



The Godchaux circular walk

In the steps of the industrial revolution



Luxembourg

the city

bienjour!



The starting point of the Godchaux walk is the car park close to the [1] **Bonnevoie Tennis Club**. We follow the foot-path descending into the valley. Upon cutting across a field, we may stumble upon ore deposits (brown hematite, pisiform or pea ore). This ore, with its high iron content and its tendency to collect at the surface, supplied the country's numerous forges under the Ancien Régime. The vast forests which covered Luxembourg provided the other raw material essential for the iron manufacturing: charcoal. We continue along the forest track. The remains of a former ice cellar are situated below us. This installation was used for storing ice at a time when refrigerators were unknown.

A clearing offers us a bird's eye view of the Rue Godchaux and the [2] **Hamm** neighbourhood. During the pre-industrial period, Hamm was a small hamlet populated with peasants and day labourers. Empress Maria-Theresa's land register of 1766 counted 18 inhabited houses and a census dated 1796 showed 90 inhabitants. During the 19th century, the setting up of a cloth manufacturing plant at Schleifmühl led to a rapid increase in population. In 1890, Hamm had 668 inhabitants, Schleifmühl 192 and Pulvermühl 381. Hamm became the village of the textile workers. In response to the demographic situation, Hamm was split off from the Commune of Sandweiler in 1873. The new Commune, which also incorporated Pulvermühl and Schleifmühl, became somewhat of a fiefdom of the "textile barons". The proprietors of the







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[2]



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Schleifmühl, Paul Godchaux and, following the latter's death, Jules Godchaux were also the two first mayors from 1874 until 1888, resp. from 1888 until 1917. In 1920, the Commune of Hamm merged with the urban district of Luxembourg, at the same time as Hollerich, Rollingergrund and Eich.

We follow the path which joins the bottom of the valley. Upon crossing the bridge over the Alzette, we discover the remains of the ancient [3] **Gantebeensmillen**. In 1786, the gunsmith Andreas Müller purchased the land to erect a sheet metal works ("Schleifmühle"). Here the gunsmith sharpened his knives, swords, axes and hoes. In 1821, Pierre Gantenbein bought up the sheet metal works and converted it into a grain mill. The mill had three water wheels and in 1872 was sold to the Godchaux family who installed a fuller's mill on the site complete with warehouse and workers' lodgings. During the 1930s an open-air swimming pool and country inn were installed on the banks of the Alzette. This site inherited the name of the former "Gantebeensmillen".

During the period of the textile industry, [4] **workers' quarters** ("Kasären") were erected in proximity to the present-day house numbers 33-35 Rue Godchaux. The rise in industrial activity brought about the problem of accommodation for the labourers. This issue was of concern to employers who required a stable workforce. In particular, in places like Hamm, which were initially insignificant, the increase in the number



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of inhabitants resulted in a housing shortage which meant the risk of losing workers. This explains why the Godchaux family constructed homes for their workers (nicknamed barracks, thanks to their Spartan and cramped character!). The proprietors of the Schleifmühl factory took to heart one of the principal convictions of the paternalistic movement: without a home, there is no family, without family no morals, and without morals no good workers. Besides providing housing for workers, their social concern led them to erect a [5] **day nursery** ("Spillschoul") for the workers' pre-school children, since the textile industry traditionally employed a large number of women. On the employers' initiative, a mutual aid association was even founded in 1865 which compensated workers in the event of illness. The second house on the left after the junction of Rue Godchaux and Rue de la Montagne was built during the beginning of the 20th century. It was known as [6] **villa Godchaux**.

We continue our path past the [7] **washhouse**, the meeting point par excellence of female sociability, where news and gossip from the valley travelled at lightning speed. Directly opposite, there used to be the café that was the meeting place for the men, now no longer in existence. The Schleifmühl was the setting for an intense social and cultural life. The Godchaux family encouraged the creation of cultural and sports associations such as the "Orphéon" choir or the "Kayak Club". The fire brigade consisting of Schleifmühl



[6]



[7]

workers was particularly impressive: 200 men, all armed with weapons and sporting their uniform. On grand occasions, director Paul Godchaux, mounted on a white horse, was in the habit of leading his “private army” on parade. The government finally banned the Schleifmühl fire brigade (which had more men than the Luxembourgish army volunteer unit) from carrying arms.

