

## Silk waste and the long life of an industry

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The silk ribbon industry was the most prominent but not the only branch of the silk industry that the refugees brought to Basel. The spinning of silk waste, known in German as *Florettseide* or, from the French, *Schappe*, used the fibres that could not be reeled into continuous threads: the outer and inner layers of the cocoon, pierced cocoons from which the moth had emerged, and the waste of the reeling process. These fibres were cleaned, degummed, combed and spun into a yarn that was less fine than reeled silk but cheaper and suitable for many purposes.<sup>1</sup>

The Basel silk waste industry developed slowly in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and expanded in the nineteenth, when mechanical spinning mills were built in the city and its surroundings. It became one of the most important silk waste industries in Europe, with several companies operating internationally, with mills in France, Italy and Germany. The industry declined in the twentieth century with the rise of synthetic fibres, until its last companies closed or were absorbed.

The history of the silk waste industry illustrates a principle that runs through the industrial history of Basel: the transformation of a raw material of low value into a product of higher value through technical knowledge. The spinners of silk waste turned the refuse of the silk industry into a marketable yarn. The dyers of the silk ribbon industry learned to produce colours that the market demanded. The chemists of the nineteenth century turned coal tar, a waste product of gas production, into synthetic dyes. And the pharmaceutical chemists of the twentieth century turned molecules into medicines. The continuity lies in the capacity to add value through knowledge, which is also the principle of a financial centre that adds value to capital through expertise.

## 1 Notes

1. On silk waste spinning (Florettseidenspinnerei, Schappe) in Basel and its development from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, see HLS, article "Seidenindustrie". To be verified. ↩

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