

Swiss quality & foreign labour

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SWISS QUALITY & FOREIGN LABOUR

It is almost a commonplace to the Swiss: their land is extremely poor in raw materials. Apart from what they often call "white coal", water resources for hydro-electric power generation, the Swiss have to import almost all the materials needed for their industry. And these massive imports have to be paid for. A look into their balance of payments reveals where they get the necessary funds from: tourism, returns from Switzerland's extensive foreign investments, the inflow of insurance premiums and revenues from numerous other services bring the country currency to the value of many milliards of francs each year. By far the biggest source of credit for paying foreign debts, however, is the export from Switzerland of goods of all kinds.

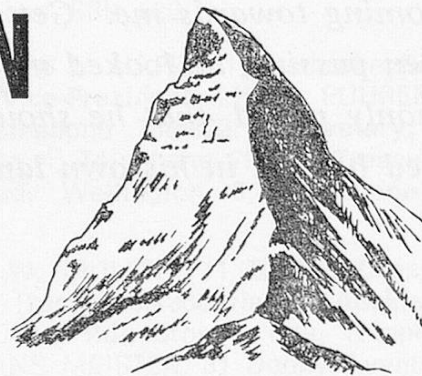
NOT JUST CHEESE . . .

The reader of these lines, from whatever country, will know of a few typical Swiss products that find their way out to all parts of the world: chocolate or cheese f.i. He may even be wearing a Swiss watch. No doubt chocolate, cheese and watches are the most renowned of Swiss exports, but they are not by any means the only ones. They are not even the primary earners of foreign currency. Machinery and metal goods, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, textiles and clothing are quantitatively much more important, for example. The range of Swiss exports

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is extremely wide. And the reader may wonder whether there are any typical attributes that hold the motley list together.

Swiss products are as a rule characterised by a high quality standard and by a measure of originality. This statement might at first seem to indicate a streak of chauvinism in the writer of these lines. But the suspicion is unfounded. Swiss industry is in fact practically condemned to turn out high-quality and specialised products. The smallness of our country and the absence of a big home market offer no foothold to large-scale manufacturing enterprises working on a mass-production basis. Then there is Switzerland's geographical position—far from the sea and therefore involving high transport costs. These disadvantages can only be offset, successfully, as results have proved, by an industry that packs its goods with value and produces things for which substitutes are few.

Chocolate, cheese and watches are only three examples. No less apposite would be diesel engines for giant ships, textile machines, turbines, pharmaceuticals and vitamins, embroidery or herbicides—all Swiss products whose quality gives them a strong position on world markets. Just how strong this position is in the face of international competition has come out clearly in recent times: in spite of a considerable rise in the relative value of the Swiss franc, exports from Switzerland have continued to increase in volume. This comparative immunity to the effects of rising prices is unquestionably a confirmation of the quality level of Swiss industrial products.

As a general rule, high-quality manufacture and specialisation call for a large labour investment. It is noteworthy that the number of persons employed in industry in Switzerland is relatively higher than in other countries in the "post-industrial world". Shortly after the Second World War, when the demand for goods from Switzerland rose steeply—the country had been spared the massive destruction suffered by most of Europe—the shortage of inland labour quickly began to become acute. This initiated an extraordinary inflow of workers from other countries. Some of them stayed for several years, others came only for a few months per year to take advantage of the seasonal boom in labour requirements in the building, catering and farming sectors.

