WHEN THE PERMANENT WAVE LEARNED TO TRAVEL

A Swiss hairdresser, a journey to London, a failed wedding hairstyle – and the beginning of an international success story.

In 1910, Swiss hairdresser **Emil Rutishauser** left Winterthur for London with a clear purpose. For weeks he had saved every franc he could spare. International travel was still a major undertaking, and the journey by train took almost two days each way. Yet Rutishauser believed it would be worth every sacrifice.

His destination was the London salon of **Karl Ludwig (Charles) Nessler**, inventor of the permanent wave.

There he witnessed something few hairdressers had ever seen before.

Using electrically heated curling rods, specially prepared chemical solutions and hours of careful work, Nessler had developed a process that allowed hair to remain permanently waved. At the beginning of the twentieth century, it was one of the most remarkable technological innovations the profession had ever encountered.

Convinced that he had seen the future of hairdressing, Rutishauser purchased one of Nessler's permanent wave machines and returned to Switzerland.

He could not have imagined how difficult the beginning would be.

His first customer was a bride.

She wanted a permanent wave for her wedding.

The treatment lasted almost eight hours. Every adjustment of the machine relied on instinct rather than experience. When the curling rods were finally removed, excitement quickly turned into disappointment.

The excessive heat had damaged the hair.

The curls failed.

Rutishauser refunded the full **100 Swiss francs**—a remarkable amount in 1910, representing several weeks' wages for a skilled hairdresser and equivalent to well over **€1,000 (approximately US$1,200)** in today's purchasing power.

Many hairdressers would probably have abandoned the idea after such a costly failure.

Rutishauser did not.

With every treatment he gained experience, refined his technique and gradually won the confidence of his customers.

Only one year later, on **26 March 1911**, he wrote to **Eduard Trost**, Nessler's representative in Berlin:

"Winterthur is a town of only about 25,000 inhabitants, and yet I am now able to give permanent waves to two to four ladies each week. Today I earn more than I previously did with a much larger staff."

With just a few sentences, Rutishauser disproved one of the common assumptions of his time.

Many believed that Nessler's invention could succeed only in major cities such as London or Berlin.

Winterthur proved otherwise.

Today, Rutishauser's account is recognised as one of the earliest documented testimonies to the introduction of the permanent wave in Switzerland. More than a century later, his remarkable story has been reconstructed through original archival research carried out as part of the **Charles Nessler Research Project**.

It reminds us that great innovations rarely begin with immediate success. They begin with curiosity, perseverance and the courage to continue after failure.

Historical Perspective

Year: 1910

Location: Winterthur, Switzerland (approximately 25,000 inhabitants)

Journey to London: Approximately two days by rail (each way)

Treatment Time: Nearly eight hours

Refund: 100 Swiss francs

Present-day Equivalent: More than €1,000 (approximately US$1,200) in purchasing power

Historical Significance: One of the earliest documented accounts of the introduction of the permanent wave in Switzerland.

About the Charles Nessler Research Project

The **Charles Nessler Research Project** is an independent historical research initiative dedicated to documenting the life, work and international legacy of **Karl Ludwig (Charles) Nessler**, inventor of the permanent wave.

Drawing on original archival sources from Switzerland, Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States, the project reconstructs Nessler's career and the

international development of permanent wave technology while preserving the history of one of the beauty industry's most influential pioneers.

Help Preserve Hairdressing History

Do you own historical photographs, advertisements, letters, invoices, brochures, catalogues, equipment or other documents relating to the history of the hairdressing profession or the early development of the permanent wave?

Personal recollections, family archives, and information about former hairdressers, salons and businesses can also provide valuable historical evidence.

Every photograph, document and personal memory has the potential to add another piece to the historical puzzle.

If you believe you have material that may be of historical interest, I would be delighted to hear from you.

Contact

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