

# LIVE BETTER!

The Search for  
the Ideal Way of Life

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## Foreword

“Live better!” was the rallying cry and precept of the “Lebensreform” (Life Reform) movement, in Switzerland as in other European countries. It challenged people unequivocally to change their ways, and was a declaration of discontent with the prevailing state of affairs and a warning of dangers to come. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it was the way in which advocates of Lebensreform expressed their unease at increasing industrialisation, mechanisation and urbanisation, and their malaise at the accelerated pace of daily life and the globalisation of the world. Later these concerns expanded to include unhappiness at the growth-driven consumer society, and anxiety about environmental pollution and climate change. What did not change was the sense of crisis, which for some led to predictions of disaster and a feeling that the end of the world was nigh, but which mainly encouraged people to search for the ideal life, and an improvement in their own lifestyles.

Although the forebodings of disaster pertained to society as a whole, or, indeed, to the planet as a whole, the Lebensreform call for change was directed at individuals. Advocates of Lebensreform were convinced that if every human being were to change his or her personal lifestyle, this would ultimately bring about a change in society. The focus was not on social ideals of equality and justice, or demands for emancipation

and participation; rather, what was important was for individuals to mould themselves and to achieve their own personal well-being. “Live better!” is a call for people to take responsibility for themselves, a commitment to self-empowerment. It is up to each individual to forge his or her own happiness, was the constant refrain. So it is no surprise that since the 1970s, in the wake of the rapid neo-liberalisation of post-industrial society and the individual inequality that it has created, practices of personality development and self-improvement inspired by Lebensreform ideas have enjoyed a boom.

The Lebensreform movement was initially rooted chiefly in the upper middle class in Switzerland and appealed mainly to the better-off part of the population. For a long time the only people who could make a show of giving up meat and eating vegetarian were those who could afford meat dishes in the first place. Even today, not everyone can afford organic products, whole foods and natural therapies. Lebensreform in the sense of self-reform also involved intensive work on one's own body. Naturalness, beauty and fitness were preached as guiding principles of Lebensreform. The body should be healthy, slim and strong, very much in line with today's body and fitness cult. Meat, alcohol and tobacco were to be given up, which is in accordance with our current understanding of a health-conscious and abstemious life style. Often enough, these concepts of human health and fitness were based on ideas of social Darwinism, and in the past were used to justify eugenic policies. Finally, it is worth pointing out that the Swiss Lebensreform advocates who travelled all over the world were part of the history of European colonialism. Their denunciation of civilisation and their search for natural, ideal types of life and society led them to produce romanticised and exoticised accounts of peoples outside Europe, thereby contributing to the colonial vision of the world, which in turn influenced the self-image of the Lebensreform

activists (e.g. in the way they portrayed themselves as “children of nature”).

Such ambiguities and dark sides are typical of the history of the Lebensreform movement in Switzerland, which until now has attracted little attention. A research project conducted over the course of several years by the Department of Contemporary History of the University of Fribourg and supported by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), has for the first time produced comprehensive historical findings, which not only illustrate the extraordinary importance of Switzerland for the transnational Lebensreform movement, but also point out the striking continuity of Lebensreform ideas and practices in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

For several years now, exhibitions at the Bernisches Historisches Museum have looked at different aspects of modern history and tackled contemporary issues. University research, meanwhile, aims to make its findings accessible to a broad public. With this in mind, the Bernisches Historisches Museum and the Department of Contemporary History of the University of Fribourg have decided to combine forces to present the findings of the research project on the history of the Lebensreform movement in Switzerland to a broad public through the popular medium of an exhibition. This plan has received financial support from the SNSF as one of its Agora projects. In realising it, each institution has drawn on its own area of expertise. The result is the exhibition “Live better! The Search for the Ideal Way of Life”, which can be seen in the Bernisches Historisches Museum from 13<sup>th</sup> February until 5<sup>th</sup> July 2020.

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# Echoes of the Lebensreform movement in the present day

Eva Locher

There are a number of things in our daily life which go back to the Lebensreform (Reform of Life) movement, without our realising it. What has survived of the Lebensreform movement? What has happened to its ideas? And why is our attitude towards it so very ambivalent?

