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Book Review: Swiss Immigration to Canada

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Ilona Shulman Spaar. *Swiss Immigration to Canada*. Vancouver: Consulate General of Switzerland, 2013, 221 pp.

This lavishly-illustrated book is one of the very few publications in English to celebrate the Swiss-Canadian relationship and to highlight the long friendship between these two countries. Organised into eleven sections *Swiss Immigration to Canada* presents: the circumstances and motives for Swiss immigration to Canada, the first Swiss pioneers among fur traders and adventurers, the first Swiss colonies in Canada, the Swiss diplomacy, the Swiss humanitarian work in Canada, the Swiss community clubs in Vancouver, agriculture and farmers, business and commercial exchanges, sciences, arts and artists. The last section is about sports.

In this overview, Dr. Ilona Shulman Spaar presents the common history of those many lesser-known Swiss emigrants who chose Canada as a place to live their lives. Many of the mentioned names will seem familiar. In many cases, one might say something like “I did not know he was Swiss”, just like many Canadians would say about a celebrity “I did not know he was Canadian”. As one would guess, the migration phases from Switzerland toward North America were conducted differently if one considers either USA or Canada as a destination. The first Swiss pioneers in the new continent were mercenaries; a few came to Nouvelle-France “as early as 1604” with French explorer Samuel de Champlain, but the hostile maritime conditions and harsh winters caused many ills and deaths (p. 9). The first officially known Swiss migrant seems to be Jacques Bizard (1642-1692), who became the town-major of Montréal. A big island near Montréal still bears his name, even though most people in Canada do not know that this founder was originally from Switzerland (p. 9). Sadly, some Swiss-born soldiers who came to Nouvelle-France allied with the oppressing British invader against the French colonials. For example, the case of Frederick Haldimand (1618-1691) is mentioned (p. 11). In fact, the list of notable Swiss citizens who succeeded in Canada would be too long to be enumerated. The examples of the scientists Joseph Risi, Peter Schaerer and so many engineers, educators and artists are briefly presented here with a short biography (p. 145).

Swiss Immigration to Canada is undoubtedly instructive and enthusiastic in its tone. It does not try to display only the positive side of the integration of the Swiss in Canada. Some hard times are highlighted too.

For example, the Swiss humanitarian initiatives during World War II, when Canada's Ministry of Defense asked that prisoners of war (mostly Nazis) to be gathered in internment camps located in isolated zones in Ontario and Manitoba (p. 82). The overall conclusion regarding the Swiss presence in Canada is impressively good and remains promising. The Swiss immigrants have integrated so well into Canadian society one can hardly tell nowadays who is Swiss or of a Swiss background. And in a way, that is encouraging. However, the Swiss culture is still thriving in Canada, including the many Swiss restaurants that are praised by Canadians (p. 123). The most stimulating passages of this book are about the Swiss entrepreneurs who brought their unique expertise in various domains, including the luxury hotels and spas in the Canadian Rockies (in Lake Louise, Alberta) owned by the Schwartz Family (p. 115). In this case, the Swiss mountaineers found a comparable site in Canada's West (p. 115).

Since this non-scholarly book actually emerges from the Swiss Consulate in Vancouver, most of its focus is West-centered, and therefore there is not enough balanced information about the other Swiss antennas in Canada, including the Swiss Embassy in Ottawa or other consulates such as the Swiss Consulate in Montréal. Nevertheless, the Swiss presence in Québec is mentioned and highlighted in a few places, regarding the everlasting presence of many Swiss Clubs in various Canadian cities, including Montréal and Québec City (p. 91).

Of course, other archival research will have to be done in a near future about the Swiss presence in Canada, notably for the Pre-Confederation period, when the relations between both continents (and especially between France and Nouvelle-France before 1763) were conducted mostly in French. The French-speaking Swiss community has certainly participated into this transatlantic movement. The numerous archives available in Québec offer an infinite source of documentation. Unfortunately, this basic documentation mostly in French does not appear in the final bibliography (pp. 215-217). Therefore, we understand there is still much to be said (and to be found) regarding the Swiss-Canadian relations, and as proven here in these pages, one book is already a good start.

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