



Popular Autobiography in Switzerland*

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ABSTRACT IN ENGLISH

Switzerland has a very old and lively tradition of working-class writing, including outstanding examples such as Augustin Gützler, Ulrich Bräker or the weavers Matthias and Heinrich Senn. This rich culture is due to the high social mobility, relatively early successful literacy and Protestant self-introspection. Then, though there are not many texts written by left wing workers, male and female, there is a substantial number of texts written by men and women from the margins of society. These texts are not strongly ideological and are thus very interesting sources for everyday history. Despite this tradition, there is a lack of institutional and scientific interest in collecting and conserving autobiographical texts in Switzerland. This article traces the Swiss tradition of working-class life writing, relating it to the social and cultural factors which enabled it; highlights some of the scholarship of editing and interpretation which these texts have generated; and indicates the author's own contribution to the task of collecting and cataloguing Swiss popular autobiographical texts.

ABSTRACT IN GERMAN

Die Schweiz kennt eine lange und lebendige Tradition populären Schreibens inklusive aussergewöhnlicher Beispiele wie Augustin Gützler, Ulrich Bräker oder der beiden Brüder und Weber Mathias und Heinrich Senn. Diese reiche Schreibkultur ist einer sozialen Aufwärtsmobilität geschuldet, auch einer relativ frühen erfolgreichen Alphabetisierung sowie protestantischer Selbstinspektion. Zwar sind recht wenige Texte von organisierten linken Arbeiterinnen und Arbeitern erhalten, doch existiert eine substanzielle Anzahl von Texten, die von Frauen und Männern vom Rande der Gesellschaft geschrieben wurden. Diese Selbstzeugnisse sind nicht sehr ideologisch und somit sehr interessant

für eine alltagsgeschichtliche Auswertung. Trotz dieser grossen Tradition fehlt es in der Schweiz an institutioneller und wissenschaftlichem Interesse sowie an der Praxis des professionellen Aufbewahrens. Dieser Artikel verfolgt die Tradition populären Schreibens in der Schweiz und versucht, dieses Schreiben mit den kulturellen und sozialen Faktoren zu verbinden, die es prägen. Der Artikel wirft einen Scheinwerfer auf einige Highlights und einige massgebliche Editionen und versucht auch, den eigenen Beitrag des Autors im Sammeln und Edieren von Selbstzeugnissen ins rechte Licht rücken.

Keywords: Switzerland, autobiography, working-class, social mobility, literacy, everyday history.

In 2010, the marvellous edition of the complete works of Ulrich Bräker (1735–1798), the “Poor Man of the Toggenburg”, was finished at last, after more than 15 years of research. (Bräker 1998–2010) Bräker wrote an autobiography, many volumes of diaries, and commented on literature and arts, writing drama himself. Born a small farmer’s son in 1735 in Eastern Switzerland, Ulrich Bräker was a Prussian mercenary and deserter, a weaver, small tradesman and salpeter-boiler. He became a member of an enlightened reading society in the small town of Lichtensteig, read many books, including translations of Shakespeare, and had close contacts to the enlightened Zurich elite who patronized his writing with substantial gifts. Nevertheless, Bräker was an outsider in his community who died very poor in 1798, the very year of the ending of the Ancien Regime in Switzerland. Of his work, only his autobiography was printed during his lifetime. This book was widely read and reviewed instantly, even in Germany, and became a surprising commercial success, bringing some money to the notoriously poor family. In many ways, the autobiography fulfilled the elites’ wishes of an educated, industrious subject who was against substantial political reforms.¹ So Bräker essentially was a man between two cultures, enlightened high culture and the popular culture of the pubs of his village.