Vegetarianism and veganism are popular today, many young people are keen to live in an ecologically sustainable way and regard the prevention of a climate catastrophe as a matter of urgency, it is impossible to imagine life now without alternative therapies and a good number of people hone their bodies tirelessly in fitness studios. But how many of us are aware that these concerns were already being talked about in the Lebensreform movement at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Healthy nutrition, natural therapies and the ideal of the body beautiful centred on health, nature and beauty, were part of the Lebensreform agenda, but over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century these practices and principles spread into society more generally.

So the Lebensreform movement is a historical subject which directly impacts the present. Even today there are Reform associations in Switzerland, like the nudist association, the "Organisation of Naturists in Switzerland", which has remained largely true to the principles laid down at the time it was founded in the 1920s. A few magazines originally published



the call for each individual to take responsibility for themselves, but also to larger scale entities, such as the “people”, for example. The Lebensreform movement thus helped to make broad sectors of the population receptive to eugenic ideas.

Correct nutrition – as little as possible and as unadulterated as possible, vegetarian, no alcohol or nicotine – was one of the key elements of the Lebensreform movement. It denounced industrialised food production and mass consumerism. Vegetarian restaurants and Reformhaus health food shops appeared, specialising in specific products like whole grain cereals, soya products and natural cosmetics. At the same time, the Reformists' dissociation from the conventional market, their inherent anti-consumerism and their encouragement to people to give up meat, alcohol and tobacco, created new consumer needs. The Reform goods industry subsequently provided its own capitalist consumer infrastructures, following the logic of the commercial market. So despite the anti-modernism ascribed to it, the Lebensreform movement should actually be seen as part of the modern age. Its methods of production and marketing and its consumption patterns have had an impact on the food market, where today there is a boom in organic products, gluten-free items and wholesome foodstuffs.

## Ways out of the crisis: Reforming life to reform the self

Andreas Schwab

In March 2019 16 year-old Greta Thunberg addressed 20,000 people at the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin about climate change, saying: “The older generations have failed tackling the biggest crisis humanity has ever faced.” She demanded an immediate change in people's behaviour, calling for a halt to CO<sup>2</sup> emissions. For despite the protests of young people all over the world, nothing has yet happened, she said. In her rhetoric the founder of the “Fridays for future” school strike movement adopts paradigms characteristic of the Lebensreform movement, namely an awareness of living in a time of crisis and overcoming it by changes in individual behaviour. Young people's climate protests in 2019 with their disaster scenarios of melting glaciers and polar icecaps can thus very well be compared to the concerns of Lebensreformists at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In his painting “The Power of Love” (1899) Gusto Gräser produced an iconic expression of this fundamental feeling of the Lebensreform movement. On the right side of the picture we see a civilisation in flames, which has already left countless people dead. By reverting to a natural, healthy way of life humanity, represented by a naked couple, can reach a new paradise. It is not by chance that this image, in contrast to the usual direction of reading, is to be read from right to left. The utopian world is characterised by total harmony between humans, animals and nature.



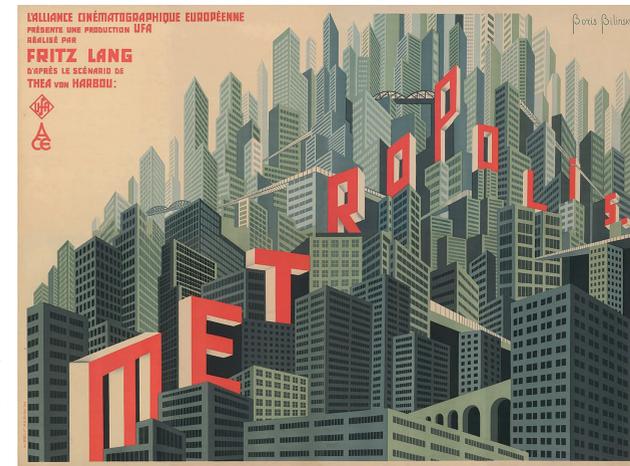
Throughout the whole of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Lebensreform activists constantly addressed the specific problems of the moment. In the first decades typical issues taken up by the Lebensreform movement were criticism of industrialisation, militarisation and urbanisation. In 1906 Paul Schultze-Naumburg, an influential conservative architect who later got involved in the defence of German heritage and became a Nazi party member of the Reichstag, published an article with the telling title “The Big City Illness” in the journal “Der Kunstwart”. In it he denounced the intolerable sanitary conditions in large cities, and the “frantic tempo” that characterised life in them. This drew some of the advocates of the Lebensreform movement into an “ethnic” way of thinking, in that they linked their critique of large cities with anti-Semitic stereotypes.

