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Basle, a century ago (from a contemporary engraving).

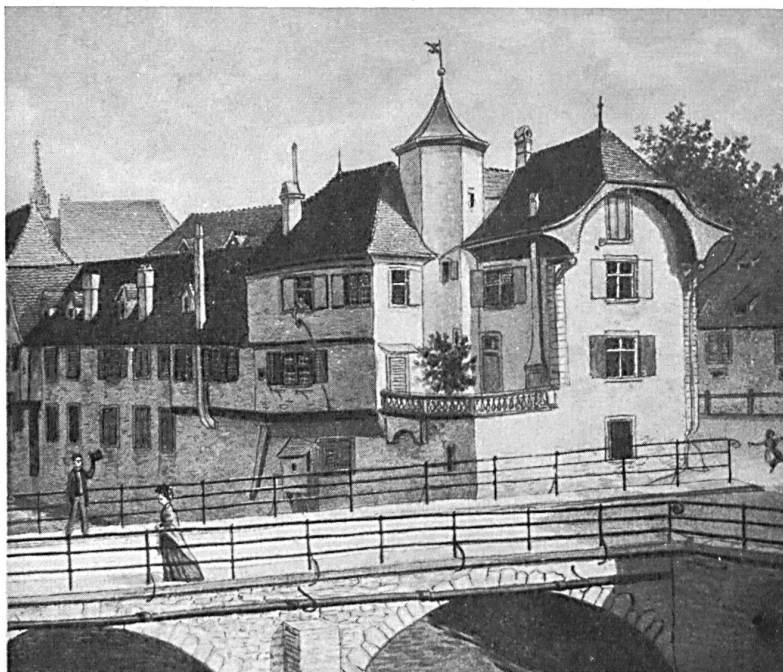
In a few words :

Basle, a town of humanism, trade and industry

Centre of the silk ribbon, schappe and dyestuffs industries

A few historical notes

The town of Basle is first mentioned in historical documents (under the name of « Basilia ») comparatively late in history, with reference to a visit made by the Emperor Valentinian in 374 A.D. It is quite certain however that it already existed before this — from the beginning of our era approximately. Situated on the boundaries of Germania and Gaul, it went through a period of vicissitudes, changing masters, being sacked, suffering fire, plague and earthquake... but more important is the fact that shortly after the year one thousand it was placed under the temporal power of its bishop, and remained so for more than five hundred years. What was equally important for the development of this Rhine town, which became part of the Swiss Confederation in 1501, was that it succeeded — in 1521 — in shaking off the episcopal yoke and coming directly under imperial control, and that eight years later it joined the Reformation.



By courtesy of Ciba-Review

The geographical position of Basle, situated at a bend of a great river, the Rhine, is particularly suitable for trade ; five centuries of political stability therefore enabled its guilds of craftsmen and merchants to develop and grow rich. International trade thrived and the town expanded. A famous Council was held there from 1431 to 1448. Its university, founded by Pope Pius II in 1460 (it is therefore the oldest in Switzerland), soon made it a centre of culture : many scholars of world-wide repute made its name illustrious, from Oecolampades and Paracelsus to Nietzsche and Jacob Burckhardt. Other great names of the Renaissance are closely connected

The « Engelsburg » house of Emmanuel Hoffmann-Muller (1644-1702), the manufacturer who introduced manifold warp weaving in Basle.

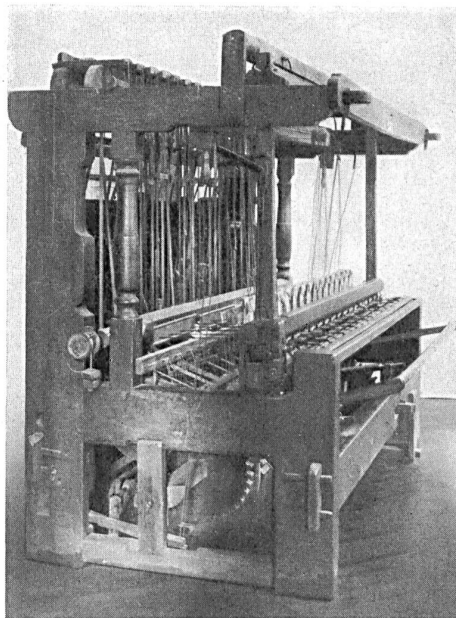
with that of Basle, including Froben and Amerbach the printers, Erasmus the humanist and Hans Holbein, the younger, one of the greatest portrait-painters of all time.

A highly developed corporate organisation determined the political and social structure of Basle and led to the creation of an oligarchy of burghesses, merchants and craftsmen, which held undisputed sway over the affairs of the town and its rural territory until the time of the Revolution. Jealous of its rights, this self-styled nobility ruled with energy but at the same time with great breadth of vision, as is proved by the fact that the university subsisted entirely on the contributions of the wealthy families.

