



The Life of Adolf Wölfli in Chronological order

Compiled by Petr Šourek and Terezie Zemánková based on Adolf Wölfli's *Short Life Story* (1895), *From the Cradle to the Grave* (1908–1912) and the medical records written by his doctors as well as on the *Chronological Presentation of the Life and Works of Adolf Wölfli* as established by Elka Spoerri¹

1864

Adolf Wölfli is born on 29 February in Bowil, Emmental (Canton Bern, Switzerland), the youngest of the seven children to Jakob and Anna Wölfli-Feuz. The father, a stonecutter, is an alcoholic. Wölfli grows up in dire poverty.

1870

"And so for about one year we lived in Steingrübli near Berne, from where I went to primary school in Wabern during the first year in the class taught by Miss Anna Ruch, teacher. [...] A magnificent comet appeared for a while and shortly afterwards the northern lights were visible."

From the Cradle to the Grave. Book No.5, 1908

1871

"French soldiers crossed the border into Switzerland near Verrières, that is Bourbaki's Army. ."

February 27th

"Again that same year the church of Kirchdorf which had served as quarters for the interned soldiers was burnt down, owing to careless handling of tobacco-smoke utensils."

"During this time my father and all my brothers scattered in all directions, deeply concerned about their wordly well-being. My mother and I were now alone, I was seven years old."

From the Cradle to the Grave. Book No.5, 1908

1872

"In summer 1872, when Napoleon was transported to St. Helena as prisoner, the great cotton-spinning-establishment Felsenau burnt down

¹ Elka Spoerri, Chronological Presentation of Adolf Wölfli's Life and Work, in: *Adolf Wölfli*, Adolf Wölfli Foundation, Kunstmuseum, Bern. 1976.

Adolf Wölfli in front of the entrance of the Waldau Clinic. Photograph coloured by Wölfli.



Postcard of Waldau
Mental Asylum signed
by Adolf Wölfl, 1907.