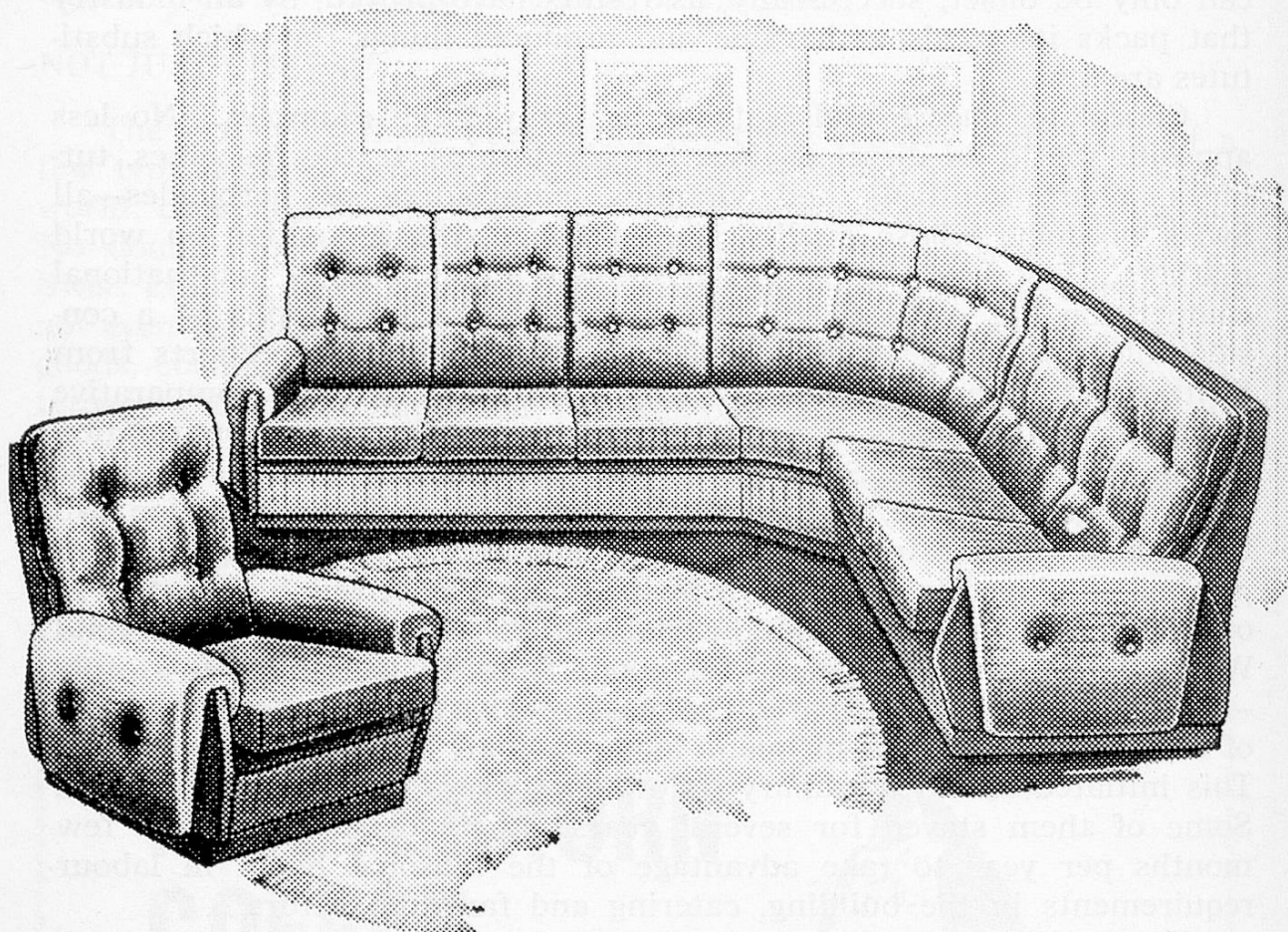
Nearly 900,000 foreign workers are today employed in Switzerland. This figure must of course be seen in relation to the total number of workers in the country, which is about three million, in order to give a fair idea of the economic importance of foreign labour. Without these helpers from abroad many companies would have to cut down their activities quite sharply. Numerous private or public undertakings would be unable to continue operation if a significant percentage of foreign workers decided or were forced to leave the country. It is perhaps interesting to record that by far the largest contingent of foreign workers comes from Italy. But other Mediterranean lands are also well represented, as are Switzerland's other immediate neighbours, whence come a large number of the so-called "frontier workers" who are employed in Switzerland but live outside. About one third of the foreign workers

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—“guest workers” is the preferred term—have jobs in industry, but their number is receding relative to those engaged in the non-industrial sector.

One worker in three in Switzerland, and one person in six, is a foreigner. The reader can very well imagine what this proportion would mean in his own country. It leaves no doubt about the dimensions of the foreign labour problem on the political and social planes. Even among those who recognise what foreign workers mean and what they have done for our economy, the view is today widely held that Switzerland is too dependent on foreign helpers. The claim that the foreign permeation of Swiss life has gone too far meets with a good deal of support. Discussions about the “right” number of foreigners today constitute one of the most controversial issues of Swiss politics and economics. Most people agree that the number of foreign workers and foreign immigrants generally should not be allowed to rise any further. Since the Swiss labour potential grows only very slowly, the labour market in the country is likely to remain very strained in future unless eased by a recession. Industry is facing up to this situation by investing a lot of money in labour-saving and production efficiency measures and by transferring manufacture to places abroad.

The quality production mentioned at the outset is closely bound up in Switzerland with the traditional economic structure deriving from the trades and crafts, which is of considerable importance even today. It would be mistaken to assume, however, that this structure is purely Swiss in its origins. Even in the very earliest phases of industrialisation Switzerland entertained large numbers of “guest workers”. Some of them laid the foundations of enterprises that today have an international name. The Frankfurt-born Henri Nestle and the American Charles Page, for instance, fathered a food company that now does business all over the world. The Englishman Charles Brown and the German Walter Boveri were the moving spirits in the foundation and rise of one of the country’s major engineering companies. Non-Swiss also played a large part in the development of watchmaking, chemistry and the textile industry. The link between Swiss quality and foreign labour is accordingly one that has its own undisputed historical significance.

Guy Bar in the Swiss Air Gazette.

The Swiss Foreign Trade in July 1974

Switzerland’s Balance of Trade

Period	Imports	Exports	Adverse Balance	Value of exports as a % of the value of imports.
1973 July	3,105.8	2,540.2	565.6	81.8
1974 June	3,558.0	2,884.3	673.7	81.1
1974 July	3 880.9	3 157.3	723.6	81.4
1973 Jan.-July	20,735.8	16,779.9	3,955.9	80.9
1974 Jan.-July	25,806.2	20,717.1	5,089.1	80.3