

A portrait of the Swiss economy : Switzerland's political and social background [end]

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A Portrait of the Swiss Economy

Switzerland's Political and Social Background

(Continued from April)

After the Battle of Sempach (1386) the Confederation of the eight cantons had consolidated its position by further alliances with future cantons, by frontier corrections and direct conquests as well as by the successful settlement of internal quarrels which at times had even taken on the form of open hostilities. This enabled it to beat off a French army near Basle in 1444 and even to carry off the victory in a conflict with the mighty Burgundian empire in the west. According to a popular saying, Charles the Bold of Burgundy lost his hat in 1476 at the Battle of Grandson in French-speaking Switzerland, his courage at Morat and his blood in 1477 at Nancy, on his own territory. In other words, the Confederates and their allies had destroyed the greatest military power in Western Europe. The geographical and political building of Switzerland could now go on with the integration of Fribourg and Solothurn (1481), of Basle and Schaffhausen (1501) and of Appenzell (1503) in the Confederation, which thus officially included more than half of the present-day twentyfive cantons and in fact was approaching its modern boundaries in that it had also acquired various subject territories, was in close contact with the surrounding regions and was engaged in a dialogue with towns such as St. Gall, Neuchatel, Lausanne

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and Geneva.

By contemporary standards, the economic domination of the urban centres over country parts had meanwhile increased in more than mere numbers. St. Gall, famous in the Middle Ages—like Schaffhausen and Appenzell—for its linen, owed a good deal of its importance to the spiritual and worldly influence of its monastery.

The Diesbach-Watt society, domiciled in Berne and St. Gall, should also be mentioned here for its trade connections extended from Spain to Poland and from Danzig to Venice.

Fribourg had built up a wool trade of international renown. In 1412 a cloth inspection centre was set up here, as in St. Gall, to exercise a strict control over the quality of cloths for export and to provide them with a certificate of origin.

Geneva had also become a city of considerable size in the Middle Ages. It was the economic centre of a large region and in the fourteenth century took over the Champagne fair and thus attained to European importance. It was for half a century or so the meeting-place of merchants from all over the Continent, and its 10,000 inhabitants ranked it with the major cities of the time.

The principal centre within the confines of the Confederation, however, was Basle, which had a population of some 15,000 by 1440. It was here that the first Swiss university was founded in 1460. Active merchants and politicians had brought about a flowering of trade and culture in this city on the Rhine where German, French and Swiss influences converged. Trading companies were a typical feature of Basle, the chief of them being that of the Halbysen family, which had direct connections with Venice, Barcelona, London, Bruges and Milan. While the city was thus international in its outlook, it had no important export line of its own as so many other Swiss towns had.

The biggest reputation as a trading centre on Swiss territory, however, belonged rather surprisingly to none of the larger cities but to Zurzach, which had not even a charter and from 1415 onwards was under the dominion of Baden. The Zurzach trade fair was an important stop on the route connecting the big trading cities of Southern Germany with the fair centres of Geneva and Lyons. Berne and Fribourg, for instance, had their own warehouses in Zurzach.

Towards the end of the fifteenth century the population of the area corresponding to present-day Switzerland must have been about 800,000. There is much to support the assumption that Central Switzerland was relatively densely populated in the first half of the fourteenth century, though no exact figures can be given. In 1349 the Black Death probably took a heavy toll here as elsewhere. Historians estimate the population of what is now Swiss territory as at least 600,000 in 1400, though emigration and immigration—later to play a major part in Swiss history—were as yet negligible.

The very early appearance of export trade in various towns has occasionally been regarded as a proof that Switzerland is the oldest

industrial country on the Continent. The evidence of such a claim, however, will not stand closer scrutiny. Quite apart from the fact that the economic significance of the exports was not very great—remarkable as they were in themselves—there were similar early export activities going on in a number of cities to the north of the Alps, not to mention Italy, where some of the Swiss trades had in any case originated. What is more, there were as yet no banks in Switzerland in the late Middle Ages, although they had already been established in Italy and Germany. Even at the time of the big trade fairs in Geneva merchants depended on the Italian banks and their foreign branches. And when the Medici bank in Florence was liquidated at the end of the fifteenth century, the Swiss scene was henceforth dominated for years by the German Fugger banking house, which had even bought part of the spoils of the victories over Burgundy from the city of Basle through its middlemen. It was the Fugger family, for instance, that financed the wages and bounties paid to the Swiss Guard in the Vatican in silver minted in Switzerland and also advanced the pay of the troops recruited on the over-populated parts of Switzerland for service under the French colours.

The absence of any banking families and the comparatively modest earnings of merchants, craftsmen, farmers and mercenaries explain why no very great fortunes were amassed in the Confederation. By comparison with other countries, incomes in Switzerland were more uniform even at that time, the differences between rich and poor were not extreme and a large middle class with broadly distributed property ownership was able to develop. This was no doubt one of the factors which prevented the occurrence of grave social upheavals in Switzerland in spite of the marked class distinctions.

Swiss Air Gazette.

New Lease of Life for Melchsee-Frutt

With the building of new transportation facilities, the 1,300 bed resort of Melchsee-Frutt, situated at an altitude of 6,233 ft. has all that's needed to start a new lease of life. The old aerial cableway linking the Stockalp with traffic-free Melchsee-Frutt was no longer able to cope with the tourist traffic. The new gondola cableway, comprising 78 four-passenger cabins now takes 500 people an hour a distance of more than two miles up to the Plateau. The second new transportation facility, an aerial cableway from Melchsee-Frutt to the Bonistock takes 60 passengers. It acts as a feeder service for the newly-constructed Bettenalp-Bonistock ski-lift and opens up new ski runs. Also proving a success is the Glogghuis group sports hotel which has 80 beds and can additionally sleep 130 people in its tourist hostel. The hotel has an indoor swimming pool heated by solar energy, keep-fit facilities, a sauna, a film projection room and a games room.