The route now comes to the [8] “Fohlmillen” which we cross through a vaulted passageway. This is the site which has most retained its industrial character of old. The austere structure with its ivy-covered chimney conjures up the era of Luxembourg’s cloth trade. This commenced around 1825 when Guetschlique and Samson Godchaux, of Jewish stock originally from the Lorraine, established themselves in the Pfaffenthal with two handlooms. The premises on the outskirts, however, rapidly became too restrictive. The factory moved to Schleifmühl in 1828. The Godchaux brothers continued to invest in the mechanisation and modernisation of their venture. In 1851, the Godchaux cloth manufacturing plant was the first to use steam within the city of Luxembourg. The hydraulic power supplied by the Alzette was henceforth complemented by a 15-horsepower steam engine. The Godchaux house prospered. Wool was imported via the ports of Antwerp and Marseille. Produce was sold on the European market and further overseas. The Godchaux family took part in several international exhibitions in Paris and London, even winning awards. Orders



from the State, however, remained an important market. The Schleifmühl factories supplied the majority of fabric to the national army. In 1868 the Godchaux brothers established a branch in Ettelbruck. In 1883, the Godchaux cloth manufacturing plant merged with the Pulvermühl cloth and hosiery manufacturing plant. To expand production in France, a factory was opened in 1884 in La Roche-sur-Chiers in Meurthe-et-Moselle. At its peak, between 1890 and 1900, the group employed approximately 2,000 people, including 800 at the Schleifmühl site. The First World War put an end to the progress of the textile industry. The dissolution of the customs union (the “Zollverein”) resulted in the loss of the German market. The economic crisis of the 1930s dealt the final blow to the Schleifmühl factory which finally halted production in 1939. Today the “Fohlmillen” houses artists’ workshops.

We walk past the old gate and along the Schleifmühl **[9] director’s villa**. This beautiful residence was erected in 1873. Its presence reminds us that not only the work but also the leisure activities of the Schleifmühl workforce always took place under the watchful eye of its masters. The company’s regulations severely cracked down on alcoholism and brawls. Opposite the management villa there used to be warehouses and foremen’s quarters as well as an imposing **[10] administrative building** that was demolished in 1970. A bit further on we find the **[11] canteen** (present-day house number 1A), a food store belonging to the factory where workers could stock up on groceries.



[9] [10]



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Now we have the option of making a detour to the [12] **Pulvermühl** by following the cycle path that runs along the Alzette. In 1841, librarian Jean-Pierre Kuborn purchased the Pulvermühl waterfall and installed a cotton mill on the premises. This was a true factory where the cotton looms were activated by energy produced by a centrifugal turbine. The cotton crisis resulting from the American Civil War forced Kuborn to sell his company to Conrot & Lamort. The new proprietors abandoned cotton production and concentrated on fine wool hosiery articles instead. In 1876 the Pulvermühl knitting factory went into partnership with the Godchaux cloth manufacturing plant. In 1883 the two companies merged under the company name of “Draperies luxembourgeoises S.A. pour la fabrication de draps et de bonneterie”. The factory of Pulvermühl continued its activities until Second World War. The last director Emile Godchaux was sent to a concentration camp by the Nazis and died in Theresienstadt in 1942. From Pulvermühl we retrace our steps to the Schleifmühl “canteen”.

When crossing the bridge, we discover on our right-hand side the old [13] **power station**. The Schleifmühl site was supplied with electricity from 1911 onwards, despite the fact that the capital city was still running on gas. To our right, the old factory buildings are still present. The vast [14] **production halls**, however, are no longer in existence. On entering the forest, we come across a last vestige of the industrial past. Pipes embedded in walls were used to evacuate nauseating fumes to the



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[15] chimneys erected on the hillside. It was not desirable to allow fumes to stagnate in the valley. The textile industry was a polluting activity. The pollution of the Alzette by the Godchaux cloth manufacturing plant was incriminated more than once in police reports of the time. Around the Schleifmühl, the river took on a red colour and riverside residents complained about the disappearance of fish.

We now go back up the forest track and reach the car park near the Bonnevoie Tennis Club. The Godchaux circular walk, which has introduced us to the industrial and social history of our city, finishes here.



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[15]

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The route bears the family name that was at the origin of the growth of the textile industry in the valley of the Alzette. Around 1825, two brothers Guetschlique and Samson Godchaux set up a weaving shed in Pfaffenthal. A few years later, the undertaking was transferred to Schleifmühl where it experienced a remarkable growth. The Godchaux walk reveals traces of this original period of urban industrialisation of which the valley of the Alzette was the birthplace. The walker will be surprised to realise that Luxembourg, before being an international finance centre, was an industrial town. During the first half of the 19th century new types of manufacturing were established on the outskirts of the town and along the valley of the Alzette. They constituted true factories, employing many workers and having recourse to mechanical manufacturing processes. The two state-of-the-art sectors were the textile industry and the glove factory. These industrial ventures preferred to be near the river, since water supplied the necessary power to the machines and also enabled easy waste disposal. The Godchaux cloth manufacturing plant in Schleifmühl is an excellent example of the beginning of the industrial revolution in Luxembourg. It was operational until the eve of the Second World War. Since then, nature has reclaimed its territory and the Schleifmühl site has become one of the most appealing recreational areas close to the city.





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