In the post-war period starting in 1945, economic growth, the rise of the consumer society and the threat of environmental disaster provided new reasons for crisis and disaster awareness. Particular targets were the contamination of the environment, air pollution causing a range of ailments, the poisoning

of foodstuffs, the concreting over of the countryside and the dangers posed by nuclear energy. In 1972 the influential Club of Rome published a report addressing these concerns: “If the present growth trends in world population, industrialization, pollution, food production, and resource depletion continue unchanged, the limits to growth on this planet will be reached sometime within the next one hundred years.”

But the concerns did not relate solely to society as a whole. Human beings as individuals are also affected, they claimed: they suffer alienation and worry about a loss of direction both professionally and in the family. Traditional values are regarded as outdated. A 1969 article in the Swiss naturists’ journal “Die neue Zeit” wrote that “the huge progress made in technology and prosperity have taken 20<sup>th</sup> century man yet further away from his natural environment. Man today, whether he knows it or not, is the slave of his ‘over-civilisation’ and the associated damage to his health.”

The symptoms of crisis in the individual, too, changed over the course of time. While in 1900 “nerves” was seen as a problem for employees, leading many people to go for treatment in specialist clinics (e.g. Max Bircher-Benner’s “Lebendige Kraft”, or “Vital Force” clinic), today it is “burnout” – an equally vague concept. Illnesses connected with too much stress in an apparently ever more complex society, are also coming increasingly to the fore.



rettet den Wald  
sauvez la forêt  
salvate il bosco  
salvai il god  
save our woods



The Lebensreform movement was a response to such feelings of crisis, whether or not in any particular case they were founded on reality. But the path that was supposed to lead out of the crisis was always an individual one. That means that according to the doctrine of Lebensreform, reform of the self always came before reform of society. Taken overall, Lebensreform appears to be a reaction to modernity, a reaction associated with an all-round change to its proponents' lifestyle. That is why the utopias which found expression in a

“return to Nature” were always linked to a broad range of practices which each person had to engage with individually. Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century these have been among the many different responses to the ever accelerating modern world.

## The Swiss Lebensreform movement: Instructions for a “better life”

Stefan Rindlisbacher

### Get back to Nature!

With the beginning of industrialisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century humans started to intervene in nature more and more. They drained bogs, cut down forests and diverted rivers. New types of machinery and the use of fossil fuels like coal and oil released huge productive forces. It was not only the industrial areas and the acreage under cultivation that expanded; towns doubled or trebled their populations within just a few decades. But life in the new metropolises was very different from life on the land. People worked in factories and offices, rather than outside in the fields. Instead of growing their own food and being self-sufficient, they bought industrially produced consumer goods. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century not only did this mass consumption rise and rise, but individual mobility increased too, with railways, cars and planes. By 1900 Switzerland was already one of the most highly industrialised countries in the world.

The more humans intervene in nature, the louder are the demands for the threatened landscapes, plants and animals to be protected. The first nature protection associations emerged back in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, philosophers like Henry David Thoreau, influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, called for a return to a “more natural” way of living. They denounced modern life in the growing towns as unhealthy,



and praised life on the land, shaped as it was by farming, as mankind's ideal state. In Switzerland the Alps were portrayed as a refuge of unspoilt nature and a pristine health paradise. In the age of colonialism, the idealised notions of nature were also projected onto so-called "primitive peoples" outside Europe, who had allegedly remained untouched by the processes of civilisation. Such philosophers contributed to the clichéd and romanticised view of the colonised world.

In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the emerging Lebensreform movement took up this idealisation of nature along with its associated denunciation of civilisation. It blamed the modern lifestyle for so-called diseases of civilisation like metabolic disorders and heart problems, tension and cancer. Advocates of Lebensreform denounced the lack of light and air in the cramped city flats, the sedentary nature of work in offices, artificially produced medicines, industrially processed foodstuffs and the rising consumption of alcohol, sugar and meat. To counter this they pushed for a simpler kind of nutrition, as far as possible vegetarian, treatments without the use of drugs, and leisure activities centred on physical fitness, like sport, hiking and mountaineering.

