

Forum Schweizer Geschichte Schwyz.

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Off to a new world – Switzerland elsewhere

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Many of us dream of emigrating. The reasons for leaving Switzerland were, and still are, many and varied. The exhibition Switzerland elsewhere has dozens of exciting stories to tell about Swiss men and women who decided to leave the country and seek their fortune abroad.

For a long time, Switzerland was regarded as a country of emigration. Just a few generations ago and up to the early 20th century, many Swiss citizens were forced to leave because of economic hardship. Others travelled to Africa, Asia and Oceania voluntarily where the colonial economy offered merchants, farmers, missionaries, and natural scientists many new, exciting opportunities. Today, about eleven per cent of the total Swiss population lives abroad: France, Germany, Italy, the UK, and Spain are the favourite destinations in Europe, while the USA, Canada, and Israel rank top among the overseas countries.

In search of a new perspective

But what is behind this wish to settle abroad, today as well as in the past?

Migrations are a constant, in historical as well as global terms; this is also true for Switzerland. Up to the age of the French Revolution, mercenarism was the most common cause for leaving the country. Mass emigration only became a phenomenon in the 19th century when nearly a half million people left Switzerland for distant shores and continents – always in the hope of finding economic fortune and personal happiness in their “new home”.

From «Müller the Turk» to Damian Felchlin from Schwyz

The exhibition presents an array of fascinating stories of Swiss migrants from the 19th century to the present. Extraordinary exhibits, photographs, and film clips document some of the narratives, for example, the story of “Müller the Turk” who left Lucerne in the 19th century and made a career for himself in Istanbul as director of the Oriental Railway, or the case of young Damian Felchlin from Schwyz who now works as a trade commissioner in the USA where he is responsible for promoting the import of Swiss products.

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Council of the Swiss Abroad

The Organization of the Swiss Abroad (OSA) was founded in 1916 with the aim of supporting Swiss expatriates in maintaining connections with their home country and among themselves. OSA represents the interests of the 751,800 Swiss nationals living abroad and is recognized by the authorities as the official organ of the “Fifth Switzerland”. It informs Swiss expats about what is going on at home and offers a wide range of services. OSA is supported by around 650 Swiss associations and institutions across the world.

Subsidized emigration

In the early 1930s, during the Great Depression, the federal government subsidized the emigration of destitute people, who were willing to start a new life as settlers in Brazil received support.

Recording your own “migration history”

A rich accompanying programme invites you to reflect on the subject of migration. How about exploring your own family’s ancestry? On selected Sundays, the Office for Migration Histories invites visitors to share their own or their family’s migration stories and have them recorded in writing.

Do not hesitate to contact us if you have any further questions:

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