

Zeitschrift: Swiss express : the Swiss Railways Society journal
Band: 4 (1994-1996)
Heft: 12

Artikel: Migros and the railways in Switzerland
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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-855117>

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Migros and the Railways in Switzerland

Any visitor to Switzerland will almost certainly have seen a Migros store and there is a strong chance that he or she will have shopped in one too! Travelling by rail in Switzerland the visitor will also undoubtedly have passed, in sidings or in transit, railway wagons carrying Migros products.

To most people Migros is one of the most widespread grocery retailers to be found in the country - Co-op is the closest rival - perhaps the equivalent of Tesco and Sainsbury in the UK. The comparison with these UK giants does not go much further however; both Migros and Co-op run a large number of small village stores (more like the Co-op or Spar in the UK) and both enterprises make considerable use of rail transport for logistics (warehousing and distribution).

Migros was founded in 1925 by Gottlieb Duttweiler who initially operated four mobile stores on the streets of Zürich. The first store was opened in 1926 and expansion was based on offering cheaper prices than any competitors at that time. The competitive edge was achieved by providing the most direct link possible between producer and consumer - through the acquisition of factories and building of its own plants. In 1934 the organisation was transformed into a series of regional co-operatives - customers were able to acquire 'social shares' in a similar style to the British Co-operative Societies. So, today Migros is effectively owned by over 1.5 million Swiss householders. The Federation of Migros Co-operatives was established in 1941 and has a similar function to the UK's Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS).

Today the Migros organisation comprises not only some 570 stores (plus 80 mobile shops and the Ex Libris book and music shops) but a number of manufacturing units, Migrol - an oil company with 270 filling stations, an educational and training sector (Migros Club Schools), banks, insurance services, printers and publishers and a range of cultural and leisure enterprises. This latter includes the Monte Generosa railway in Ticino and Bladon Lines travel agents (UK based).

Most Migros stores fall into one of three categories:-

M Shops, local stores

MM Migros Markets - Supermarkets & Restaurant

MMM Migros Centres - Hypermarkets

There are also small stores - S - and speciality stores such as Micasa Centres (household) and M-Electronic.

Like most Swiss organisations, a concern for environmental issues was high on the Migros agenda long before the recent 'greening' of industry now commonplace in the western world. This, coupled with Swiss laws governing the gross laden weight and operating hours of road heavy goods vehicles, has enabled rail to maintain an important role in the logistics and distribution of goods within the country. Although final delivery to stores will inevitably be in a lorry, the railway used for transporting goods to central distribution depots and to/from the manufacturing units in the Migros organisation. Over 60% of goods travel by rail and this figure has been growing. (1989 55%, 1995 62%).

The Migros Industries

Jowa AG Bakery products and pasta. Volketswil (ZH)

Micaina AG Meat and sausage products Courtepin (FR) and Bazenhead (SG)

Conserves Estavayer SA Dairy products and tinned foods. Estavayer-le-Lac (FR)

Bischofzell Conserves AG Tinned foods, jam, fruit juices, frozen veg. Bischofzell (TG) on the Gossau-Sulgen line near St. Gallen. 90% of Bischofzell's products go by rail.

Chocolat Frey AG Chocolate. Buchs (AG) located on the Zofingen-Suhr-Aarau line.

Production AG, Meilen Biscuits, ice cream, deserts. Meilen (ZH) near Meilen station, Zürichsee east bank.

Mita AG Laundry and dry cleaning agents. Margarine, fats. Frenkendorf (BL) between Pratteln and Liestal. New rail connected loading bays recently completed.

Mibelle AG Cosmetics. Buchs (AG)

Seba Aproz AG Mineral Water. Sion -Valais (VS) Rhône valley. 99% of the output goes by rail.

Optigal SA Poultry farms (free range) and organic fertilizers. Lausanne (head office) (VD)