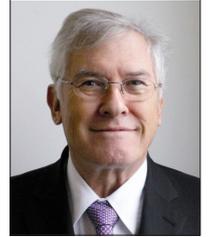


2.1 50 Years Swiss Amcham - Looking Back

Walter H. Diggelmann, former CEO, Swiss-American Chamber of Commerce



Today, the Swiss-American Chamber of Commerce is a 2000-member, flourishing and economically successful organization that plays an important role in Swiss-American policy making when representing the interests of its members. To credibly fulfill this goal, the organization operates entirely independently of governments and their agencies.

In 1966, little more than 50 years ago, a group of American and Swiss businessmen under the dynamic leadership of Henry C. Klingman, head of the European office of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, started the American Chamber of Commerce in Switzerland. In 1967, the first meeting was held by 36 founding members who pledged \$1,000 each, to provide the necessary funds to start operations. Previous attempts at founding a chamber never got beyond the discussion stage. One of the controversial issues was whether the organization should be located in Zurich, as Switzerland's principal business center, or in Geneva with its large American community.

Within a year, the Chamber counted 500 members, and 3 years later a celebration of the 1,000th member took place at the Zurich Botanical Garden where the American Ambassador and the Chamber's Chairman planted a rare American tree. Total membership has grown over the years to almost 2,000. While the U.S. Embassy and then Ambassador John S. Hayes strongly supported the Chamber from the beginning, there was also minor corporate resistance against the founding of an AmCham. The American Ambassador was named Honorary President at the first meeting.

From its very early stage, the Chamber tried to offer its membership services that were not available elsewhere in Switzerland. In this context, the *American business library* was permanently expanded and ultimately was said to be the largest and most comprehensive one in Switzerland. The library was widely used by members and non-members. At the same time, the young organization gained profile by providing a *unique speakers' platform* for both American and other well-known business and government leaders. The list of illustrious guests at the Chamber have included: Donald Reagan, the US Secretary of the Treasury, Hillary Clinton, the Aga Khan, David Rockefeller, Henry C. Ford, Paul Volcker, among many others. A special note goes to Gianni Agnelli who refused to enter the limousine to bring him to the Kongresshaus to address the Chamber. He preferred to ride in a small Fiat. Later he explained that paparazzi only wait for the occasion to see him in a Mercedes.

Some Milestones in our History

Change of Name

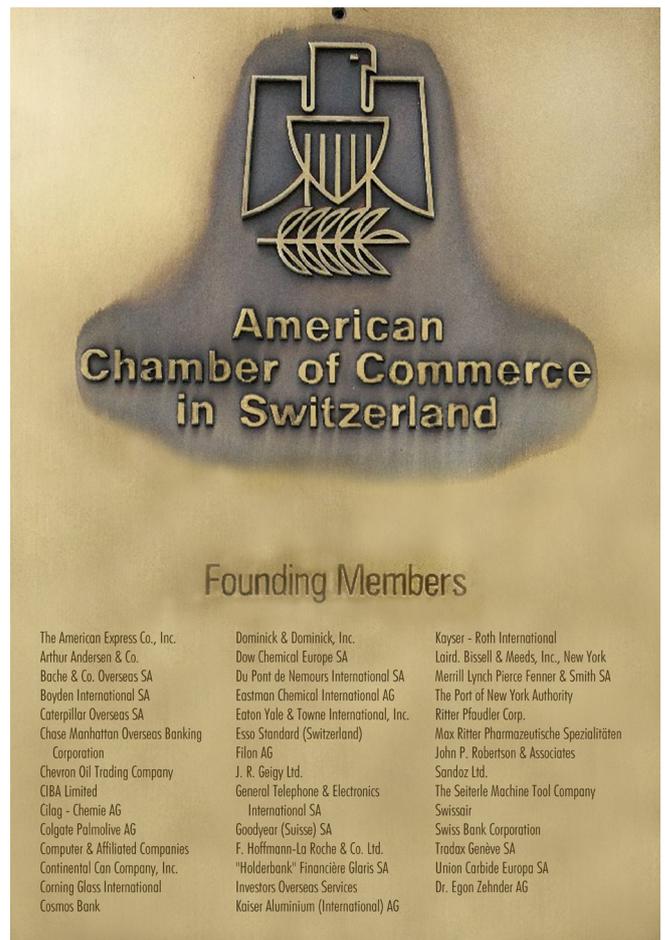
In 1972, during the process of the discussion of a bilateral judicial assistance treaty, a delegation of the Chamber's Legal Committee filed its position with the federal government. A friendly reception was followed by the suggestion of the ranking official of the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs that the American Chamber in Switzerland should present its position in Washington, rather than in Berne. Not too long thereafter, the Chamber's Annual Meeting adopted the Board's pro-