But Lebensreform proponents did not aspire to return to a pre-industrial, technophobic society. Rather, they used the achievements of modernity to follow their own goals. They drew upon the discoveries of scientific disciplines like nutritional science, evolutionary biology and physiology to legitimate their nutritional advice and therapy methods. In order to spread their demands among ordinary people as quickly and as broadly as possible, they used the emerging mass media in the form of magazines, leaflets and radio programmes. And their activities rode the first wave of globalisation: they networked far across frontiers, travelled round the world, settled in tropical colonies

and sold what were known as "colonial goods", such as exotic fruit, in their Reformhaus health food shops. And indeed they speeded up the emergence of the consumer society in that they introduced onto the market countless new goods and services like organic products, their own Reform-style clothing and natural remedies, thereby establishing a new, expensive segment in the retail trade.

### **Become who you are!**

It was not through party political work, or by using direct democracy to launch popular votes, or through demonstrations or attempts at revolution that the advocates of Lebensreform tried to bring about a change in society, but rather through awareness campaigns, educational activities and the reform of the individual. They published countless books and magazines with instructions about how to live a better life. In them they explained the advantages of eating vegetarian, published recipe suggestions, and described methods of treatment using natural remedies. In small groups, in convivial back rooms or in large event venues they debated such things as the impact on health of smoking, Indian breathing exercises and natural fertilisers. Those who wanted to get deeper into the practices of Lebensreform could attend evening courses, holiday camps or adult education centres. Participants learned how to prepare tasty dishes using raw vegetarian ingredients, heard about the challenges of organic farming, or got to grips with mysterious yoga practices. These events were attended almost exclusively by people from the bourgeois middle class, with sufficient education, time and money to take up the subjects of Lebensreform. Workers on low wages were barely represented.

The Lebensreform movement attempted in particular to convince the upcoming generation of its ideas, in order to get its health practices firmly rooted in society. In Switzerland, the first pupil and student associations were set up back in the last



years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to campaign for a healthy lifestyle free of alcohol and drugs and to organise leisure activities focusing on physical fitness. The result was the creation of the Swiss Wandervogel (Bird of Passage) movement in 1907. In contrast to the Scout Movement that emerged at the same time, this first Swiss youth movement organised its hikes, ski excursions and holiday camps largely without adult help. The Wandervogel movement combined the health ideals of the Lebensreform movement with active forms of leisure out in the countryside. With their songs, folk dances and typical hiking costumes they formed an unmistakable youth culture, which aimed to create a strong feeling of community among young people. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century new youth groups kept being formed that took up Lebensreform themes. In particular, in the wake of the 1968 protest movement many young people again started to eat vegetarian, challenged conservative dress conventions or lived with like-minded companions in rural communes.

Advocates of Lebensreform exercised a direct influence on young people through alternative educational establishments, like their rural boarding schools. The pupils were taught in boarding schools out in the country. The idea was that far away from the harmful influences of civilisation they would be brought up to live a healthy, natural and rational lifestyle. The teaching included physical activities, like sport, hiking and gardening in the open air. Many of these rural schools prescribed simple, partially vegetarian, food, with a strict ban on alcohol. Reformist educational approaches such as a partnership relationship between the teachers and those in their care or even living together as families in the so-called school community were also widespread. The best known rural boarding schools include the Freie Schulgemeinde Wickersdorf in the Thuringian Forest and the Odenwaldschule in Heppenheim in the German state of Hesse. In 1902 the first rural boarding school in Switzerland opened in the Glarisegg Castle on Lake Constance. In the 1920s allegations were already being made about abuse being practised by some teachers. The influential Reform educationalist Gustav Wyneken was sentenced to a year in jail in 1921 for sexual activity with children. The Swiss writer Friedrich Glauser wrote subsequently about abuse by teachers in Glarisegg. Nevertheless, fifty years later in its campaign for anti-authoritarian education, the 1968 protest movement took up many of the Reformist ideas about teaching used in these rural boarding schools.

