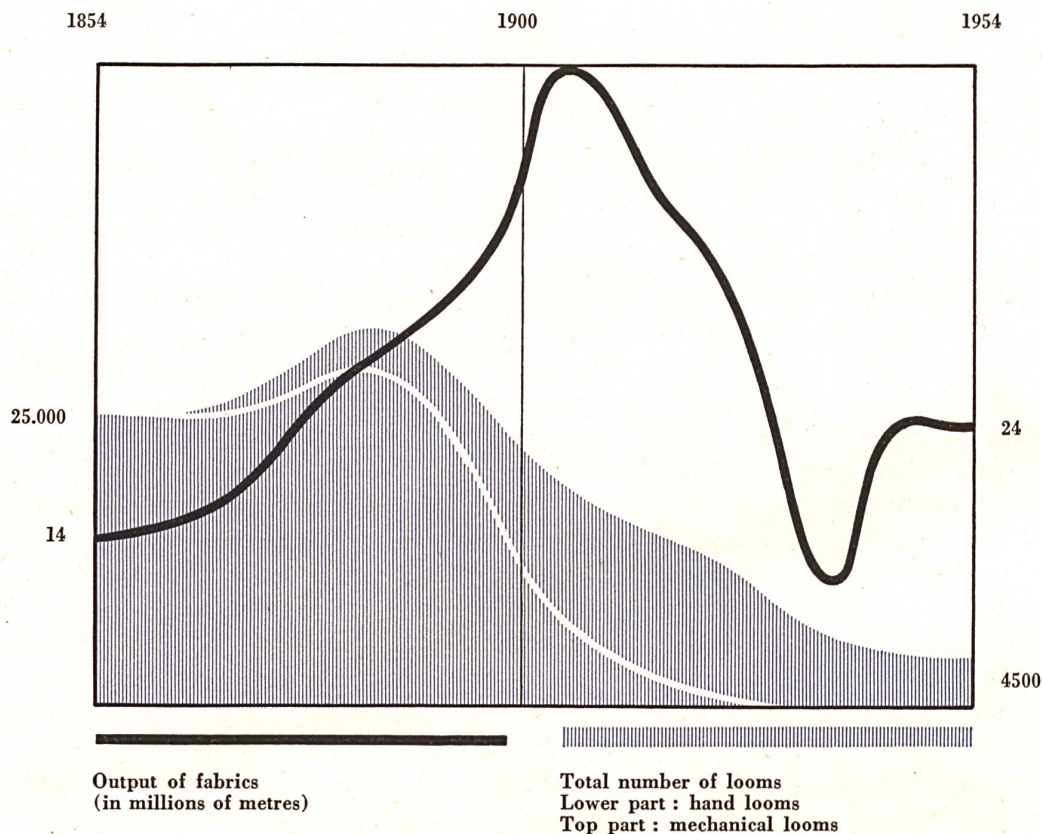


Chart I

The above chart makes it possible to recognise the following broad trends in the history of the Swiss silk industry :

