

Small Number – Big Impact

Special exhibition at the Swiss National Museum, Zürich

From March 2nd until October 28th 2007

America! America!

America! America! For more than three centuries, the land of unlimited opportunities has been the most important destination for Swiss emigrants. An estimated half million, more than 70 percent of all Swiss emigrants between 1700 and today, have left Switzerland for the USA in search of a better life. Most of them suffered from hunger, misery and unemployment in their homeland. This emigration of the poor came to a peak in times of dearth and during the several agrarian crisis due to structural changes. Most Swiss home communities were glad to get rid of their poor, some of them even encouraged their departure by financing the journey across the Atlantic. Along with the masses of the poor there came adventurers and bankrupts as well as a number of social visionaries hoping to find a setting for their ideal society. But all faced the same challenge upon their arrival: to build a new life out of nothing.

Compared to the numerous Irish, Italians or Germans the Swiss certainly formed a minor group – hence «small number». Yet the biographies presented in the exhibition show an impressive number of well-known names and important contributions in all fields of life – hence «big impact». Swiss emigrants came from a variety of professions, accordingly the impact they made in their new homeland covers every part of society and everyday life. The exhibition rooms presenting the biographies of selected personalities are thus divided in five thematical spaces: culture, music, politics, science and economics. Each of these areas is dominated by a «front» figure, who is accompanied by four supporting personalities. Large-size projections of photographs and documents offer a different angle of approach.

Not all of the immigrants took roots in their new surroundings. Some failed miserably and returned to Switzerland poor and disappointed, some stayed on, just barely surviving. The great majority struggled along, finally securing a modest income as a base for the second generation, which did astonishingly well in many cases. This aspect of Swiss emigration to America, statistically more important by far, is shown in a special area devoted to emigration from the cantons of Glarus and Ticino. Its theme: «Big number – small impact».