

Small Number – Big Impact

Special exhibition at the Swiss National Museum, Zürich

From March 2nd until October 28th 2007

«Big Number – Small Impact»

Emigration from the canton of Ticino

Emigration from the southernmost Swiss canton began in the middle of the 19th century and took place in two waves, the first being triggered by the discovery of gold deposits in California (1848). The inundations of the year 1868 caused a second big movement towards the USA. Altogether and up to the year 1947, some 27'000 persons emigrated from the Ticino to the United States.

The most popular destinations differed from region to region. People from the northern part of the canton (Sopraceneri) tended to emigrate to the USA, while southerners from the Sottoceneri preferred Latin America or Algeria. People from the Puschlav mostly chose Australia for their new homeland, while the natives of Val Blenio preferred seasonal migration to other parts of Switzerland or neighbouring countries. In the 19th century the Ticino still practised hereditary division: If a farmer had four sons, his land would be divided in four parts. The son, for his part, would again divide the farm according to the number of the male offspring. The resulting lots, hardly worth the name of «farm», were too small to support a family. Emigration was one solution for this situation. Characteristically, emigrants from the Ticino often returned to Switzerland, at least in the decades before 1900. They brought home not only their earnings but all kinds of know-how which they invested in native enterprises. They built up infrastructure for tourism, encouraged the building of railways and generally contributed to modernizing the canton.

Emigration from the canton of Glarus

In the middle of the 19th century huge parts of the population left the valleys and mountains along the river Linth. In the years between 1847 and 1854 alone, one out of twelve inhabitants emigrated. This was due to general poverty: Working conditions in the textile factories were inhuman, the salaries extremely low. The potato pest of these years deprived the population of its principle food, hundreds of people dying during the ensuing famine.

As their native country offered no prospects for the future, thousands sought their luck in faraway America. For the settlers who founded the colony New Glarus in Wisconsin (1845) the hardships of the Atlantic

crossing paid off. They had bought a generous stretch of farming land on which to build a new existence. But many of their fellow emigrants were left on their own, especially the old and handicapped who were stranded in New York or New Orleans, just barely able to struggle along.

Just like numerous other cantons Glarus gave financial support to the emigration of poor families or dropouts, thus minimizing future welfare costs. One typical example for this is 18-year-old Samuel Fässler, coming from a poor family and repeatedly fined for stealing fruit. The Glarus authorities paid a substantial sum to a shipping company and sent their «incorrigible offender» Fässler off to the USA in 1851.