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A historical study of the traditional livestock merchants of Alsace

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper is the result of empirical field research conducted in Alsace, a bi-cultural area of France controlled by Germany from 1870 to WWI, by France between the World Wars, and by Germany during WWII. The objective of the study is to contribute to the understanding of small-scale entrepreneurs who traditionally controlled the distribution of livestock in this bi-cultural and multi-lingual region.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper gives an account of the livestock distribution system, which prevailed in Alsace, until the Second World War. It uses qualitative methodology, based on oral testimonies of retired entrepreneurs and verified by means of triangulation.

Findings – The findings in this paper indicate that, in this region of traditional rivalry between French and Germans, the sector was dominated by family enterprises speaking Jédich-Daitch, serving as a middleman minority, and dealing between French-speakers and German-speakers, who did not trade with one another.

Originality/value – This paper shows that, while much literature shows that middleman minorities now exist around the world, it also reveals that the concept of middleman minority existed centuries ago, in the food sector; the arrangement allowed farmers to specialise in agriculture, while specialised entrepreneurs bought and sold livestock and also provided credit to farmers. This paper is of interest to historians and anthropology/management/sociology scholars of entrepreneurship, as well as practitioners in the livestock industry.

Keywords France, Entrepreneurs, Distribution, Livestock

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

The agro-marketing sector in Alsace developed in a manner distinctly different from its counterparts elsewhere. In Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA, livestock auctions have long existed, and farmers have been dealing directly at these markets. In contrast, the distribution of livestock in this multicultural region of France relied on primarily on networks of middlemen known in local dialect as *Päjmes Händler* and in French as *marchands de bestiaux* – merchants of livestock. This was the case until the mid-twentieth century, when co-operatives started to become major players.

Entrepreneurs who remember working in this industry are few and aging. Most of the relevant documents were destroyed during World War II. It is timely, therefore, to research this sector, while the last of its players are still alive. Based on first-hand accounts, the purpose of this article is to provide for future generations, information about the activities of formerly essential small enterprises in the food sector, which once provided an essential service, now replaced by new distribution channels.

A retired farmer interviewed by the author expressed his view:

> Many ambulant merchants came to our village. I remember the coffee merchant, and the man who used to come to sharpen knives and scissors. One peddler would bring us dishware and pottery, and another fellow used to bring us brushes, but the livestock merchants were the most memorable. It was always exciting when they came. They were very important for us, because they bought our surplus animals that cost too much to feed and more importantly, they brought us horses when ours died and we needed transport. We could not imagine life without livestock merchants.

Related research

Several studies, published in the nineteenth century, describe the rise of the rural merchant class in France. These include Benoit (1889); Cahun (1886); Levy (1862); Stenne (1877) and Weill (1870). In Alsace, a multicultural region consisting of Catholics, Protestants and Jews, the rural merchant class was comprised of Jewish entrepreneurs, many of whom were itinerant merchants, and these people dominated the trade of livestock.

According to Levy (1862), Jewish leaders of the nineteenth century preached that an education at a technical school would lead to a better future than commerce. Yet, most of the Jews of Alsace continued to earn their livelihood as merchants, acting as intermediaries between Catholics and Protestants.

Reuss (1898) focused on the occupational clustering of the Jews in nineteenth century Alsace. During times of peace, Alsatian Jews thrived, trading a wide assortment of merchandise, precious metals and livestock, especially cattle. During wartime, these traders prospered by selling horses to the military; horses were needed for transport, and, horsemeat was relished by the soldiers. In addition, troops bought horse-feed from Jewish merchants. Those known as *Pfühändler* bought grain and sold flour; the *Nahloshändler* peddled general goods. Some specialised in sharpening knives and scissors; others served as *prête-noms*, lending money on behalf of Catholic clergymen, who were not supposed to charge direct interest to other Catholics. Marx (1975) discussed the role of Jewish financiers in Alsace.

From the above literature it appears that Catholics disliked buying from Protestants and vice versa. Yet, everybody bought from the Jews, and these were the middlemen. A

similar scenario, is described by Loewen (1971), who found Chinese entrepreneurs were the middlemen between Afro-Americans and whites in Mississippi.

Bonacich (1973) pioneered a middleman minority theory. This was built upon by Aldrich *et al.* (1984), Bonacich (1987), Marger (1990), Min and Jaret (1985), and Zenner (1991).