### **Keep healthy!**

The supreme goal and central principle of the Lebensreform movement was the striving after perfect health. Anyone who had fallen ill as a result of the modern lifestyle in the industrial and consumer society was to be cured through the use of natural treatments like cold water baths, sunlight cures, exercise therapies or any one of a wide range of diets. So-called

naturopathy preached the self-healing of the body in that it encouraged the removal of toxins from the body, or the restoration of balance in the organism by specific stimuli to the skin or to the digestion. Homeopathy took a different approach, administering remedies on the principle of like curing like. For example, to treat nausea an agent would be prescribed in an extremely diluted form, which at a high concentration would provoke nausea even in healthy people. In the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many other types of therapy were added to the list, including acupuncture, chiropractic and Ayurveda. By contrast,



Wilhelm Brunner, a doctor from Winterthur, opened Switzerland's first hydrotherapy establishment in Albisbrunn in canton Zurich in 1839. The German apothecary Theodor Hahn had a different focus in his natural therapy establishment, "Auf der Waid" in St. Gallen, from 1854 onwards. He treated his patients

orthodox scientific medicine treats diseases with targeted medicines and operations, or prevents them through vaccination. While some natural therapies like massage, relaxation exercises or specific herbal tinctures are today recognised as complementary medicine, the effectiveness of many alternative medical applications is disputed and scientifically unproven.

Switzerland has been known for its many therapeutic baths, like Leukerbad, Pfäfers and Baden, since the Middle Ages. Then in the 19<sup>th</sup> century natural healing methods spread very quickly.

for the first time with vegetarian diets. Yet another approach was pursued by Arnold Rikli, who had no medical training, and who sold nude sunbathing as a therapy to the guests at his spa. The most famous natural therapy establishment in Switzerland was opened by Max Bircher-Benner on the Zurichberg in 1904. In his "Vital Force" sanatorium for the well-heeled, he preached a vegetarian whole food diet, plenty of movement and a well-ordered day. Among his most famous guests was Thomas Mann, who found inspiration for his novel "The Magic Mountain" in the strict treatment programme.

In the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century naturopathic associations sprang up all over Switzerland, and in 1907 they joined together in the "Swiss Union of Naturopathic Associations" (now "vita-swiss"). Until the 1950s it had over 10,000 members. But with their allotments and sun baths the naturopathy movement in Switzerland reached many more people than that. In 1934 the sun bathing facility of the Zurich Naturopathy Association on the Zurichberg alone drew more than 53,000 people. The lightly clothed visitors lay in the sun in a fenced-off area on the Zurichberg, exercised on fitness apparatus or took part in sports. The idea of such leisure activities was to toughen up their bodies and improve their health, so that - as far as possible - they would never fall ill again.

### **Tone up your body!**

Concern for the body was at the heart of almost all the Lebensreform practices. Changing ones diet, giving up luxury foods, using natural therapies and engaging in body-focused leisure activities like hiking, sunbathing and sport, were all means to develop and preserve a healthy, fit and beautiful body. Many health-oriented physical practices like gymnastics, yoga, breathing exercises and massages only came to Switzerland with the Lebensreform movement. They were presented and taught in books and magazines, in lectures or in practical courses.

The naturist movement left the human body completely visible. Nude exposure to light and air was not only used as a therapy for the ill, but became the tool of a “new morality” and “naturalness”. Since the 1920s Swiss naturist pioneers like Eduard Fankhauser and Werner Zimmermann had stressed that it was not the naked body that was sexually arousing, but fashionable clothing. As many leisure activities as possible – sunbathing, swimming, gymnastics and even skiing – should therefore be done in the nude. The call for “natural nudity” was not accepted everywhere, however. Many naturist journals turned into erotic magazines, especially after 1950. The “Schweizerische Lichtbund” (“Swiss League of Light”) founded in Switzerland in 1928 (today the “Organisation der Naturisten in der Schweiz”, or “Organisation of Naturists in Switzerland”) is one of the longest surviving naturist organisations in the world. In the 1970s the association had more than 13,000 members. In “die neue zeit”, the naturist site that opened in Thielle on Lake Neuchâtel in 1937, basic Lebensreform principles like the alcohol and tobacco ban, and vegetarian food are still in force today.

The Lebensreform movement shaped a new body ideal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The yearning for good health and fitness was increasingly manifested in the wish for a slim, well-toned body. For the male body this meant above all strength and resilience, while the female body was to produce an impression of elegance and was reduced to its child-bearing capability. This cemented dualistic gender stereotypes. It also stepped up the pressure on individuals to keep working on their own bodies in order to optimise themselves. Not surprisingly, eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia appeared in connection with these new body ideals. The pressure for self-optimisation kept increasing in the wake of the fitness movement in the 1980s and today has reached a new peak as people stage themselves on social media.