In the second half of the 16th century, emigrants from Lorraine, the Netherlands, Lombardy and elsewhere — for the most part victims of religious persecutions — came and settled in Basle where they introduced various textile industries: the weaving of velvet and ribbons, the dyeing of silk and the spinning and twisting of schappe. They had their ups and downs, but the new activities that they had introduced prospered, overcame crises, became adapted to the introduction of machines, survived the division of Basle (1833) into two cantons known as «town» and «country», witnessed the creation of the first postage stamp, the famous Basle «dove» (1845), the establishment of a river port on the Rhine (1906), the foundation of a big annual Industries Fair (1917) and became, after more than three and a half centuries of continual development, the three big modern industries of silk ribbons, schappe spinning and dyestuffs, from the last of which has sprung that of pharmaceutical products. With more than 180,000 inhabitants, Basle is to-day Switzerland's second-largest city.

Silk Ribbons

There is no trace to be found of the regular weaving of ribbons at Basle before 1570. This was the time of the establishment of the foreign makers of « passementerie » who wove velvet and ribbons. Their industry prospered and soon employed a large number of workers who did job-work and constituted a sort of proletariat. At the beginning of the 17th century, an attempt at a reorganisation of the profession led to the expulsion of the workers who, in spite of orders, settled in the surrounding villages and continued their activity there. Fifty years or so later, there were as many as a hundred looms in the country around Basle, owned by « non-union members ». During this period, ribbon manufacture became separated from other silk industries and from velvet weaving, which was in a bad way and finally disappeared. It is not possible to describe here all the disputes that took place between manufacturers proper and the contractors who had their ribbons made to order, the weavers of the town and those of the country, and finally the struggles of the Basle ribbon makers to meet foreign competition. Let us merely mention that the industry prospered in the hands of a certain number of influential families, especially after the invention of a loom producing 14 to 16 ribbons simultaneously (see picture on page 101). The manufacture, use and exportation of this machine also led to many disputes. About the year 1730, an ingenious manufacturer had the idea — at first opposed — of working his looms by means of water-wheels, while in 1840 steam was adopted as a driving power. The invention of the Jacquard loom gave a further impetus to the industry



A multiple warp loom from the middle of the 18th century.
By courtesy of Ciba-Review



Aerial view of Basle. On the left along the river between the first two bridges, lies the old city.

Photo Balair



by opening up vast new possibilities of production. Ever since the 18th century, the ribbon manufacturers have constituted the largest and most powerful section of the industrialists and merchants of Basle. They have handled not only the manufacture but also — and most successfully — the sale of their products.

During the 19th century the number of looms continually increased. The first really mechanized factory for making silk ribbons dates back to 1846. The development of this industry was unfortunately interrupted by the 1914-1918 war. Even afterwards, the situation could not improve in any lasting manner, because the changes brought about in fashions by the war, the monetary restrictions and other difficulties did considerable harm to the Basle ribbon industry, even before the big slump of 1930. The situation seemed to be improving however in 1939, when the second world war broke out. In 1945 the need to replenish stocks was felt, but devaluations, import restrictions and other factors too had their adverse effects. From 5 million Swiss francs both before and during the war, exports nevertheless rose to 15 millions in 1946 and 19.5 millions in 1948. Today they amount to 12.22 millions (1954), the quantities exported being approximately the same, but the average values having decreased.

Space does not permit us to go here into the details of the industrial structure of this branch. The introduction of looms driven independently by individual motors made decentralization possible: the present trend is towards the establishment of small decentralized factories, run on very rational lines, with modern machinery and skilled workers. Manufacture is almost entirely concentrated in the cantons of Basle-Country and Aargau, but all the big firms have their offices in Basle.



The ribbon in feminine fashion a century ago (from contemporary engravings).

Manufacturers have the hard task of organizing a production which must be constantly changing to follow the trends of fashion and the requirements of consumers and must be adapted to modern techniques in order to be able to meet foreign competition on an equal footing. They are sustained in their efforts by the memory of the great tradition to which they are heir. The Basle ribbon industry today uses not only the traditional silk and rayon but also cotton, staple fibre, nylon, etc. It produces a very complete range of articles from the ribbons used for fashion (couture, millinery, hairdressing, lingerie, etc.) to those used by the electro-technical industry for insulation as well as a great number of ribbons for packaging and other purposes.

Other economic aspects

In 1573, refugees introduced schappe spinning into Basle. This branch has expanded considerably and the Basle spinning mills are among the most important in Europe. They have naturally adapted their production to present-day requirements and spin rayon fibres according to the schappe process (that is to say staple fibre) as well as synthetic fibres (nylon, orlon, etc.).

The textile industries needed dyes. About the year 1860 therefore, Basle saw the birth of a chemical industry intended mainly for the production of aniline dyes. This new industry may thus be considered as a direct outcome of the development of the ribbon industry. The Basle chemical products factories succeeded in rising to a place among the leaders of world production in this field. Since the beginning of the century, they have led, in their turn, to the manufacture of high-quality pharmaceutical products.

We shall be returning to these activities again as the occasion arises. For the moment, space being limited, we shall just mention in passing the importance of Basle as an international banking centre (Bank of International Settlements), the Swiss Industries Fair (see p. 98-99) and the river ports of Basle through which passed more than 40 % of Switzerland's total imports and exports in 1952.



Photo Guniat



Modern Basle ribbons in various styles.

Photo Wyden