Ulrich Bräker might be the most famous example in Swiss working-class autobiographical writing, his autobiography being translated into many languages, his life and deeds finding much interest.² But even in the small valley of Toggenburg (my own birthplace), Ulrich Bräker does not stand alone. The biconfessional valley, the home of the Protestant reformer Ulrich Zwingli and, from the late Middle Ages until 1798, governed by a Catholic Prince-Abbot, was unruly and the location of many riots and revolts,³ and it has a tradition of popular writing which dates back even to the late seventeenth century.⁴ From then to the present, I

found over twenty printed popular autobiographies, written by male and female farmers, by artisans, workers, emigrants, whereas there are many more unpublished handwritings, autobiographies as well as diaries.⁵ The Catholic farmer, politician and instrument maker Fridolin Anton Grob (1745–1807), for example, a contemporary of Bräker, wrote a substantial, very rich autobiography which, as well as his diaries, unfortunately has not been published so far. (Hagmann 1991) Whether Grob was influenced by his famous fellow countryman or not, it is hard to say. But it is sure that the Enlightenment saw quite a few popular writers in Switzerland, self-taught persons with literary ambitions. Besides Ulrich Bräker, there is another famous example of autodidact writing in the late eighteenth-century. The writer's name is Heinrich Bosshard (1748–1815), born in the Zurich countryside, a poor farmer's son, who studied as an autodidact and became an important surveyor at the beginning of the nineteenth century. (Bosshard 2005; Schmid 2002) The Helvetic Revolution of 1798, influenced by France, opened many doors for the poorer sort of people. (Böning 1998a; Graber 2003) Even the 1815 restoration of the old regime did not prevent the common man from writing. (Messerli 2002) On the contrary, Bräker, Bosshard and many others started a very lively tradition of writing which continues until our days.

In fact, the premodern tradition of Swiss popular egodocuments (*Selbstzeugnisse*) is quite impressive. The oldest self-testimony of a well-to-do farmer, Jost von Brechershäusern/Jodokus Jost from the Bernese Emmental, dates back to the beginning of the seventeenth century. (von Brecherhäusern 1892; Tosato-Rigo 2000) A Basle-based database, led by the historian Kaspar von Greyerz, mentions 15 farmers, 24 artisans and four publicans/landlords writing self-testimonies in the German language of Switzerland alone.⁶ Some of these texts are just fragments, to be sure, small housebooks or little chronicles written in calendars. But there are some truly outstanding works, like the autobiography written by the Valaisan cordmaker Thomas Platter (1499–1582) who lived in the sixteenth century. Platter emigrated to Basle, converted to the reformed confession, learnt Greek and Latin and became a leading humanist of his time.⁷ On the other hand, there is the autobiography of the Alsace-born pewterer Augustin Gützer, who died around 1657 in Basle. Gützer was the son of a Calvinist pewterer, travelled all around Europe as a journeyman, married a rich widow and became a wealthy artisan in Colmar. During the Thirty Years War, he emigrated to Lutheran Strasbourg, came back to Colmar, where he was, as a Calvinist, a confessional outsider who later emigrated to Basle in search of the true faith. He died as a poor man, lonely, maybe on the road, writing a fascinating autobiography which justified his downwards mobility by reason of his pursuit of Calvinist faith.

His text is now fully edited and even translated into French.⁸ Both Platter and Güntzer are not typical representatives of their estate. Platter, of humble origins, became a professor at Basle University, his life representing extreme, maybe even singular upwards mobility, whereas Augustin Güntzer is an otherwise extreme example of downwards mobility, ridiculed by his colleagues and even mocked by his own children at the end of his bitter life. So many of those in the popular world who wrote autobiographies were outsiders, that as readers and writers they were often ridiculed by their fellows (Brändle 2002a).

Professor von Greyerz and his team not only built up a superb database, they also founded a new series of editions, called *Selbst-Konstruktion*.⁹ The series co-editor is the folklorist Alfred Messerli, who himself used many popular autobiographies and childhood-memories to write an attractive history of the development of literacy in Switzerland. (Messerli 2002) Many authors wrote about their experiences at school, about reading and learning. Professor von Greyerz also inspired research in egodocuments, and tutored dissertations which investigate the relations of writing and disease (Piller 2007) or death (Leutert 2007; Zihlmann-Märki 2010), among other things.¹⁰

If we consider the obviously great tradition of Swiss popular writing, it is a surprise that there is no national archive of popular class writing in Switzerland and no project to create a new database. There are institutions of that kind in Germany and Austria. In Germany, the “Deutsche Tagebucharchiv” in Emmendingen, founded in 1998 by Frauke von Troschke, is collecting autobiographies and diaries written by working and upper classes. It has got several thousand unpublished documents, many recordings of the wars among them, which are all registered on a database and can be used easily.¹¹ In Austria, the Viennese “Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen”, inspired by social historian Professor Michael Mitterauer, has got a tremendous archive of popular writing including thousands of documents.¹² It publishes autobiographies, the series “Damit es nicht verloren geht”, published by Böhlau, Vienna, which includes almost 70 volumes so far.¹³