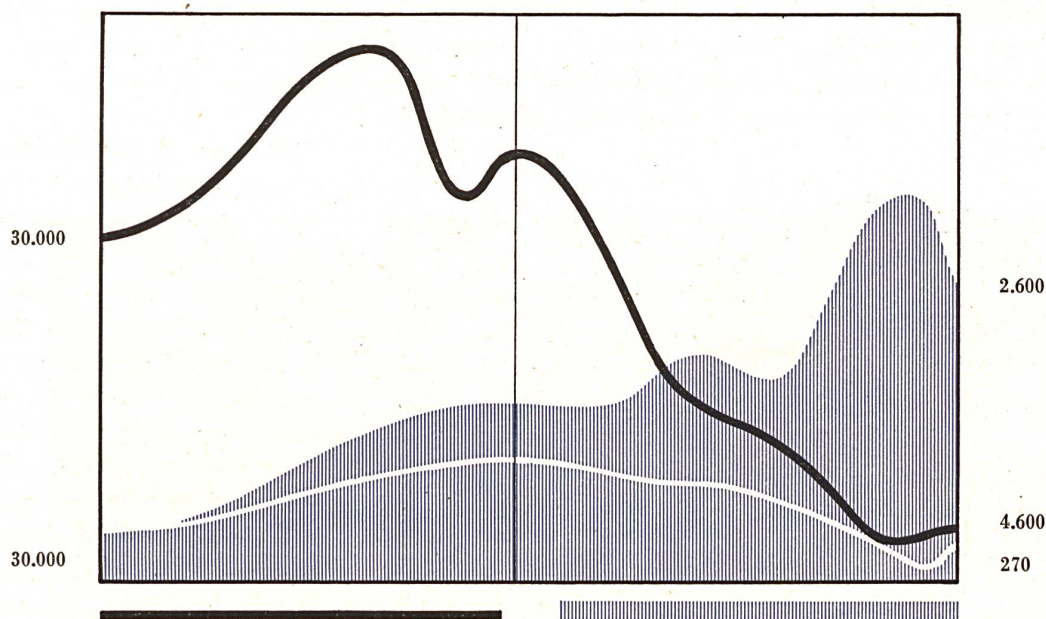
This industry reached the peak of its prosperity before the first world war, when its output was at its highest and there were no obstacles in the way of exporting its products. From then on the output decreased and reached its lowest point during the slump of 1930. However the industry escaped complete ruin and output rose again to settle at a reasonable level. But whereas today 24 million meters of fabric can be produced annually with 4,500 looms, a hundred years ago 25,000 hand-looms were required to turn out only 14 million metres. It should be pointed out in this connection that the considerably higher output obtained today does not correspond entirely to the possibilities of modern automatic equipment, for the production of novelty fabrics in small quantities is sometimes not very rational. Our first table shows again how the hand-loom has been completely supplanted by the automatic loom. The consequences of this evolution on the figures for manpower in the industry are clearly seen in chart II.

About the year 1880 for example, some 40,000 workers would have been required to achieve the present output, whereas today, the number of workers is little more than one tenth of that figure for the same result. The output therefore has increased and the surplus manpower been used elsewhere.

1854

1900

1954



Number of workers

Total consumption of raw materials in
metric tons
Lower part : natural silk
Top part : other fibres (cotton, rayon,
staple fibre, nylon, etc.)

Chart II

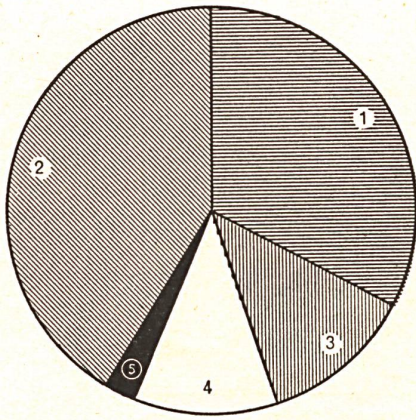
Chart II also shows the way in which rayon was introduced into the manufacturing programme of the silk industry and was rapidly able to raise the weight produced, for the reason that rayon fabrics are usually heavier than silk fabrics. Although in comparison with former days silk itself occupies only a small place, in weight at least, its share nevertheless remains more than 10% of the total weight of the materials used, which is remarkable in the present circumstances; this proportion is exceeded by no other silk industry except that of Japan.

The customs barriers raised by countries all over the world were fatal to the Zurich silk industry, such as it had become during the course of the first fifty years of the existence of our association through the manufacture of inexpensive articles, since it exported 80% of its output. Access to its traditional markets — Germany, Austria, the United States, Russia, France, Great Britain and countries overseas — was denied it by one country after the other. At the same time, the appearance of rayon caused it great difficulties, for this material could be used quite easily for weaving in countries with no tradition of silk behind them, such as in South America for example. The ability of Swiss silks to compete also suffered as a result of the heavy increase in the level of prices in Switzerland brought about by the last war. The recovery that has taken place since then has only been made possible by the increasing specialisation in the expensive type of novelty fabrics; the Swiss industry has also turned with great zeal to working with new artificial and man-made fibres. This has enabled it to export high quality fabrics to unmistakably industrial countries, in spite of high import duties.