Some of the Lebensreform activists like the well-known Swiss doctors Auguste Forel and Gustav von Bunge started to transfer these requirements onto the population as a whole in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They wanted the state to improve general health not only through information and prevention campaigns, but also through compulsory measures. While good health would be promoted with large-scale sports events, food at reduced prices and better healthcare provision, alcoholics, people with a disability and the chronically ill should be prevented

from reproducing by forbidding them to get married, subjecting them to compulsory treatment, and even by sterilisation or castration. Such measures were based on so-called eugenics, which was a widespread doctrine in many democratic countries, including Switzerland, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the aims of eugenics met with a lot of support in the Swiss Lebensreform movement. State-ordered compulsory health programmes were implemented on a horrific scale

in Nazi Germany, where hundreds of thousands of people were victims of eugenics-inspired measures. Max Bircher-Benner was in active communication with leading Nazis until the 1930s. His son Ralph Bircher kept up these contacts even after 1945 and continued to offer eugenic ideas a platform in his magazine “Wendepunkt”.



Even when skiing advocates of naturism managed without clothing.

### Eat healthily!

Until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century Switzerland suffered repeated famines. Food security among the poorer segments of the population remained precarious until the 1950s. And yet agricultural production increased massively thanks to new methods of cultivation, the introduction of agricultural machinery, new fertilisers and pesticides. In Switzerland the intensification of cattle raising and the industrialisation of abattoirs and dairies led to a rise in meat and milk production in particular. The beneficiaries were companies like Nestlé, Maggi and Cailler, who were selling the first manufactured foods, such as milk powder, meat extract and chocolate, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Equally important, rapidly increasing foreign trade made it possible to import ever larger amounts of non-staple items, like sugar, coffee and tobacco. As a result of these developments, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century the urban middle and upper classes in particular had been eating fewer vegetables and cereals, while consumption of meat, milk, sugar, coffee, alcohol, tobacco and industrially processed items had increased.

It was among these sections of society that the Lebensreform movement started to criticise the change in eating habits, blaming them for a whole range of illnesses. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it campaigned mainly against the consumption of alcohol in Switzerland, which was high by international standards. The first vegetarian associations focused on the increasing consumption of meat. Between 1850 and 1950 the annual per capita consumption rose from about 15 kg to over 50 kg. Alongside the health arguments, vegetarians also stressed ethical considerations against the killing of animals, and pointed to the lower cost of a vegetarian diet. They also published economic calculations showing how a lot more plant-based than animal-based food could be produced from the same cultivated area. Mainly after 1950 environmental arguments against increasing factory farming and industrialised agriculture started to be put forward. The

rise in the use of pesticides was a particular target of criticism. An ambivalent attitude emerged in the Lebensreform movement, between consumption and renunciation. Criticism of increasing consumption of meat, alcohol and tobacco, of industrially produced foodstuffs and of intensive agriculture did not only encourage followers to give such things up, but also created new consumer needs.

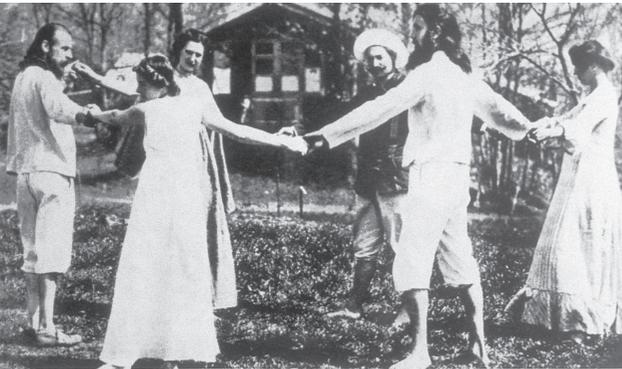
As substitutes for wine, beer and brandy, proponents of Lebensreform advocated such things as fruit juices, soft drinks and mineral water. Instead of processed white bread they promoted their own types, like Graham bread, Steinmetz bread and whole grain bread. They reacted to industrialised farming by establishing organic farms which did not use man-made pesticides. The first Reformhaus health food stores appeared in Switzerland around 1900, offering customers the choice of a broad range of foodstuffs that promised to be both healthy and sustainable. At the same time, vegetarian and tee-total restaurants, boarding houses and hotels spread through all large towns. Since the 1980s these niche products have penetrated the mass market more and more and are now among the fastest growing product lines of Swiss wholesalers.