As we have seen, the situation in Switzerland is rather different. In the French part of the country, the Romandie, there are at least two small archives: the *Archives de la vie ordinaire* in Neuchâtel¹⁴ and the *Archives de la vie privée* in Carouge near Geneva.¹⁵ There are a number of publications exploring popular ego-documents as sources for everyday life, not only in the French part of Switzerland. A comparative perspective on French- and German-language texts is still lacking; this is part of the future research agenda. In the German, the Italian and the Romansch parts of the country, there are no comparable institutions. The Swiss National Library in Bern, *Schweizerische Landesbibliothek*,¹⁶ is collecting all printed Swiss books,

to be sure, and the *Schweizerisches Sozialarchiv*¹⁷ in Zurich has a nice collection of leftwing activists' and trade unionists' writings.

Still, there is a real deficit. This lack is even more surprising considering that there exists a highly successful series of popular writing, the "Folklorist Pocket Book" (*Das Volkskundliche Taschenbuch*), edited by the now-retired folklore-professor Paul Hugger for many decades and issued by the publisher Limmat-Verlag in Zurich.¹⁸ This series includes manuscripts of working-class and bourgeois writing as well, focussing on emigrants' texts. It includes the successful autobiography of the Austrian-born child-labourer (*Schwabenkind*) Regina Lampert who wrote intensely about the tough conditions of work abroad. (Lampert 1996)¹⁹ Professor Paul Hugger was a collector of manuscripts himself, his private collection including many interesting volumes of popular writing.

My own collection, which includes about 300 volumes of printed popular Swiss autobiographies, dating back to the early nineteenth century, is now in the possession of the Sozialarchiv, Zurich.²⁰ What can I say about this collection? Firstly, the gender-aspect is quite interesting. In the nineteenth century, there were just a few working-class women writing about their lives, whereas in the late twentieth century, there is even a female dominance. Current research has made similar appraisals about the feminization of autobiographical writing. In Switzerland, there is a number of real bestsellers written by working-class women, including Rosmarie Buri's "Silly and Fat" (*Dumm und Dick*)²¹ and Corinne Hofman's "The White Massai" (*Die weisse Massai*),²² the story of a rather naive Swiss woman marrying a chief in Kenya, which sold over three million copies all over the world and was filmed. It must be added that there is a big audience for popular writing in my country including writers from foreign countries like the Bavarian farmer Anna Wimschneider (1985). Another recent success, for example, was the autobiography of the butcher Hans Meister called "Meat and Blood" (*Fleisch and Blut*), a fine piece of oral history done by the historian Susanne Schwager, the author's grandchild. (Meister, 2004) Schwager also published the autobiography of Hans Meister's wife and a highly successful collection of elderly people's egodocuments. (Schwager 2007a, 2007b.)

Secondly, religion plays an important role in nineteenth and early twentieth-century writing. (Kormann 2004; Velten 1995) In the nineteenth century, there is a quantitative dominance of Protestant writers. The reformed church knows a long tradition of self-introspection which can lead to personal writing. By writing about their sinful life before conversion to a Protestant sect, the writers wanted to be an example for their public. The Basle historian Lorenz Heiligensetzer did interesting research in clergymen's autobiographies of the seventeenth century, mainly Protestant, not only discovering leaders of the church, but also

village pastors of sometimes humble backgrounds. (Heiligensetzer 2006) Thus doing research in a specific, relatively early genre of egodocuments written by pastors and priests, Heiligensetzer makes clear the relations between Protestantism and writing.