These difficult years of crisis and readaptation raised for the Association of the Silk Industry numerous problems in the field of economics and commercial policy which could not have been solved without the disinterested collaboration of many eminent figures of industry and commerce. Let us also acknowledge here with gratitude the wholehearted support the silk industry has constantly received from the authorities and the directorate of the Union of Trade and Industry.

After the last war, the industry's chief concern was the protection of its interests in the field of commercial politics, particularly with regard to exports. Our association then became of indispensable assistance to its members, for whom it facilitates the steps that have to be taken in the maze of complicated regulations concerning currency and exports; for the ability to export their products is of vital importance to all members of the Zurich silk industry. Even today this

industry exports two-thirds of its output, and manufacturers and exporters have to be on their mettle in the bitter struggle for foreign markets, in which they are exposed without any form of protection to the merciless winds of international competition. During the last year, Swiss exports of silk and rayon fabrics amounted to a value of 104.6 million Swiss francs. This total was made up as follows, according to the principal categories of fabrics :



Exports of fabrics in 1953

(in millions of Swiss francs)

1. Silk fabrics	33.9
2. Rayon fabrics	43.1
3. Staple fibre fabrics	12.6
4. Nylon fabrics	12.1
5. Squares and miscellaneous fabrics	2.9

The series of photographs published in the pages that follow under the title « Zurich silks throughout the world » show that there are few civilised countries which do not figure in the export statistics of the silk industry. The more widespread the activity of the Zurich Association of the Silk Industry, owing to the force of circumstances, the more apparent became the clash of interests between the different sections of the industry, making neces-

sary a reorganisation into several more specialised associations. This is how the different sections of our association gradually came into existence, i. e. the associations of the silk twistors, the manufacturers of silk fabrics, the dyers, the importers of raw silk, the merchants and the silk fabric wholesalers.

Except for the dyers', all these sections have entrusted the administration of their normal affairs to the secretariat of the main organisation. The handling of all these different tasks made it necessary, as long ago as 1891, to engage a permanent secretary. In 1899, our Association called on Th. Niggli, Doctor of Laws, who for more than half a century devoted himself wholeheartedly and worked with the greatest efficiency at the head of the secretariat. Although he retired in 1950, Dr. Niggli is still in charge of the campaign in favour of natural silk, undertaken by our enterprise within the framework of an international propagande drive. The management of the secretariat has now been taken over by M. F. Honegger, Doctor of Economic Sciences, who joined the Association in 1944.

To bring to a close these notes, which make no claim to being complete, let us mention one of the tasks of the Association of the Silk Industry which is often overlooked but none-the-less interesting from the human point of view, the one it performs in the amicable settling of disputes. The raw silk trade depends very largely on an agreement of views on a multitude of details and on good faith between parties. In the course of work carried out over a period of years in collaboration with members of the trade and the customer, the Zurich trade regulations for raw silk were perfected and finally put into force in their first form in 1878. At the same time a court of arbitration was set up consisting of members of the trade. In agreement with silk circles in other European countries, the international trade regulations concerning raw silk, which had been decisively influenced by Swiss regulations, were finally brought into force in 1929. As early as 1903, it had been possible to lay down local regulations for trade in silk fabrics and at the same time institute a court of arbitration for fabrics. In 1916 it was possible to merge the two courts of arbitration and the post of secretary was entrusted to Dr. Niggli. This institution has rendered innumerable and invaluable services to our members by avoiding costly law suits and by helping to overcome differences of opinion in commercial matters. The court of arbitration is also the living expression of an important and difficult task of our association, that which consists in seeking to find a balance between often divergent interests of the various professions dealing with silk, in the general interests of the industry as a whole.

The clients of the Swiss silk industry follow closely the present-day production of the manufacturers and converters of silk fabrics. We hope that the photographs that follow will give them an idea of the youthful and creative spirit which nevertheless represents the best of a century's old tradition.