Like the entrepreneurs described by Barth (1963; 1967), the merchants of Alsace were also agents of change. Barthian literature views entrepreneurship as an activity involving the relationship of persons and institutions in different ethnic communities. Barth (1963) placed great emphasis on the existence of different spheres of values, and central to his discussion is the concept of the entrepreneur as being an essential broker, mediating boundary transfers in this situation of contacts between cultures. Given that farms in Alsace were dispersed and that farmers seldom travelled beyond their church, residents relied on the Jewish merchants to bring them innovations from the city, e.g. the first musical recording, the first electrical appliance, the first disposable shaver, the first radio, etc.

Central to the success of the Jewish middlemen in Alsace were their networks, as is the case in much modern-day entrepreneurship (Aldrich, 1989; Aldrich *et al.*, 1984, 1987; Aldrich and Zimmer, 1986; Bonacich *et al.*, 1977; Boubakri, 1999; Brenner and Toulouse, 1990; Dhaliwala, 1998; Dubini and Aldrich, 1991; Dyer and Ross, 2000; Iyer and Shapiro, 1999; Jagd, 2005; Koniordos, 2005; Light, 1972; Miles and Snow, 2005; Peterson and Roquebert, 1993; Ram, 1994; Ray *et al.*, 1988; Shenker, 1994; Waldinger, 1988; and Wong, 1987). The literature explains that minority entrepreneurs can benefit greatly from the social capital of an ethnic network, including co-ethnic suppliers, markets, employees, as well as finance and information.

Juteau and Paré (1996) and Lee (1999) found co-ethnic suppliers were prevalent among Jewish entrepreneurs in Canada and in the United States, respectively. Lee (1999) noted that this provided access to lower wholesale costs, which could translate to lower retail costs and enhanced competitiveness. For the livestock merchants of Alsace, however, co-ethnic suppliers were not an option, as Jews did not breed animals. Nor could they limit themselves to a co-ethnic market.

The merchants of Alsace often operated their micro-enterprises without paid employees, depending instead on unpaid family labour. Much current literature likewise indicates a reliance, by ethnic minority entrepreneurs, on unpaid family members (e.g. Juteau and Paré, 1996; Wong and Ng, 1998). Butler and Greene (1997) pointed out that this led to a stereotype of exploitation. In the case of the Alsatian livestock merchants, according to respondents and their families, unpaid labour did not involve exploitation, but rather a very valuable apprenticeship. Thus, sons and nephews learned the trade from their fathers and uncles, who served as role models and mentors.

These merchants also relied heavily on family for financing. In addition, members of the ethnic community also provided finance when needed. This was similar to the credit networks described by Iyer and Shapiro (1999) and by Juteau and Paré (1996) in their studies of Jewish entrepreneurs in the United States and in Canada respectively. Mechanisms to provide financing to co-ethnics are quite widespread, as discussed by Basu (1998); Bates (1997); Boubakri (1999); Gold (1992); Laguerre (1998); Lee (1999); Peterson and Roquebert (1993); Phizacklea and Ram (1996); Shin and Han (1990); Saxenian (1999) and Yoon (1995).

In addition, the Jewish merchants of Alsace relied on their ethnic network for information and advice. Such practice is commonly referred to by the literature, including Basu (1998); Dadzie and Cho (1989); Marger and Hoffman (1992); Peterson (1995); Saxenian (1999); and Yoon (1995). Iyer and Shapiro (1999), and Juteau and Paré (1996), refer to information networks of Jewish entrepreneurs in the USA and Canada respectively. In Alsace, *Schmüsser* were individuals who provided information, for a fee.

The social network of the merchants of Alsace also included a feature seemingly absent in the literature. Travel was intrinsic to their livelihood and during business trips these frequent travellers would pray, and eat, with co-religionists, and sleep at their homes. The religious duty of allowing animals to rest on the Sabbath (from sunset on Friday until dusk on Saturday) made it impossible to travel with livestock during this time of rest. Therefore, business trips were often extended due to religious obligations, and considerable time was spent with the families of other merchants. During this time, matchmaking was a common occurrence, as the son of a merchant fancied the daughter of another. The co-religionists shared the same language, holidays, belief system and dietary restrictions. All this, in turn, reinforced social networking among this ethnic minority.

Writing about entrepreneurs in twenty-first century Europe, Sternberg and Lückgen (2005) emphasised the difficulty of small firms to obtain financing in Germany. This is not a new phenomenon. During the nineteenth century, credit institutions were reluctant to give loans to small farmers in Germany. Therefore, some farmers leased cattle from Jewish entrepreneurs. Others bought cattle on credit from Jewish merchants.

