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Willy C. Forster



Textile and fashion circles, both at home and abroad, were distressed to hear of the death in the last days of 1964 of Mr. Willy C. Forster, the well-known embroidery manufacturer, who was head of Forster Willi & Co., in St. Gall.

Born in 1899, he was the son of Conrad Forster-Willi, who in 1904 founded an embroidery firm in St. Gall, known as Belser, Forster & Co. The firm went in for the production and sale of white embroideries as well as a wide range of dotted Swiss.

In spite of the great artistic gifts he obviously possessed, the young Willy-Conrad Forster nevertheless prepared himself, on leaving school, for a commercial career, in particular by doing a period of voluntary apprenticeship in a bank, then by familiarizing himself with all the activities of his father's business. In 1919, he was sent to England where he stayed for a year and a half, initiating himself into the art of sales with the firm's British representative. This stay in Great Britain, at a time when the St. Gall embroidery industry was suffering heavily from the after-effects of the first World War, proved invaluable to Willy Forster, by making him familiar with the difficult side of the business right from the start. On his return to Switzerland, he worked with his father; the economic situation had not improved and father and son were spared no difficulties, the latter being responsible mainly for sales while the former looked after manufacture. Business was slack and they had to be continually on the lookout for new markets in order to keep the firm's head above water. About 1924, business began to improve and, in 1927, Conrad Forster made his son a partner in the firm. In 1929, the world's economic situation deteriorated again: Great Britain abandoned free trade and in 1931 devaluated the pound. This catastrophic development had its good side however, since it obliged Willy Forster to re-examine the whole question of sales and look for new markets, particularly in Switzerland herself. The devaluation of the Swiss franc in 1936 had a good effect on the Swiss embroidery industry and enabled it to get on its feet again. It is to this time that the development of Forster-Willi's collection of novelties dates back and it was at this time too that the firm was admitted to the « Paris Committee », to which the St. Gall embroiderers who create novelties for couture belong.

The difficulties caused by the second World War were able to be overcome thanks to the position gained by embroidery on the home market. With the end of the war, international contacts started again and Forster-

Willi continued to produce exclusivities, very popular with Parisian haute couture as well as on all foreign fashion markets. « This working for haute couture, which represented a big responsibility for the whole firm, was destined », as the late Willy C. Forster said, « to keep embroidery visibly in the wake of fashion, not only for the firm itself but for the whole industry. It compelled the designers to work in a really creative manner and at the same time constituted to a certain extent the basis of the regular collections. » In this way, Willy C. Forster, thanks to his gifts as a businessman, his spirit of enterprise, his thorough knowledge of his job, but also to his artistic gifts, his good taste and unshakeable faith in the future of the embroidery industry, succeeded in putting his name, for almost twenty years, in the forefront of those working for fashion.

When he was 35, Willy C. Forster became a member of the Board of the Swiss Union of Embroidery Exporters, to which he communicated his firm faith in the destiny of embroidery. His conviction that the recognition of St. Gall creations by Parisian couture was an essential factor of success, as well as the high standard of his collections resulted in his being selected in 1956 to succeed the late Friedrich Hug as head of the Paris Committee. He did a great deal of work for the Industrial Museum Commission, especially for the Fashion School attached to the museum. In addition the deceased placed his great technical knowledge at the service of the Exporters Union, working on many commissions and on the committee of the Office for the Promotion of the Swiss Cotton and Embroidery Industries; he was also a member of the Directorship of the Swiss Office for the Development of Trade and the Editorial Committee of the periodical « Textiles Suisses ». In 1957, he was appointed vice-president of the Embroidery Exporters Union. All these posts and responsibilities he fulfilled with a perfect sense of duty, in the interests of the St. Gall industry as a whole, which has lost in him one of its most prominent figures.

Well liked by his numerous friends and all who came in contact with him, very fond of nature and the mountains, Willy C. Forster was a complete man, who always remained cheerful in spite of persistent ill-health and who, right to the end, carried out his many tasks with great enthusiasm and rare courage. To his family, his friends and those who worked with him, the Swiss Office for the Development of Trade and the editors of « Textiles Suisses » wish to extend here their heartfelt sympathy.