Short Life Story

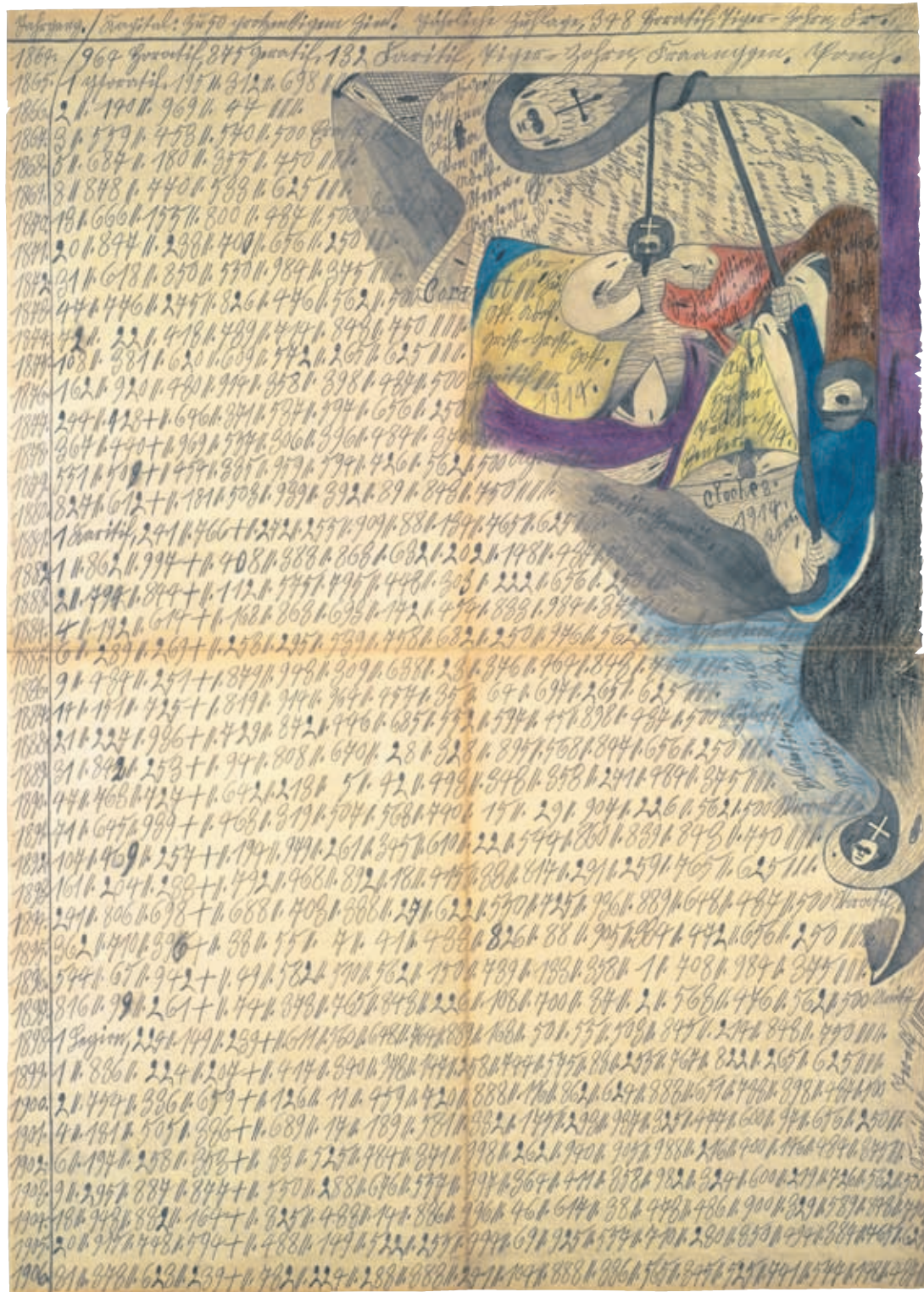
ADOLF WÖFLI

MY EARLY YEARS

*From my youth, from my youth,
The song rings out always!
Oh, how far off, oh, how far off
Lies what once was mine!*

I was born on February 29th, 1864, in Nütchern near Bowyl, of poor destitute parents. About my grandparents I know nothing. My father, a stonecutter by profession, drifted around the countryside as a derelict from one place to the next. When he was sober and in good spirits, he was able to finish his job promptly to the satisfaction of his master, then he was intelligent. But as soon as he pocketed his pay for one or two days of work, instead of heading home to support his wretched kids and their mother, he made for the next notorious dive, where he blew all his hard-earned pay among people like himself. No wonder that he soon acquired the reputation of a vile criminal and that he consequently spent most of his life in prison. My mother, born F. from B., bore him 7 sons, of whom I am the youngest. I had no sisters. Two of my brothers died in childhood. Without the help of my father, my mother (who was a laundress, as far as I know) was not able to support us for long, and all five of us were raised on welfare by our home parish. It was in November of the year 1872 that my mother and I, her youngest child, were transported from Bern to her home parish, and the local parish president Mr. S. received us with the sharpest of taunts and insults. I was 8 years old at the time; my mother was in very poor health. From our arrival in November until the following 2nd of January, the day for the hiring out of workers in the local parish, we two had our lodging on a farm, where I did not yet feel any unpleasant change; but a different fate was awaiting me. On the