The third point is the relatively poor tradition of classical left-wing working-class writing. Of course, there are a number of male and female activists, politicians and trade union leaders writing about their lives. As in Germany, classical left wing working-class writing started around 1900. (Münchow 1973; Wösthoff 1995) To be honest, in many aspects these texts are rather boring, they are a kind of political memoirs (*Memoiren*), enumerating the writer's appointments and great achievements for party or trade union. So they were mainly used as sources for the history of the organized working class, social democrat or communist. There are exceptions, of course, when writers coming from a very humble background tell about their childhood in misery.²³ A fine piece of early working-class women's writing is Annelise Rüegg's (1879–1934) "Adventures of a Waitress" (*Erlebnisse einer Serviertochter*) from 1913 which not only is the testimony of an early female activist, but pictures the highly sexualized world of a waitress in a male-dominated milieu.²⁴

The fourth point is the dominance of the petty bourgeoisie, of artisans, small tradesmen and primary teachers of humble background. As a matter of fact, the patriotic and hard-working petty bourgeoisie was the backbone of the young national state of 1848, both in the economy and in the military. They had their own political party (the *Demokraten*) since the 1860s which was fighting successfully for more direct democracy. In lifestyle, the petty bourgeoisie was orientated to high bourgeoisie. This habitus (Pierre Bourdieu) could include writing postcards, letters, diaries and autobiographies. (Tanner 1995; Sarasin 1990)

Social mobility in Switzerland was relatively high, thus allowing mechanics to become engineers. Upwards mobility is a frequent theme in Swiss popular autobiography, focussing on the very poor background of a self-made man. This leads me to an important issue: the educational system in Switzerland as a direct democracy was relatively open, although the old elites defended their privileges, of course, and still occupied the leading positions in universities, diplomacy or military. To be sure, there were many autodidacts as well, sometimes patronized by the rich who invested in certain ways in new ideas.

The fifth point is the most surprising one, I dare say. Dating back to the middle of the nineteenth century, there is a substantial number of texts written by people living on the margins of society. There are many vagabonds, criminals,²⁵ mercenaries,²⁶ travelling journeymen,²⁷ outsiders, peddlers, vagrant workers, weavers,²⁸ emigrants,²⁹ immigrants writing

about their lives. As a matter of fact, emigration to America was a mass phenomenon in the nineteenth century and not only caused the writing of letters home and back, but also real autobiographies and popular accounts of the journey.

I mention two striking examples of outsiders writing around 1900. The first is the peddler, vagabond and criminal Peter Binz, writing a fascinating autobiography which uncovers the world of the landless, of transient workers, of alcoholic excess and sexual libertinism. His autobiography was found in the records of the psychiatric institution where Peter Binz had been sent because of incest.³⁰

The second example is the peddler and weaver Gregorius Aemisegger (1815–1913), a very religious man of reformed faith who speaks of his God-given gifts and talents towards men and animals, but does not mention that he was twice at war. (Brändle 2007a) This should show us that popular autobiographies wish to draw a certain picture of the author, they want to communicate a certain image. So, well-researched editions are important, and there are quite a few examples of these. Gregorius Aemisegger is not the only weaver who wrote about his life. The two brothers Jakob (1824–1879) and Heinrich Senn (1827–1915) of the Zurich countryside, for example, wrote about their lives as well, one trying to become a writer, the other writing dozens of volumes of diaries which are also a source of how humble people saw change in economics, culture and politics. (Peter 2004) Together with the primary-school teacher Jakob Stutz (1801–1877) and other writers,³¹ the two brothers were part of an active literary scene in a region of early proto-industrialisation and industrialisation (*Zürcher Oberland*). The pioneer of Swiss social history, Professor Rudolf Braun, was using popular autobiographies as sources for interpreting history as early as 1960, thus documenting the social, political, cultural, religious and economical change in that region.³² There are, to be sure, other examples of writing weavers in the nineteenth century.

There is a true genre of outsider autobiography in Switzerland, including many texts of so called *Verdingkinder*, children who were taken away from their parents by the state for financial or moral reasons. These children had to work very hard in agriculture or in artisans' shops, replacing expensive farmhands. Tired from work, they often performed badly at their studies in school, or were mistreated by peers and teachers, and could not gain a decent apprenticeship or a higher education, so they ended up as farmhands or as factory workers or even as criminals in spite of their talents. They were not well protected by the state, and very often, they became the victims of physical and sexual abuse.³³ Dozens of them wrote about their stigma, thus dealing with their unjust fate. An example of this, the ancient *Verdingkind*, borstal boy and author Carl Albert Loosli (1877–1959),

the “poet of Bümpliz”, was denouncing the unjust system of education in the 1920s. (Loosli 2006–2009) At the beginning of the twenty-first century, former *Verdingkinder* organized, and talked about their lives, also publicly. They accuse the state and the farmers of abuse. A powerful movie was very successful, a well-documented exhibition as well;³⁴ and much research, partially supported by the state, is being done, also oral history concerned with biographies and often enough difficult life stories. The research shows, quite interestingly, changing popular concepts of childhood as well. Many *Verdingkinder* are writing about their lives and find an interested audience, their fortune is a theme in the media discourse, too.