Historical background

Raphaël (1980) discussed the factors that led Jews to become merchants in Alsace. These people were once active farmers in Europe. Over time, however, a number of factors led them to abandon their farms and their vineyards. Their religion prevented them from working on Saturday, and the Church forbade them labouring in their fields on Sundays. The Church also banned them from giving employment to Christians. In addition, experience taught the Jews that, in times of religious persecutions, it was more convenient to have moveable assets, such as gold, cattle and later diamonds, than to own immovables.

During the thirteenth century, Jews began abandoning agriculture, at an alarming rate. Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenburg, an influential German spiritual leader of the times, described as a calamity the fact that Jews were leaving the land in order to pursue commercial profits. By the fourteenth century, Jews no longer had a choice; under the Saxon civil code, *Meissener Rechtsbuch,* Jews were banned from owning land. Yet, in Alsace, this did not lead to urbanisation, because Jews were not allowed to live in the cities.

Alsace remained part of the Holy German Empire until being acquired in 1648, by the Kingdom of France. At the time, the French army was facing a shortage of horses, and a lack of animal feed for the horses it had. The Jews of Alsace, with their experience in commerce, efficiently supplied the French with horses and with animal feed. The French offered protection to these people who supplied their army, and this led to a mass immigration of Jews from central Europe, to Alsace. Whereas the number

of Jewish population in Alsace had consisted of 525 families in 1689, according to the census of 1784, the province was home to 3,910 families that year, amounting to 19,624 people. Still forbidden to own land, deprived of entry into universities, excluded from the guilds and not allowed to reside in cities, these people tended to be travelling merchants, linking the urban and rural economies. In September 1791, Jews were permitted to reside in the cities of Alsace, and this helped them expand their commercial networks.

In 1870, the Germans took back Alsace from France, and the Kaiser built large and ornate synagogues for the Jews. This ensured the continued growth of commerce in Alsace.

"*Nix tse handle*?" used to scream the fathers, as their sons would wobble along the main road of each village. In Alsatian dialect, this meant, "Anything for sale?" The peddlers would stock up with second-hand wares before departing to sell them in the next town. The fathers and elder brothers would carry their loads on backs. This included utensils, candles and soap, as well as animal hides, laces, string and used clothing. Wealthier merchants used man-powered pushcarts. The exceptions were those known as *Esseljéde* (donkey-Jews), as they would travel from one village to another with a donkey-drawn cart; they traded kitchenware and other household items, accepting rags and beehives as payment. Livestock merchants constituted a class of their own. Some had a horse-drawn wagon on which two calves could be transported.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Jews had a monopoly in cattle dealing in areas of Baden, Bavaria, Hannover, Rhineland and Westphalia. Until the First World War, most independent cattle dealers in Germany (including Alsace) were Jewish.

The livestock sector

Livestock breeders, having responsibilities linked to their land and to their animals, could not easily spend time away from their farms, in order to sell their animals to butchers. It was highly inconvenient for the farmers to displace themselves to urban areas, searching for buyers to purchase livestock. Jews, not being tied to the land, identified a highly lucrative opportunity, buying live animals from families in rural areas, and providing urban butchers with livestock. The Jews of Alsace soon came to dominate this trade, constantly travelling between supply and demand. They managed the link between the rural and urban economies, providing cash for farmers and a source of meat for consumers. In addition, they spread information as required. If one farmer needed a bull, temporarily, for breeding purposes, a livestock merchant could source this need.

For farmers who wished to raise cattle, but not necessarily breed them, Alain Levy provided calves, with a promise to buy them back for their meat. For those who wished to buy calves but lacked cash, the livestock merchant provided short-term credit:

> "We could provide credit," explained an interviewee, "because we learned to spend little, in order to have some cash left over – frugality."

Another respondent elaborated:

> On a work day, we left home at dawn, and all we ate all day was some cheese and some bread, or potatoes, perhaps with boiled eggs. In the fall or in winter we sometimes had a few nuts. We drank water from public fountains. At times, we had a little beer, but we reserved wine for special occasions. Only after a successful deal would we splurge on coffee and some

eau-de-vie. Of course, on Friday nights we dressed up and celebrated the Sabbath with a special meal, very labour-intensive in its preparation, stuffed stomach for example. The rest of the time, we were thrifty.

Weber (1904) in his culturalist theory, also referred to frugality, thrift and the willingness to defer gratification.