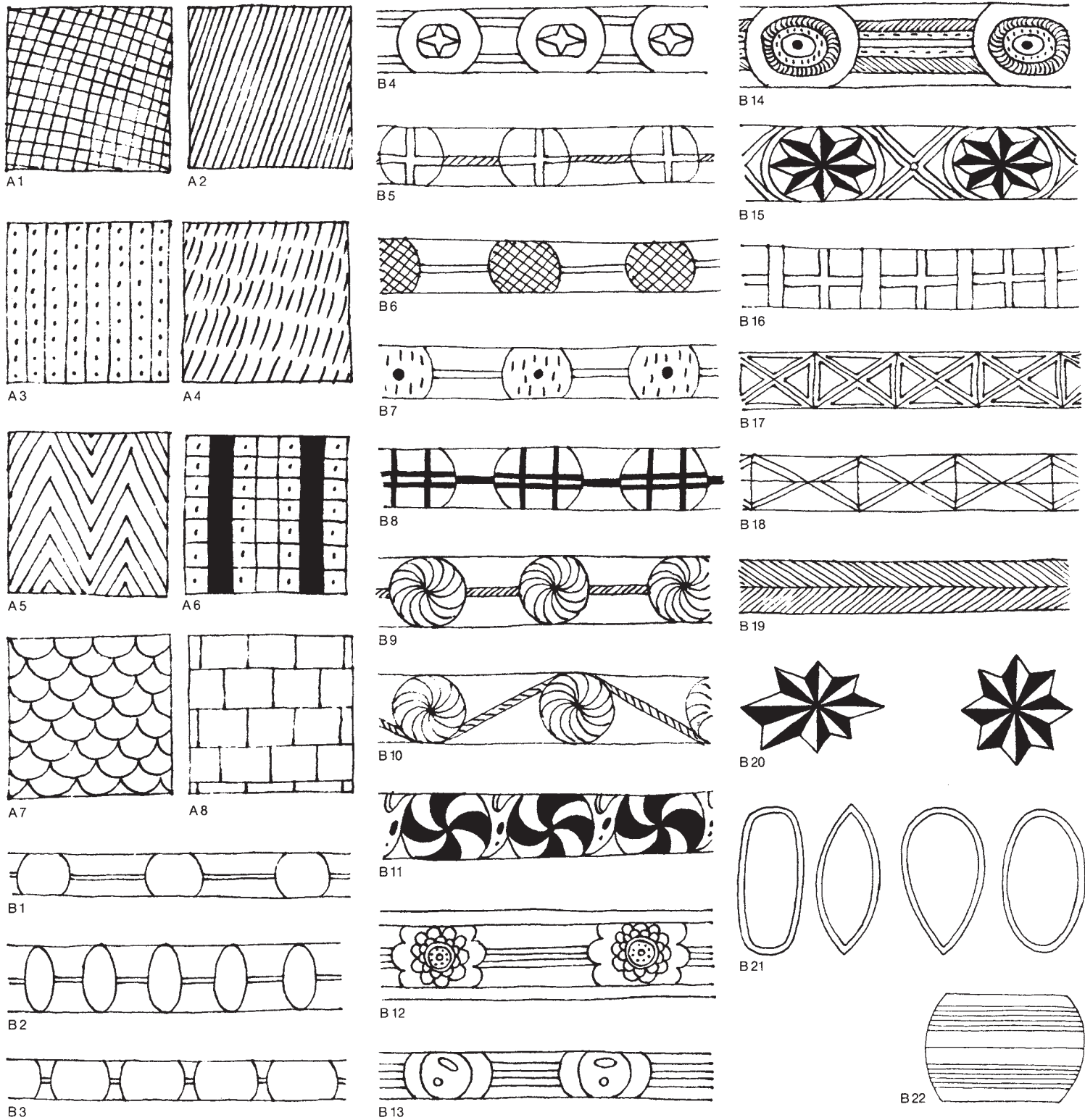




Wölfli's Vocabulary of Forms

ELKA SPOERRI

DRAWN BY MARKUS RÄTZ



- A1 – series of cross-hatched squares
- A2 – series of strips in parallel lines
- A3 – polyphonic surface: alternating lines and dots
- A4 – surface modulated by free strokes
- A5 – surface modulated in "herring-bone pattern"
- A6 – polyphonic surface: alternating dots and strips
- A7 – surface modulated in "fish-scale pattern"
- A8 – surface modulated in "brick pattern"
- B1, B2, B3 – variations of "Ring of Bells" (Glöggli-Ring)
- B4 – "Ring of Bells" with a star in the middle
- B5 – "Ring of Bells" with a cross in the middle
- B6 – "Ring of Bells" with cross-hatching
- B7 – "Ring of Bells" with a dot in the centre and free strokes
- B8 – "Ring of Bells" with musical notations
- B9 – "Ring of Bells" with screw-shaped spirals
- B10 – as coils of wool or swirling rosettes
- B11 – "Steam-Propeller-Ring"
- B12 – ornamental strip in "rosette pattern"
- B13 – ornamental strip with skittle balls
- B14 – ornamental strip in "peacock-eye-pattern"
- B15 – ornamental strip in "eight-pointed-star pattern"
- B16 – ornamental strip in "cruciform pattern"
- B17 – ornamental strip in "cut-diamond pattern"
- B18 – ornamental strip in "rhomb-and-dart pattern"
- B19 – ornamental strip in "feather pattern"
- B20 – three-dimensional shaded "eight-pointed-star"
- B21 – various oval shapes
- B22 – "music-barrel" ("Musikfässli")



