

Sandoz and the other dye makers

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In 1886, the chemist Alfred Kern and the businessman Edouard Sandoz founded the firm Kern & Sandoz in Basel to produce synthetic dyes. Kern, an experienced dye chemist who had worked for Bindschedler & Busch, provided the scientific knowledge, while Sandoz, from a family of watchmakers and merchants of Le Locle, provided the commercial skills and part of the capital. The firm began production with alizarin blue and auramine, two dyes developed by Kern. After Kern's death in 1893, the firm was converted into a joint-stock company under the name Chemische Fabrik vormals Sandoz, later Sandoz AG.¹

Other dye makers were founded in Basel in the same period, among them Durand & Huguenin, established in 1871 by chemists from Lyon and Mulhouse, which specialised in dyes for printing on textiles and later became part of Sandoz. By the end of the nineteenth century, Basel had several significant dye producers, which together formed the second largest dye industry in the world after Germany, although at a considerable distance in size.

The Basel dye makers specialised in high-value dyes for particular uses, in which they could compete with the German giants through quality and service. They maintained close relationships with the textile industries of Switzerland, France, Italy, Britain and the United States, sent technical representatives to advise dyers on the use of their products and adapted their range to the needs of particular markets. This strategy of specialisation, quality and customer service, which the small Swiss companies adopted against their larger competitors, would also characterise their later development in pharmaceuticals.

1 Notes

1. On the foundation of Kern & Sandoz in 1886 by Alfred Kern and Edouard Sandoz, its first products and its conversion into the Chemische Fabrik vormals Sandoz (1895), see HLS, article "Sandoz". Dates to be verified. ↩

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