

The horological industry

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THE HOROLOGICAL INDUSTRY. A key section of Swiss national economy.

Switzerland is very poor in natural resources. The barren ground can furnish but a small part of the food-stuffs that a population of 4.7 millions need to be able to live. Of all the countries of Europe, it is the one most lacking in raw materials. And in spite of that, it is lucky today to have a flourishing economy with balanced finances, and also a steady currency, whilst its inhabitants enjoy a relatively high standard of living.

It is, above all, by utilising the labour of its workpeople with the maximum efficiency that Switzerland has succeeded in overcoming the obstacles that at first stood in the way of her development.

It was of course clear that this precious workmanship should be employed on productive activities that make as little demand as possible on other materials, whose acquisition beyond the national frontiers would be very costly. Switzerland therefore specialises in the manufacture of goods incorporating much national labour, and little raw material.

Nevertheless, not being able alone to satisfy her own needs, and being obliged to purchase abroad the food-stuffs and raw materials indispensable for the existence of her inhabitants and the maintenance of her industries, she was forced to produce in particular articles that could be exported in sufficient quantities to furnish the nation with resources without which she could not pay even for vital imports. In this respect Switzerland was not free to choose from thousands of possibilities. Only a few ways were open to her, and she set about exploiting them thoroughly, systematically and economically.

No form of business activity can respond better than watchmaking to the conditions described above. The watch, whose production requires skilful workmanship, is in fact an article which incorporates a considerable quantity of work along with very little raw material. Moreover, it is a product which is highly appreciated and in great demand by foreign clients. Already from this double point of view, the watchmaking industry conforms particularly well with the "natural" requirements of Swiss production.

But there is still more: The Swiss watchmaking industry exports 95% of its production. That is an important fact for a country whose commercial balance is traditionally on the wrong side and which must consequently be able to rely on having industries capable of exporting the greater part of their production. Such a high percentage is not reached in any other industry. Its signification is all the greater, since — as we have just seen — the exported horological products incorporate only a very small quantity of imported raw material. In the balance of payments, this means that the devisen originating from watch exports constitute practically a net amount which can be devoted almost entirely to the work of provisioning the country with food-stuffs and buying the raw materials needed to keep other forms of industry in activity.

In short, the volume of exports of Swiss watches reflects the importance of this industry in a particularly striking manner. In this respect, customs statistics show that Switzerland exported 33 million

watches and watch movements during each of the years 1952 and 1953, the value of these deliveries being well over 1,000 millions and Swiss francs 107.7 millions in 1953).

These figures are impressive. It is, however, necessary to view them in relation to the statistics for the total of Swiss exports, in order to be able to form an idea of the extent to which watchmaking industry participates in producing the revenue from foreign trade.

At the present moment, the goods sent by the Swiss horological industry to the different markets of the world are well over one-fifth of all Swiss exports. That is to say, the watchmaking industry is at the head of the exporting industries of the country, i.e. in front of the engineering industry, the chemical-pharmaceutical industry, the textile industry, and the makers of instruments and apparatus.

It is interesting to note that in 1953 the horological exports would have been sufficient to cover either some 90% of the cost of the imported food-stuffs and fodder — and thus ensure food for nearly all the population of the country — or 91% of the cost of the imported raw materials.

The importance of the watchmaking industry is equally apparent in other connections. Thus, this industry furnishes work for about 75,000 workmen and employees, and thus guarantees the means of existence of an important fraction of the population, especially when the number of persons in the families is taken into account.

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The above figure includes about 57,000 workers subject to the enactments of the Swiss law regarding work in factories, i.e. more than 10% of all Swiss workers subject to that law (totalling rather more than 551,800 persons at the end of 1953).

These horological workers are distributed among 1,195 "factories" in the sense of the above-mentioned law — the total number of all factories in Switzerland is 11,750 — and in 1,300 workshops of less importance.

It can therefore be seen that the horological workers are not concentrated in a restricted number of more or less gigantic factories, but are on the contrary distributed among many enterprises, medium or small in size — a fact of evident interest from the social point of view. Under these conditions, the contact between master and man remains very close, so that the atmosphere in this branch is favourable not only for production — the economic aspect of the problem — but also for the social and political stability of the country.

To allow comparison, we mention that the engineering industry (including makers of instruments and apparatus) gives occupation to about 137,000 workers (distributed in 1,715 firms), the textile industry to 67,800 (1,032 firms), and the chemical industry to 25,000 (375 firms).

These figures, however, cannot be directly compared in order to determine the relative importance for Swiss economy of the industries considered. In fact, as concerns the production of national revenue, the work done by the horological workers is, in pro-

portion, far greater than would be indicated by the percentage of watchmakers to the total of all Swiss workers. The reason is simple: the watchmakers are among the best paid workers in the country.

In 1953, the total amount paid in wages and salaries to horological workers and employees came to more than 500 million Swiss francs, a considerable sum from which other sections of Swiss national economy greatly benefited.

On a different plane, it may be pointed out that the Swiss watch enjoys abroad a reputation which is often the envy of competitive businesses in Europe and elsewhere. As a herald of Swiss quality and Swiss precision, the "Swiss made" watch gives great satisfaction to millions of people living in the five continents, and thus maintains nearly everywhere in this vast world a favourable regard for "Swiss products" in general.

The Swiss watchmaking industry is perfectly conscious of the mission thus devolved upon it. Because of this, it does everything in its power to maintain the high reputation of Swiss quality, giving particular care to the training of the engineers and technicians who are called on to devote their whole life to the perfecting of an article which has become indispensable to civilised people.

Because of the constant efforts of these persons — efficiently supported by the Swiss horological research laboratory at Neuchâtel — the Swiss watchmaking industry is able today to offer its worldwide clientele a rich series of articles, complying with all requirements and suiting all tastes. From the "current" watch to the luxury watch, between which come chronographs for all kinds of sport, the Swiss watchmaking industry remains in the lead of progress and can comply with the most exacting demands.

Finally, on the purely technical plane, horology — the precision industry par excellence — renders appreciable service in the domain of national defence. The part which it can play in this respect is often much exaggerated for protectionist ends, by certain watchmaking industries outside Switzerland.

One important conclusion can be drawn from the brief statements we have been able to make within the restricted scope of this article: watchmaking constitutes one of the pillars of the Swiss economic structure, a structure which is today strong and harmonious, but which would certainly not fail to collapse if one of the elements necessary for its support should weaken. The high authorities of the country well understand this and therefore devote especial care in examining the delicate situation in which the Swiss watchmaking industry is at present placed, now that the unjustifiable measures recently taken by the United States government have become a serious menace to full-time employment.

It must nevertheless be hoped that the economic directives that exist under various forms will finally succumb to the efforts made by certain international organisations — such as the OECE and the GATT — who are endeavouring to establish the freedom of exchange throughout the world. Then the Swiss watchmaking industry will again be able to give better satisfaction to its numerous and faithful clients distributed in the five continents.

W.

(*Swiss Technical Export Review.*)

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