The sixth and last point of my article is the rich presence of dialect autobiographies, especially in Bernese dialect. In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Bernese pastor Jeremias Gotthelf (1797–1854) was a very popular writer, using dialect in his fascinating descriptions of the farmer’s world. Gotthelf had many heirs, including writers like the teacher and abstinence advocate Simon Gfeller (1858–1943), Meinrad Lienert (1865–1933) or Alfred Huggenberger³⁵ (1867–1960) in the eastern part of Switzerland. Their so-called *Heimatliteratur* was very successful and would inspire many authors of humble backgrounds. In the late 1960s, the dialect literature had a strong renaissance, especially in the canton of Berne. (Pezold 1991; Ris 1989) In Berne, there still exists a very active scene of writers and musicians, including popular writers writing about their childhood or their whole lives.

I come to my conclusions. My first thesis is that Switzerland has a very old and lively tradition of working-class writing, including outstanding examples such as Augustin Gützer, Ulrich Bräker or the weavers Matthias and Heinrich Senn. This rich culture is due to the high social mobility, relatively early successful literacy and Protestant self-introspection. Then, though there are not many texts written by left-wing workers, male and female, there is a substantial number of texts written by men and women from the margins of society. These texts are not strongly ideological and are thus very interesting sources for everyday history. Finally, despite this very interesting tradition, there is a lack of institutional and scientific interest in collecting and conserving autobiographical texts in Switzerland. This deficit must change radically, now!

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Fabian Brändle has published widely on popular autobiography in Switzerland. He has edited the autobiographies of the 17th-century Alsatian pewterer Augustin Güntzer (Böhlau, 2002), and the 19th-century Toggenburg pedlar, Gregorius Aemisegger (Wattwil, 2007). His recent publications include "Die Würde der Arbeit. Zur Autobiographie des Verdingbuben, Schlossers und

Gewerkschaftssekretärs Alois Büchi (1879–1948)” [The dignity of work. On the autobiography of the child labourer, locksmith and union secretary Alois Buchi], *Badener Neujaarsblätter* (2011); and “‘Ganz sicher müsst ich nicht mehr weben.’ Zum Tagebuch des Degersheimer Webers Johann Jakob Brunner (1806–1879) [‘I certainly will not need to weave’. The diary of the Degersheim weaver Johann Jakob Brunner]”, *Toggenburger Jahrbuch* (2011). Brändle is currently editing the autobiography of a poor Swiss emigrant and soldier who fought in the US-Army in the Indian Wars, in Cuba and in the Philippines.