### Find kindred spirits!

In 1800 just under 10% of people in Switzerland lived in towns. Only Bern, Basel, Zurich and Geneva had populations of more than 10,000. A century later the populations of these towns had already gone above the 100,000 mark. But expansion of the infrastructure lagged behind this spectacular growth. For



workers in particular there was a lack of affordable housing in 1900. But even the new middle classes could often only afford small, dark rooms in cramped neighbourhoods. So calls for more and better housing came from different sectors of society. The Lebensreform movement suggested various approaches in response to the housing crisis. On the one hand, propo-



nents advocated the construction of so-called garden cities. These settlements of detached houses on the edges of cities were supposed to connect the urban space with rural life. All the houses were given generous gardens in order to make them self-sufficient. Many of the garden settlements, such as Freidorf MuttENZ, built to the south of Basel in 1919, were

organised cooperatively. Freidorf had its own shop selling food and an alcohol-free restaurant, it took over responsibility for education and it held cultural events. At one point it even had its own complementary currency, valid only in the settlement. Some advocates of Lebensreform tried to turn their back on society even more, in order to realise their ideals of a natural, healthy lifestyle. In 1900 the German pianist Ida Hofmann, Henri Oedenkoven of Belgium and the Austrian officer Karl Gräser established the Monte Verità vegetarian colony in Ascona on Lake Maggiore. They lived in houses they had built themselves and ate food grown in their own garden. In order to improve their financial circumstances they opened a sanatorium specialising in natural therapies which offered sunbathing treatment and vegetarian diets. In the following years Monte Verità developed into an international magnet for intellectuals, artists and anarchists like Hermann Hesse, Sophie Täuber-Arp

and Erich Mühsam. The founding members left Ascona in 1920 and started a new settlement project in Brazil. They were not the only proponents of Lebensreform to try their luck in colonial countries, thus becoming part of the history of European colonialism. Others established farms in Central America, went on spiritual journeys through Asia or settled on tropical islands to live off sunshine and coconuts.

Similar rural communes, settlements for drop-outs from society and various self-governing enterprises sprang up all over the world during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Especially in the wake of the 1968 protest movement more people were drawn to the land in order to escape the urban lifestyle in the consumer society. In one such example, between 1971 and 1973 up to 1,000 young people spent the summer in the Alps in canton Valais, in order to feel closer to nature. The so-called Bärglütli (mountain people) lived in simple tents, wore little clothing and ate vegetarian food. They received active support from Lebensreform supporters of the first generation. The young people gained an understanding of diet reform, organic farming and naturopathy, carrying on the same Lebensreform policies that had been practised since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, albeit under a different name.

## Authors

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**Andreas Schwab**, PhD in history. His dissertation "Monte Verità – Sanatorium der Sehnsucht" appeared in 2003. His "Landkooperativen Longomaï. Pioniere einer gelebten Utopie" appeared in 2013 published by Rotpunkt Verlag, Zurich. He has curated many exhibitions, including "Die 68er. Kurzer Sommer – lange Wirkung" ("The 1968 protesters. Short summer – durable impact") in the Historisches Museum Frankfurt am Main (2008), "Die Utopie der Widerspenstigen. 40 Jahre Longomaï" ("The Utopia of the Rebellious. 40 years of Longomaï") (2013) and was the project leader for the new permanent exhibition on Monte Verità (2017). Since 2017 lecturer on public history in the department of contemporary history at the University of Fribourg. Curator of the exhibition "Live Better! The Search for the Ideal Way of Life" in the Bernisches Historisches Museum.