Funeral March: The Last Step in Adolf Wölfli’s Ascension

BARBARA ŠAFÁŘOVÁ

1 Adolf Wölfli, *The Position of the Numbers*, from *Geographic Book* No. 11, pp. 205-213, see pp. 177–179 of this catalogue.

2 “Das gibt zu tun! Sie können sich gar nicht vorstellen, wie man dabei seinen Kopf anstrengen muss, um nichts zu vergessen. Man würde sicher verrückt darob, wenn man’s nicht schon wäre.” In Walter Morgenthaler, *Ein Geisteskranker als Künstler*, Vienna and Berlin, 1921, p. 15. See also p. 277 of this catalogue.

3 Noted in the medical file from 19th October 1902; on 15th March 1913 Wölfli used up one pencil a day. On 13th June 1918: “Erhält jeden Montag einen Bleistift, der aber meist schon am Mittwoch abend aufgebraucht ist, ist dann unglücklich & und geht überall Bleistifte betteln.” [“He is given a pencil each Monday, which is however already used up by Wednesday evening; then he is unhappy and walks around to beg for new ones.”]

4 “Obacht: Obacht. Es folgt nun wegen mangel an Papier und sonstigem Material, vohrläuffig ein gantz kurtzer Text.” In Adolf Wölfli, *Book No. 4 299, WG I*, p. 552.

5 Adolf Wölfli, in *Adolf Wölfli Univers*, Christophe Boulanger, Savine Faupin (ed.), Villeneuve d’Ascq, LaM, Lille métropole musée d’art moderne, d’art contemporain et d’art brut, 2011, p. 58.

Funeral March, 1928–1930, pencil and collage on paper, sheet No. 24.

“That there really and truly is a heaven, which has a surface area measuring more than 70,000,000 times that of our earth, nobody certainly needs to doubt in any way and it is even my legal possession. Viva, Alla: Gloria. Amen, amen.”¹

Adolf Wölfli

45 large books bound by the artist himself, 16 exercise books of more than 25,000 pages, 1,600 drawings and 1,600 collages – this is the number of writings and drawings created between 1904 and 1930, the year of A. Wölfli’s death, now preserved at the Adolf Wölfli Foundation. Consulting them, one is struck not only by the immense complexity of the work, but also by the urgency that emanates from it: “There’s the work! You can’t imagine how taxing it is to try not to forget anything. It would surely drive a person crazy if he weren’t so already.”² **It is not only time that is missing: one pencil a week,³ the lack of paper about which Wölfli often complains through the voice of the author, regularly interrupting the narrative of his “auto-fiction”:** “Attention: attention. Due to lack of paper and other equipment there follows a very short text until something better”.⁴ **In any case, the will to produce, total absorption in creative activity, the sense of duty, the need to finish before it is too late,** “to constitute [...] a coherent labyrinth or chaos”;⁵ **to create appears to be the vital condition to ensure the survival and the “resurrection” of Adolf Wölfli at the psychiatric hospital of Waldau. Are the urgency he feels, the speed with which he fills the sheets of paper echoed in the acceleration of time, the consequence of the technical inventions of the late nineteenth century? This is not completely unlikely; in any case, excess, movement and growing speed are at the heart of Wölfli’s**

Diga, wagt! Mergenfor. diemwatt Ragat.
 Si, = uf mitt mitt! lof mitt Lufft,
 lof mitt goitt! Giv u g'wont da
 flautt die, juf mitt mitt! Fofa u
 Eifur bi der, Mit-for!! diemwatt
 Ragatki, = uf mitt Mitt! lof mitt
 mitt, ufuf gitt Gitt! Giv u Gant-
 ziv da, da yuf mitt ytt! Hof
 mitt mitt, wuf mitt mitt!! Gafu:
 gatz. Mt. Adolf: Lann: 1915.

