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The Present Economic Situation of the Swiss Textile Industry

At the recent general meeting of the « Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Konjunkturforschung » (Swiss Association for the Study of the Economic Situation), Mr. A. Wiegner, manager of the « St. Galler Feinwebereien A.-G. » (Stoffel group) in St. Gall, presented an interesting account of the economic situation of the Swiss textile industry. An idea of the interest it affords may be had when it is known that its author took a decisive part, during the war, in all measures connected with the rationing of textiles and the organizing of the Swiss textile industry in general. We can give a summary here of only some of the items of this report, those best suited to interest our readers abroad.

The editor.

General development of the Swiss textile industry

In order to make clear the different problems to be dealt with, the author started by giving an outline of the structure of the Swiss textile industry with its origins deep-rooted in the past and which, until now, has for the most part escaped from both horizontal and vertical concentration. The further one moves away from raw materials, the less capital is required by factories, which favours the existence of a very great number of small concerns. In spinning mills, spindles numbered 400,000 in 1827 and 1.6 million in 1887. To-day this figure is only 1.1 million, but the total production is nevertheless appreciably greater owing to the increase in the output of modern machines. At the present moment there are about 20,000 concerns engaged in the production and distribution of textiles ; they employ 250,000 people and are represented by 160 different associations. It can therefore be said that 10 % of all the people in Switzerland pursuing a lucrative occupation depend directly on the textile industry.

This industry experienced its greatest development before the first world war, but was greatly affected by the last war ; it was in the years after 1920 that it really began to adjust itself to the new world conditions, and then the great economic crisis of 1930 dealt it another hard blow. However, after 1935, a general resumption of trade brought about a marked improvement in the situation.

Predominance of the „labour“ element

Continuing his account, Mr. Wiegner explained that the increase in the price of textile goods which has occurred in recent years is not only due to the increase in wages and in the price of raw materials, but also to the fact that the industry has had to modify its manufacturing methods. As a matter of fact, at the moment during the last war when raw materials were scarce, factories would not have been able to continue to employ all of their workers if they had not started to produce articles requiring the use of greater man-power. Thus the same quantity of raw materials was used to manufacture fewer articles but at the same time provided a means of livelihood for more workers, hence the increase in the price of finished articles.

Productive capacity 1948 = 1938

The Swiss textile industry began to recover again rapidly in 1945 and 1946, and in 1947 reached its pre-war level of productive capacity. Until the end of 1947 demand was always greater than supply in this industry. The greater part of Swiss textile exports is made up of fabrics. The

average annual exports of cotton, silk, rayon and staple fibre fabrics for 1937 and 1938 amounted to 100 million Swiss francs. Now, on export, fabrics have increased in price from this period until the end of the war by about 330 %. Therefore post-war exports would have had to reach a value of 330 million Swiss francs to be equivalent to those of ten years ago. In actual fact, they only amounted to 260 million Swiss francs. However, taken in conjunction with the home market consumption, they were sufficient to ensure the normal functioning of all concerns.

Obstacles to export

Since then, the export of Swiss textiles has run up against serious obstacles. First of all, the last hard currency markets have been able to replenish their stocks to saturation point, and the other countries, many of whom are far from having satisfied all their needs for goods, have put obstacles in the way of the importing of consumer goods, while seeking unilaterally to increase their own exports with a view to obtaining currency. In this way, exports of fabrics fell from 267 million Swiss francs in 1947 to 161 million in 1948. For instance, during this period exports of Swiss fabrics to Sweden fell from 44 to 6 million and, in the case of Argentina, from 39 to 5 million Swiss francs.

Unless something completely unforeseen happens it can be expected that, in the future, the demand of the home market will be more or less the same as it was before the war, with imports meeting part of the demand, so that the Swiss textile industry will need to export the same volume as before, if it is to continue to employ the whole of its man-power.

The use of imports to help exports

If, therefore, exports cannot be adequately maintained, supplies will increase on the home market, and in this lies danger for the whole economy of the country. Therefore all branches of the textile industry expect the authorities to use Swiss imports to help exports. The author sees in this procedure the principal remedy to the imminent danger of unemployment, with Switzerland moreover still showing an unfavourable balance of trade. He points out in passing, that the United States of America, to quote only one country, levies duties on the import of Swiss textiles ten times greater than those imposed on textile goods on their entry into Switzerland.]

The tasks that lie ahead

But the speaker does not think that bilateralism is the only remedy for the present condition of the Swiss textile industry. If this industry wishes to keep its lead, he says, it will have to become rationalized, not only in so far as industrial production proper (machinery) is concerned, but also in the organization of labour. The co-operation of all concerns is necessary if this is to be achieved. Tradition, although it has its good side, is also dangerous in that it often prevents technical and economic problems from being seen « from the outside » and without a certain sentimental bias. Many problems of modernization can only be solved by collective planning, not according to ideas of distributive justice, but according to the coldly rational principles of drastic reorganization (standardization of techniques, bringing up to date of machinery, etc.). Moreover scientific research, with a view to the improvement of methods and products and the perfecting of new processes and new materials, must be energetically encouraged, by the official laboratories as well as in private enterprise.

At the present moment *every failure to advance is a step back*; and therefore Swiss textile industrialists must advance to be ready to meet, and overcome, the difficulties that lie ahead.

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Dans la légende du document reproduit à la page 105 de «Textiles Suisses» No 4/1948, il manquait les mentions suivantes :

In the caption describing the photograph reproduced on page 105, «Textiles Suisses» No 4/1948, the following mention was erroneously omitted :

En el texto al pie del documento reproducido en la página 105 de «Textiles Suisses» No. 4/1948, fué omitida la mención siguiente :

In der Legende des auf Seite 105 veröffentlichten Bildes der «Textiles Suisses» Nr. 4/1948 fehlten folgende Angaben :

Modèle Gaby Messer.

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I nr. 4/1948 av vår tidskrift, sida 73 har smygigt in sig ett sättfel i svenska legenden, som vi önska beriktiga som följande :

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