

The Zurich Silk Industry

Silk was woven in Zurich, Switzerland in the middle of the 16th Century, and by the 17th Century the silk industry had transformed Zurich into a city of importance throughout Europe.

Around 1860 mechanisation took place and the first mechanical silk weaving mill was established. Many smaller enterprises followed afterwards.

The silk industry experienced a boom after the First World War but the depression and the Second World War hit the industry particularly hard.

During the 1950's manmade fibres poured onto the market and manufacturers and the haute couture industry used these fibres increasingly.

In the 1960's it was nearly impossible to attract workers to the silk industry due to low wages in this sector. Young women from Italy and Spain were recruited and employers offered accommodation in comfortable flats close to their workplace.

New technology became available in

the late 1960's and it was successfully applied, turning silk weaving from labour-intensive into capital-intensive production. A proposal existed to pool all enterprises to create a single Swiss Silk Company.

The tie was revived in the late 1960's and it became wider and more colourful by the day. The Zurich silk industry played a key role in designing and weaving tie fabrics for producers around the globe including the New South Wales Fire Brigade.

Unfortunately, from the mid- sixties smaller enterprises slowly began to die out and many companies were forced to shut down their operations. For many enterprises it was more profitable to sell off factory sites instead of continuing their production.

Today, two silk weavers are left in Switzerland. *Gessner AG*, also operating as *GMG*, is one of them. The company has modernised and converted one of its factory halls into a shopping centre. In 1982 *Gessner AG* merged with a silk printing firm and focused its activities on the exclusive market. The company still supplies the haute couture industry worldwide as well as the exclusive Australian market.