

"No short-cut to the revision of a country's history"

Interview with
Hans Faessler on Swiss
participation in the
Slave Trade

In an exclusive interview with Simon Inou, the author of "Reise in Schwarz-Weiss. Schweizer Ortstermine in Sachen Sklaverei", Hans Faessler talks about his motivation to write the book, the obstacles he faced while researching for it, the reaction of descendants of the Swiss slave traders to his book and why there is no difference between direct and indirect participation in the atrocious trade

What led you to take up this topic?

Questions relating to Human Rights have always interested me. I was a co-founder of the organisation called Justice for Paul Grueninger, which succeeded in fighting for the rehabilitation of that police officer from St Gallen who allowed Jewish refugees to immigrate into Switzerland, despite the closed borders during the World War II. During my research work on a cabaret programme, relating to the Haitian slave liberator Toussaint L'Ouverture, I came across historical material which suggested that Switzerland was involved in the Slave Trade and had worked towards its military sustenance. From there onwards, the topic did not leave me cold anymore.

How did you gain access to the sources of information?

There is a lot of information in scattered publications, information that does not necessarily focus on slave trading *per se*, but deals with economic history, personal adventures, histories of emigration or military exercises. Most files in the archives were

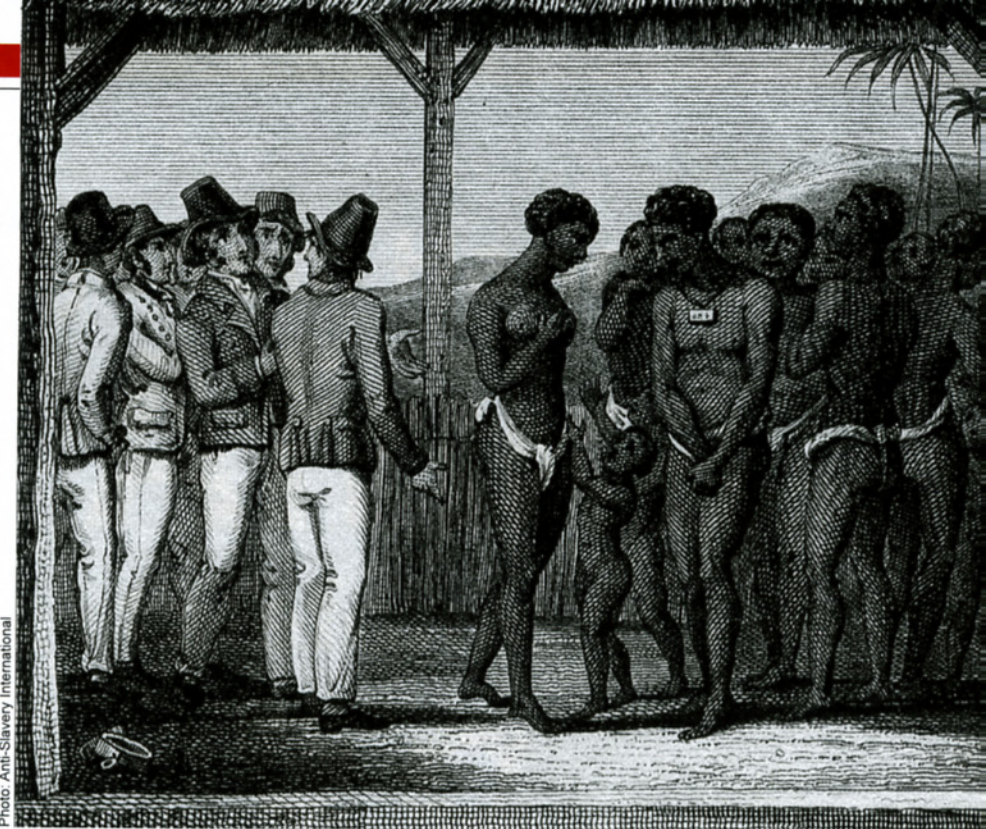


Photo: Anti-Slavery International

Robbed of all human dignity, Africans exposed for sale as chattel slaves. "They are to be seen almost daily exposed for sale...like oxen or sheep", from Bickells *West Indies as They Are*, 1825

accessible without much problem but difficulties arose when it came to the files of one Pourtalès of Neuenburg (owners of plantations and slaves, merchants of slave products), whose descendants refused to let me look into their files.

How did the families in question react? Did you know them?

There were very positive reactions from some descendants who had an interest in this section of their family history. There were also descendants who did not want to have anything to do with the topic and even went as far as to claim that their families were not involved in any such activities, despite the evidence in the files. I do not know most of these families and have so far also not received any reactions from them.

What has been the resonance to your book so far in Switzerland?

Till now, almost all have been positive. After the controversy on the undisclosed amounts of Jewish money stashed in Swiss bank vaults and after the reappraisal of the history of Switzerland during World War II conducted by the Bergier Commission, there appears to be an increased readiness to confront ourselves with some of the uncomfortable aspects of Swiss history. Civic organisations, especially those of my home Canton St Gallen (FDP, SVP), however, tried to use outrageous arguments and contortions to either hinder my work or vilify it.

The same topic has been dealt with in Switzerland with the book "Schwarze

Geschäfte" by Thomas David, Bouda Etemad and Janick Marina Schaufelbuehl. Why are so many people suddenly interested in this topic?

I think, with the breakdown of our habit to think in blocks during the Cold War, the pressure which came from African, American and Caribbean NGOs during the World Anti-Racism Conference, held in Durban in September 2001, together with the further development of International Law with regard to crimes against humanity (from Nuremberg to Yugoslavia and Rwanda), and finally after the payment of compensations and reparations (Swiss banking settlement, charges against Apartheid) in 2000, various Swiss historians had a feeling that a critical mass had been reached. With the help of scattered files, publications and other evidence, a "Swiss slavery connection" needed to be researched.

In the introduction (on page 7) to the above book "Schwarze Geschäfte" the authors write, "Switzerland has never possessed a slave trading fleet or colonies with sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean or on the American continent." However, on page 21 of your book (Introduction) you write, "Among the slave ships with "Swiss participation" were some with symbolical names like the 150-ton ship, which called itself 'la Ville de Bâle', or a 500-ton ship named 'Les treize Cantons' and a frigate called 'l'Helvetie'. How are readers to deal with such equivocal research results?"