NOTES

- * This is a slightly revised version of a chapter published in *Egodokumentai ir privati Lietuvos erdvė XVI–XX amžiuje* [Egodocuments and Lithuanian private space, XVI–XX century], ed. Arydas Pacevičius (Vilnius: Vilniaus universiteto leidykla [Vilnius University Press], 2013), 149–161. We are grateful to the editor and publishers for permission to reprint it here.
- 1 On the background see Graber 1993.
 - 2 The research on Ulrich Bräker is very rich. See for example Böning 1998b; Hoffmann 2009 (on Bräker’s attitude to health and disease, popular healing and high medicine).
 - 3 Z’Graggen 1999; Brändle, Heiligensetzer and Michel 1999.
 - 4 Bösch 2001. Although later a pastor in a small village, Bösch’s father was a small farmer. Bösch, who is writing about his childhood, was farming as well as being a pastor.
 - 5 On the concept of “popular autobiography” see for example: Amelang 1998; Dörfer 1998; Warneken 1985; Peters 2003; Bergmann 1991; Vogtmeier 1984; Brändle 2002a; Lyons 2008, 2013; Maynes 1995.
 - 6 <http://wp.unil.ch/egodocuments/presentation/> [accessed 9.10.2017] (authorization required). See also Piller and Leutert 1999.
 - 7 Platter 2006. See also Le Roy Ladurie 1993; Meyer and von Greyerz 2002.
 - 8 Güntzer 2002; 2010. On Güntzer, there is wide research now, see for example: Mieg 1948, 1974/75; Muller 1983; Sieber 2002; Brändle 2002b, 2010, 2011b. Generally on German egodocuments (“Selbstzeugnisse”) of the Thirty Years War see von Krusenstjern 1993.
 - 9 An example of popular autobiography of the seventeenth-century (Colmar, Alsace) in the series is: <http://www.schwabe.ch/schwabe-verlag/buecher/buchdetails/selbst-konstruktion/mein-haussbiechlein-schreibende-schuhmacher-im-17-jahrhundert-3395/> [accessed 9.10.2017].
 - 10 For Swiss pastors, see Lorenz Heiligensetzer, *Getreue Kirchendiener—gefährdete Pfarrherren: Deutschschweizer Prädikanten des 17. Jahrhunderts in ihren Lebensbeschreibungen*, Köln: Böhlau, 2006. There are many “Lizentiatsarbeiten” and “Magisterarbeiten” written with the help of Professor von Greyerz dealing with egodocuments. See the full list in: <https://dg.philhist.unibas.ch/departement/personen/personen-details/betreute-arbeiten/person/vongreyerz/> [accessed 9.10.2017].
 - 11 <http://www.tagebucharchiv.de/> [accessed 9.10.2017]. See also Risse 2010.
 - 12 <http://www.menschenschreibengeschichte.at/> [accessed 9.10.2017]. See also Müller 2006.
 - 13 See a full list with comments: http://www.boehlau-verlag.com/Damit_es_nicht_verlorengeht_.htm/ [accessed 9.10.2017].

- 14 <http://www.archivesdelavieordinaire.ch> [accessed 9.10.2017]; *Revue Historique Neuchâtoise*, “Autour des Archives de la vie ordinaire. Les écrits personnels et le retour de l’individu dans l’histoire”, nos 1-2, 2009, with many publications on the subject.
- 15 <http://www.archivesdelavieprivee.ch/> [accessed 9.10.2017].
- 16 The catalogue is on internet: <http://www.nb.admin.ch/> [accessed 9.10.2017].
- 17 <http://www.sozialarchiv.ch/> [accessed 9.10.2017]. See also Häusler 2006.
- 18 There are 49 volumes to date. See: <http://www.sagw.ch/sgv/publikationen/buecher/katalog/volkskundliches-taschenbuch.html> [accessed 9.10.2017].
- 19 On “Schwabenkinder” using egodocuments see Uhlig 2003; Seglias 2007.
- 20 I am planning to build up a database.
- 21 Buri 1990; see also Buri 1993. Another success is Marti 2011.
- 22 Hofmann 2003.
- 23 See for example Brändle 2011a, 2011c.
- 24 Rüegg 1913. On egodocuments of Swiss waiters and waitresses see Brändle 2012. Combining egodocuments and everyday-history (“Alltagsgeschichte”) is Witzig 2004. See also Brändle 2007b.
- 25 For Germany see Bergmann 1991; Talkenberger 2011.
- 26 See for example: Brändle 2011d; Koller 2002.
- 27 Wadauer 2005; Halse 2002.
- 28 See for example Brändle 2011e; Peter 2004.
- 29 See for example Baumann 2012; Schelbert and Rappolt 2009; Michael-Cafilisch 2008 (using a broad corpus of interesting letters).
- 30 Binz 1995. Dr. Vogt is working on a biography on Peter Binz.
- 31 Brunold-Bigler 1979; Stutz 2001.
- 32 Braun 1960.
- 33 See for example, using egodocuments, Freisler-Mühlemann 2011; Leuenberger and Seglias 2011.
- 34 The exhibition *Verdingkinder Reden* (“Contract Children Speak”) toured twelve Swiss cities between 2009 and 2017; the film *Der Verdingbub* (“The Foster Boy”), dir. Markus Imboden, premiered in 2011.
- 35 Brändle and König 2012.