

From home looms to factories

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the ribbon industry of Basel gradually moved from home work to factories. The introduction of power looms, driven first by water and then by steam and electricity, allowed the concentration of production in large mills, where hundreds of looms could be operated under the supervision of the manufacturer. The factory offered advantages over home work: better quality control, faster production, less embezzlement of material and the use of mechanical power. It also required large investments in buildings, machines and power while transforming the weavers from home workers into factory employees.¹

The transition was slow and incomplete. Home weaving continued alongside factory production for decades, in particular in the villages of Basel-Landschaft, where the electrification of home looms in the early twentieth century briefly revived the home industry. Electric motors, supplied by the new electricity networks, could drive the looms in the weavers' houses, so that the home weavers could compete with the factories for a time. But the decline of demand for ribbons after the First World War, when fashion changed and the use of ribbons diminished, ended the home industry in most villages by the 1930s.

The factories of the ribbon industry were built in the city and in the countryside, often near water courses that provided power. Some of them were later converted to other uses. Several of the chemical companies of Basel began their activity in buildings or on sites previously used by the textile industry. The industrial landscape of Basel thus shows the succession of the two industries: the ribbon mills of the nineteenth century and the chemical plants that replaced them.

The mechanisation of the ribbon industry required capital on a larger scale than the putting-out system, and the ribbon manufacturers financed it partly from their own resources and partly through the banks that were

From home looms to factories

emerging in the city. The factory age thus reinforced the connection between industry and banking in Basel, which Chapter III examines.

1 Notes

1. On the transition of the Basel ribbon industry from home weaving to factory production in the second half of the nineteenth century, see HLS, article "Posamenterei". To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-from-home-loom-to-factories