The livestock merchants of Alsace were eager to fulfil various needs of consumers, and prospered from the opportunities they identified. However, their culture did not consider commerce to be a socially desirable occupation. A retired merchant explained to the author:

Our rabbis were telling us to learn trades, for example at the *Ecole des Arts et Métiers de Strasbourg*. I think it is Psalm 128, if I recall correctly, at my age, that teaches us something like this: When you subsist from the labour of your hands, then you shall be happy and satisfied.

Another respondent explained:

Social reform allowed us to enter mainstream society, but we perceived there to be excessive in risk in attempting an activity completely unknown to us. Why take an unnecessary risk? For us, entrepreneurship was the only means to eliminate risk. It was our expertise to travel across the countryside and to buy livestock, and that is what we did best.

For longer expeditions, merchants invariably departed in the early morning. Grandmothers and mothers blessed the travellers and wives often joined their husbands for the first few steps, reciting together prayers for a safe return. Although calves often rode in carts, behind which larger animals walked, attached by means of a rope.

The traders did not travel randomly. Rather, they their itineraries were carefully planned within networks of like-minded people who would host them. Until the twentieth century, there were 145 Jewish communities in the Bas-Rhin department of Alsace, and another 58 in the Haut-Rhin department to the south. By travelling within this network of communities, it was possible for the travellers to observe their day of rest on Saturday, and to acquire food prepared according to religious laws. In December, friends and relatives prepared a winter specialty – potato pancakes fried in oil, and known in *Jédich-Daitch* as *latkes*. In the spring, during the festival of Passover, unleavened bread was readily available. The wives of peddlers in one village were very welcoming of the peddlers from another. The hospitality was reciprocated, as the husbands of the hosts would be accommodated by the families of the visitors, in their respective hometowns. Their success as entrepreneurs, and their survival as a linguistic and religious minority, depended on the social cohesion within this regional ethnic network.

Farmers interviewed by the author explained that as youngsters they would feel uncomfortable when they heard the merchants talking in a foreign language amongst themselves:

Although ours was a relatively large farm, whenever we had more than twelve cattle, we would sell the surplus. During negotiations to purchase cattle from my father, the buyers would discuss the price amongst themselves, speaking in *Jédich-Daitch*. We never knew what they were saying, but we assumed that they were planning a strategy to pay us a lower price. In any case, we seldom rejected an offer, because we did not have the resources to search for

> another buyer. Rarely would more than one or two teams of livestock merchants approach us, since they appeared to have charted the territory in such a way as to avoid excessive competition.

Another interviewee expressed his feeling:

> The Jews were very knowledgeable and well-organised. The value of dairy cattle was related to their capacity to produce milk. In the case of *Navelbehejmess* (an animal sold for meat), the price was a function of its weight.[1] The value of beasts of burden reflected their ability to perform work. In addition, prices reflected the time of year.[2] I used to milk the cows, and I was amazed how the livestock merchants could figure out, with great accuracy, the milk producing capacity of a cow. In addition, these expert buyers would guess, apparently quite accurately, the weight of an animal. So we were happy to make a sale, but the fact that they spoke a different language made us nervous, because they could understand everything we said, but they could also say things, which we could not understand.

Livestock merchants told the author their side of the story:

> We used *Jédich-Daitch* among us because that is what we spoke best. When asking my father or brother whether he agreed on my weight estimate of a given animal, it would have felt very awkward to do so in French or German, both of these being foreign languages for us.

Youngsters played a very active role in the family business. As pre-school children, they would play beside the cows, in the stable. When they got slightly older, they took pride in sweeping the stable. School-age boys, referred to as *die Jénglich,* were responsible for milking the cows, before having breakfast, which often consisted of soup. After eating, the lads would chop hay and beets for the animals. After school, children would participate in short-haul animal deliveries, to the neighbouring village, for instance.

During school holidays, boys as young as ten years old became involved in longer deliveries, taking livestock to the market. An interviewee reminisced being an adolescent:

> To get to the market on time, it was necessary for us to rise before dawn and as a reward we were sometimes treated to sausages! Other times we ate bread moistened with beer.

In his biography, Weill (1870) recalled being the companion and apprentice of his father, an established livestock merchant. While the father rode on horseback, the son would walk alongside, leading one or two cows. By the age of 14, noted Weill, teenagers were considered mature adults, responsible for their own purchases and sales. According to this biography, a merchant of the nineteenth century did not interfere with the transactions of a 14-year old son. In contrast, interviews conducted by the author indicate that, merchants of the twentieth century felt it necessary to give advice to their sons.