posal to rename the Chamber the "Swiss-American Chamber of Commerce" to emphasize its bilateral nature.

Governance

As a result of the name change, the Board of Directors decided in 1973 to alternate the three-year chairmanship between an American and a Swiss citizen, despite the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington's rules which stipulated that the chairman should be a US citizen, as a condition to qualify as an affiliate "AmCham". The decision caused some controversy. Hans J. Baer of the Bank Julius Bär became the Chamber's first Swiss chairman.

Federal Councilor Hans Brugger praised the chairman for his fast and efficient leadership through the not very exciting business of the 1975 Annual Meeting's agenda. He remarked: "Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I learn from you how democracy works."



Memorial Plate given to each founding member.
(Source: Egon P.S. Zehnder)

What is it all about

It was Hans Baer who first raised the question “do we know what Swiss-American business relations really are?”. This subsequently led to in-depth economic research, which culminated in the first comprehensive analysis of bilateral investments, trade, tourism, migration and more. The results became part of the first Yearbook, published in view of the American Bicentennial celebration in 1976. Since then, the Yearbook is the prime information source of the bilateral Swiss-American economic relationship.

Years later, we discovered that former banker (UCB) and famous financial novel writer Paul Erdman (“The Billion Dollar Sure Thing”, “The Crash of ‘79”) authored his dissertation on “Swiss-American Economic Relations 1936-1954”. Luckily, the Chamber could secure a copy. Erdman obtained his PhD from the University of Basle. “The Swiss Account”, his 1992 novel, has been credited with triggering worldwide investigations into the role of the Swiss in connection with Germany during World War II.

Entering the Computer Age

When in the late 70s, then Chairman Rainer E. Gut proposed an investment of close to CHF 100,000 for a small computer system, the board of directors surprisingly did not go along. Due to the chairman’s well-orchestrated discussion, the board ultimately decided to delegate the final decision to a small task force. It did not take long before the Chamber’s computerized administration brought about a quantum leap in the organization’s administrative efficiency and membership growth.

Also Noteworthy..

It was in 1974 when at a dinner after the General Meeting, *John Kenneth Galbraith*, renowned economist and American diplomat, took the Executive Director aside and said: “Walter, keep the dignity of your organization,” -- impressive praise for the Chamber’s chairman, officers and board members!

While sitting in a meeting of the European Council of American Chambers of Commerce in 1975 in Zurich, Chairman Hans Baer turned to me and wondered about the *eagle in the Chamber’s emblem*. It did not take long to find out that the eagle looked to the wrong side, and, subsequently, the bird’s head was turned by 180 degrees. Since then, all stationery and other printed matter are decorated with a correct heraldic eagle.

At the turn of the century, Chamber Chairman Thomas Knecht extended an invitation to the Swiss Federal Council to explore “what is going on” in Silicon Valley and learn about the business dynamics there. The idea eventually turned into a 2-day Silicon Valley briefing tour by a *Federal Council delegation*, led by Kaspar Villiger, accompanied by a number of ranking federal officials. This successful project, no doubt, reinforced the Chamber’s profile in Berne.

About the author:

Walter H. Diggelmann was CEO of the Swiss-American Chamber of Commerce from 1998-2004. He currently sits on the Senior Advisory Council Board.