

Geigy: from the dye merchant to the dye maker

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The Geigy family had traded in dyestuffs, drugs and chemicals since 1758, as Part C showed. In the late 1850s, Johann Rudolf Geigy-Merian, the head of the family firm, began the production of synthetic dyes, initially in cooperation with Johann Jakob Müller-Pack, a dye manufacturer, who produced fuchsine in a factory on the Rosental, in Kleinbasel.¹

The production of fuchsine used arsenic acid as an oxidising agent, which left process waste that contained large quantities of arsenic. In 1863 and 1864, wells in the neighbourhood of the Müller-Pack factory in Kleinbasel were found to be contaminated with arsenic, making residents ill. After the authorities investigated, the factory owner was prosecuted and ordered to pay compensation, while the factory had to close or change its process.² The case was one of the first environmental scandals of the chemical industry and led to stricter regulation of chemical factories in Basel. Geigy took over the business and developed it into one of the leading dye producers of Switzerland.

The arsenic case of the 1860s stands at the beginning of a long history of conflicts between the chemical industry of Basel and its environment. The industry discharged waste into the Rhine and the ground for more than a century, contaminated sites in the city and the region, and caused occasional accidents. The most serious occurred in November 1986, when a fire in a warehouse of the Sandoz company at Schweizerhalle released toxic chemicals into the Rhine and killed fish along hundreds of kilometres of the river. Part G examines the consequences of Schweizerhalle for the regulation of the industry and for the liability of companies.

1 Notes

1. On the beginning of synthetic dye production by the Geigy family in cooperation with Johann Jakob Müller-Pack (late 1850s) and the development of J. R. Geigy, see HLS, article "Geigy". To be verified. ↩
2. On the arsenic contamination of wells near the fuchsine factory of Johann Jakob Müller-Pack in Kleinbasel (1863/64), the resulting legal proceedings and compensation, see the literature on the history of the Basel chemical industry and its environmental impact. To be verified. ↩

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