

The Schweizer Mustermesse of 1917

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

The modern fair business of Basel began in the middle of the First World War. Although Switzerland was neutral, it was surrounded by belligerents. Its industry suffered from the interruption of imports, the closure of export markets and the controls imposed by both sides on trade with neutral countries. Part D described how the Société Suisse de Surveillance économique and the Allied and German supervisory bodies monitored Swiss imports and exports during the war. At the same time, the war removed foreign competitors from the Swiss market, because German, French and Austrian goods could no longer be delivered in the usual quantities. Swiss manufacturers had an opportunity to win domestic customers, provided they could show what they produced.¹

The model for such a display was the sample fair, the *Mustermesse*, a form that Leipzig had developed in the late nineteenth century. At a sample fair, manufacturers no longer brought their goods for sale on the spot. They exhibited samples, took orders from wholesalers and retailers, and delivered later from the factory. Lyon had revived its own fair in 1916 on this model as a deliberate instrument of French economic warfare against the Leipzig fair. In Switzerland, Basel took up the idea. Supported by business circles and by the cantonal government, a group of initiators prepared a national fair for Swiss products. The first *Schweizer Mustermesse* opened in Basel in April 1917.²

The first fair was held in provisional premises and attracted, according to the anniversary publications, several hundred exhibitors and a large number of visitors from all parts of the country. Its success led to the foundation of a permanent body to organise it. The Genossenschaft Schweizer Mustermesse, a cooperative in which the canton, the city's business community and other shareholders took part, acquired land in Kleinbasel near the Badischer Bahnhof and built the first permanent exhibition halls in the 1920s. The choice of the site linked the fair to the

German railway station and to the Rhine harbours, both of which Part D and the first chapter of this Part described.³

The *Muba*, as the fair came to be called, was for most of the twentieth century a fixture of Swiss life. It presented consumer goods, machinery, household appliances, textiles and food to a mass public, drawing school classes, farming families and urban consumers who travelled to Basel each spring to see the latest products. Its function changed over the decades. In the early years it served as a platform for Swiss industry to win the domestic market. After the Second World War, it became a showcase of Swiss prosperity and of consumer culture. From the 1970s onwards, specialised fairs gradually took over its role as a meeting place for trade buyers, whereas the *Muba* itself became a consumer fair with entertainment, regional products and attractions. Its visitor numbers declined in the twenty-first century. MCH Group held the last *Muba* in 2019 and then discontinued it.⁴

The history of the Mustermesse illustrates a general pattern in the life of fairs. A fair begins as a solution to a problem of information. Buyers and sellers who cannot easily find each other meet at a known place at a known time. When other channels of information develop, such as trade journals, catalogues, sales representatives and finally the internet, the general fair loses its function. Specialised fairs survive longer because they offer something that other channels cannot provide: physical inspection of goods, personal contact with decision-makers and the concentration of an entire industry in one place for a few days. The watch fair and the art fair in Basel both owed their rise to that concentration, although only one of them managed to preserve it.⁵

1 Notes

1. On the economic situation of Switzerland during the First World War, the controls of the Société Suisse de Surveillance économique (SSS) and the Schweizerische Treuhandstelle, see HLS, article "Erster Weltkrieg", and the Swiss economic history literature, for example Halbeisen/Müller/Veyrassat (eds), *Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert*, 2012. To be verified. ↩
2. On the Leipzig sample fair as a model, the revival of the Lyon fair in 1916, and the preparation and opening of the first Schweizer Mustermesse in Basel in April 1917, see HLS, article "Schweizer Mustermesse"; the anniversary publications of the Mustermesse and of MCH Group. Dates and names of the initiators to be verified. ↩

3. On the cooperative structure of the early Mustermesse, the acquisition of the site near the Badischer Bahnhof in Kleinbasel and the construction of the first permanent halls in the 1920s, see the anniversary publications of the Mustermesse and the HLS. Legal form and dates to be verified. ↩
4. On the development of the Muba from a sample fair for trade buyers to a consumer fair and its discontinuation after the edition of 2019, see the annual reports and press releases of MCH Group (2018–2019). To be verified. ↩
5. On the economics of trade fairs as institutions reducing search and transaction costs, see the literature on trade fair economics, for example the publications of the Association of the German Trade Fair Industry (AUMA) and of UFI, the Global Association of the Exhibition Industry. 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-the-schweizer-mustermesse-of-1917