## For further reading

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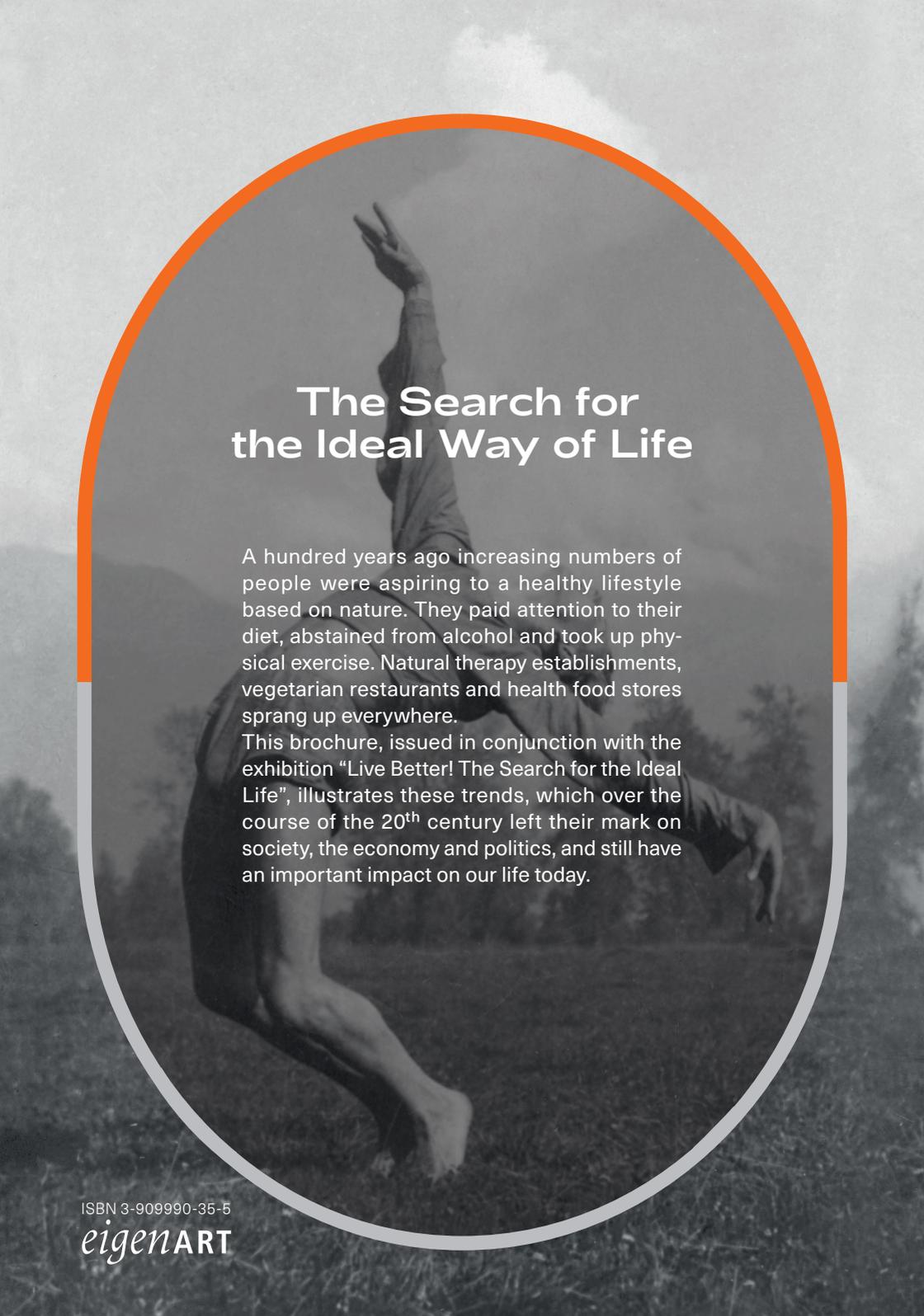
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### Picture credits

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Sigurd Leeder in Ascona in 1925.  
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p. 16, 20: Swiss Social Archives, Zurich  
p. 22: Archive of the History of Medicine, Zurich  
p. 25: *Die Neue Zeit*, Volume 2 Issue 2, 1930, p 28.  
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## The Search for the Ideal Way of Life

A hundred years ago increasing numbers of people were aspiring to a healthy lifestyle based on nature. They paid attention to their diet, abstained from alcohol and took up physical exercise. Natural therapy establishments, vegetarian restaurants and health food stores sprang up everywhere.

This brochure, issued in conjunction with the exhibition "Live Better! The Search for the Ideal Life", illustrates these trends, which over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century left their mark on society, the economy and politics, and still have an important impact on our life today.

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