The merchants would visit up to eight villages in a day, looking to negotiate transactions. Some Jews did not themselves deal with livestock, but served as brokers, or informers who simply sold information, which would lead to transactions. These entrepreneurs were called *Schmüsser*, and their commission was referred to as *Sassergeld.* Operating informally, these individuals mingled with the villagers, identified needs and opportunities and then waited by the side of a road, knowing that livestock merchants would be passing by eventually. The *Schmüsser* then sold their information to livestock merchants (The word they used for this activity was

vermassere, literally meaning, "to inform.") In order to reduce time spent away from their own villages, the transient merchants preferred to pay for this market research, rather than to conduct this time-consuming task themselves. The *Schmüsser* thus formed an integral part of the business network.

Also integral to the social capital of livestock merchants were the *Unterbieter*[3]. Livestock merchants would send these people ahead of themselves, to offer farmers low prices, in order to give the impression that market values were depressed. When the actual merchant followed, his offer appeared relatively high, making the seller feel good about his sale to the highest bidder.

Beyond the ethnic boundary of cultural resources, a network of buyers and sellers also developed. When a merchant had more animals than he had the capacity to take care of, he often looked beyond his ethnic resources, to a larger network encompassing local farmers with whom friendships had been developed:

> From time to time, I had a temporary surplus of cattle. Although I needed to board them somewhere, I could not look to other merchants for assistance, because if I had an excess of animals and not enough space, chances were that they were in the identical situation. So, it was very useful to have an arrangement to board livestock on the property of a farmer.

In many cases, farmers and merchants developed friendships and conducting business together on a regular basis. Butchers also liked having a regular supplier of quality animals, and so livestock merchants often had regular buyers. These were known as *Kaunem* (possibly from the German verb *kaufen* meaning "to buy" or the Hebrew *kaunim* meaning "purchasers."

A retired merchant recalled:

> I had 20 regular clients, each of whom I visited five or six times a year. I also had a butcher who was a regular buyer and over time, we developed an intense trust. He knew it was good to but from me, and I knew I could sell to him, so it reduced any risk of uncertainty. You see, the average turnover rate was 15 days, from the instant we bought a cow until the moment we sold it. No merchant wanted to hold an animal longer than that, because it represented tied-up capital, and expenses, as the animal needed to eat and it took up place.

Another merchant elaborated:

> In the old days, there was also the risk of an animal catching tuberculosis. During my career, as a livestock merchant, I saw at least 20 calves die unexpectedly, before I had a chance to find a buyer for veal. If I knew a butcher who would buy regularly from me, I might have been able to sell the calves before they got sick. A sick animal could be sold to the candle factory, but we would not sell it for food. So, it was good to have one or more regular buyers.

Cattle were also traded at the bi-weekly livestock market, which took place, in the town of Saverne, on every second Thursday (except on Jewish holidays, such as *Rosh Hashanah*, *Yom Kippur* and the *Fête des Cabanes*). Information flow was relatively less imperfect here, compared to those conducted on a farm, because buyers and sellers had a large variety of animals and prices to compare. According to documents at the town hall of Saverne, most transactions that took place at the local livestock market took place between Jewish merchants and did not involve farmers or butchers.

One merchant explained to the author:

> When dealing with meat-cattle, our margins were slim and after transportation and other expenses not much profit remained! The market of Saverne was fabulous because, there, we

> could buy and sell an animal, all on the same day, without travelling with it long distances. Sometimes, I found a seller and a buyer and I introduced them to each other. They would pay me a commission for making possible a transfer and I did not even take possession of the animal. In this way, the market allowed me to earn money as a commission agent, rather than being an actual merchant.

Some market transactions were more complex than were others, requiring legal documentation. Saverne merchant Jacob Kahn, for instance, sold to a resident of the Pfalsburg area, a pregnant cow, with the agreement that eight days after its birth, the calf would be returned to the vendor. It was also possible to sell a cow, with a promise that the seller would be entitled to a supply of milk.

A more common, yet detailed, transaction was the *Anschlag*. This was a sale of an animal, which led to a sharing of profits (or losses) at the time of resale.

Some sales were paid cash, while others were on instalment, at times without interest. As well, some transactions involved barter. When Théodore Lévy, a merchant based in Marmoutier, sold two horses to Antoni Hiegel, a farmer from Dimbsthal, the former accepted a blind horse, as a trade-in, in partial payment.

In some cases, the merchants would try to enhance the appearance of an animal, before bringing it to the market. For this, they hired the service of professionals outside their ethnic network. A village-smith was paid to sharpen the horns of an animal. Tails were sometimes trimmed, teeth were cleaned, and in the case of horses, white eyebrows were plucked. A well-fed and good-looking animal could yield a handsome profit, especially when sold with a guarantee. The standard guarantee, *landesübliche Währschaft* lasted for six weeks. When dealing with merchants, who had established good reputations, farmers were willing to pay a premium for a healthy animal with a guarantee.

Constantly travelling, assisted by their vast networks, rich with ethnic resources, the livestock merchants of Alsace were aware of prevailing prices in different areas, and this allowed them to identify opportunities for arbitrage. These Jews could read and write using the Hebrew alphabet (from right to left), as well as the Latin one, from left to right. They people spoke *Jédich-Daitch* among themselves and Yiddish with Jews from Switzerland. With local farmers, they spoke Alsatian dialect, to which they referred as *Galeres-Daitch*. The merchants also mastered French and German, which they used in mainstream society. The daughters of wealthy Jews frequently studied in Lorraine, and girls from poor backgrounds often spent some time working as maids of richer Jews, in Paris. Thus, even women learned to speak French. Knowledge of several languages, coupled with human relations skills, enhanced their ability to negotiate. Business skills were developed from a very young age, as children watched their fathers doing transactions. Commerce was a way of life, and attempting another occupation would have been perceived as being an unnecessary risk. A network of livestock merchants, across the region, facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and availability of finance among co-religionists. In the event of bankruptcy, an individual was given assistance by other merchants. All of these factors predisposed Jews to follow the role of their fathers and to take over the family business, from one generation to the next.

The sector transformed

WWII witnessed the disappearance of Jews from many of communities across Alsace. Without the elaborate network, which had existed earlier, the livestock sector would

never be the same again. Farmers realised that the function formerly performed by the livestock merchants needed to be done by new entities. Co-operatives arose to fulfil this need.

Yet, the nature of the sector changed as the small-scale family farm declined in importance. Rather than own one horse and a couple of cows, as did the typical family farm of the early twentieth century, a modern farmer may have 150 animals or none at all. Nowadays, fewer farmers raise animals, and it is less common for a farmer to have just a few dairy cattle. No longer are Alsatian farmers generalists, owning a few animals, and planting some crops (usually beets, potatoes, cabbage, and wheat) to feed themselves and their animals. The trend has been to specialize in large-scale production of beets or tobacco or grapes.

No longer do young boys wake-up early to mix beets and bran for their father's cattle. Large-scale feeders provide the animals with corn. No longer does a farmer need to get a breeding-bull for a few days. Artificial insemination has become the norm. Breeding stock are bought and sold by means of ads in newspapers such as *L'Est agricole et viticole*.

The last livestock market of Saverne took place in June 1973, survived by large ones outside Alsace, namely those in Dijon and Nancy. Urban butcheries, nowadays, buy directly from farmers and the marketing of livestock for butchering is done via co-operatives.

No longer does each village have its own slaughtering facilities. The slaughterhouses of Mützig and Wasselone are among the many that closed down. Large-scale slaughterhouses have replaced the traditional smaller ones that were scattered across the region. Outside Strasbourg, the only slaughterhouse, which remains in the Bas Rhin Department of France (northern Alsace), is in the municipality of Haguenau. Animals from farms as far as Valff are processed in large plants located in Strasbourg. The only local slaughtering would be the undeclared slaughter of non-registered calves (the birth of which has not been registered), for personal consumption.

No longer do livestock merchants roam the countryside of Alsace walking animals from one village to another. Trucks and trains transport livestock, and meat is exported by air. "It is all different now, and not necessarily for the better," exclaimed one interviewee. "Now, we are living in the era of mad cow disease!"

Notes

1. A carcass is roughly 45 percent the weight of a live cow. A live dairy cow weighs in the vicinity of 500 kg.
2. The price of livestock underwent seasonal fluctuations. In the fall, prices were depressed, reflecting the fact that animals needed shelter during the winter, and space was limited. In March, the same animal would be worth much more, because space was less of a constraint, and there was less of a perceived need to sell.
3. This slang term is derived from the verb unterbieten, which means to beat somebody's offer.

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