

16. Swiss-American Society – Zurich 100 Years of History and Still Going Strong

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Today, the Swiss-American Society – Zurich is a 250-member organization that aims to foster friendship between Switzerland and the USA, and to strengthen the ties of friendship between its members. We provide scholarship contributions for studying and graduating in the USA and hold monthly luncheons with speakers from the worlds of business, academia, politics and culture.

How it all Began

The Swiss-American Society – Zurich was founded in 1920 as “Swiss Friends of the United States of America” (SFUSA) in what was then the Grand Hotel Victoria near Zurich Central Station. The 13 founding members participated in the first “Swiss Mission of Economic Studies” in 1919, in which 225 manufacturers and merchants - including prominent names such as Bally, Boveri, Raichle, Reinhard, Schmidheiny, Steinfels, and Sulzer - travelled the USA for 68 days to get to know the process-oriented “Scientific Management” of Frederick Taylor. The tour included American model companies such as Ford Motor Comp., General Electric, National Cash Register Co., Armour and Co., Westinghouse Electric and Manufacturing Co., American Locomotive Works, Eastman Kodak Co., the shoe factory Hanan & Son, the elevator factory Otis Elevator Co. as well as a large number of other companies from various industries also significant in Switzerland. The last “Business Tour” most likely took place in 1972, this time by plane with Swissair and no longer with the steamship, and only for 16 days.

The principle aim of SFUSA always was - and still is - to maintain and promote friendly cultural and economic relations between Switzerland and the United States of America, as well as extend and enhance the understanding of the USA in Switzerland. For this purpose, the Society has been regularly organizing luncheons with presentations on economic and cultural topics. In earlier years, in addition to monthly meetings and weekly luncheons, many social events took place such as Christmas parties, the SFUSA ball and the popular Smoker’s Night, where each participant was given a pipe and tobacco “à discretion”.

As probably the first Swiss-American institution in Switzerland, the SFUSA was also midwife for the founding of the Rotary Club of Zurich (1924), the American Women’s Club of Zurich, formerly American Ladies’ Club (1925), and the ETH Institute of Industrial Engineering and Management (BWI, 1929). In 1927, SFUSA arranged and sponsored the first exchange of students between the two countries. Each year, the Society awarded an American student a scholarship to complete a year of study in Switzerland.

After World War II, SFUSA organized holiday activities for officers of the US Army. In a bulletin published on August 21, 1945, one could read that vacationers in our country almost felt at home: “Staying in a country spared by the war, sleeping in a clean bed means a lot to them”. Such actions as well as the regular exchange with the US Embassy in Bern and the Consulate General and now Consular Agency in Zurich have contributed a lot to the mutual cultural and economic understanding between Switzerland and its Sister Republic USA.

Friendship can Sometimes be Challenging

Every friendship knows its crises. In the great worldwide depression, triggered by the “Black Friday” on the New York Stock Exchange in 1929, various states, and in particular the USA, tried to strengthen their own economies at the expense of other states’ export opportunities. For example, the USA erected customs barriers and import restrictions, which also hit the Swiss economy hard. Some enthusiasts no longer wanted to call themselves “Swiss Friends of the USA”, which led to a slow but sustained decline in membership in our Society in those years.

The friendship was put to the test once again in the mid-90s. From the USA came the accusation that the Swiss banks would for the sake of bare profit-seeking not hand over to the descendants of Holocaust victims the funds to which they were entitled. The dispute escalated both in media and political terms. It took years for this dispute to be settled, and even during this time some members resigned from the SFUSA in protest. Despite sometimes different political and economic views, however, the friendship between Switzerland and the United States has survived these burdens well.

Today, the economic and political environment has become more volatile, complex and uncertain and there is a danger of history repeating itself with the banking issues of recent years and current trade barriers.

The Swiss-American Society – Zurich has demonstrated over the past century the value and importance of friendship not only in good times but also in moments of sometimes different political and economic views.

Also Noteworthy

At the beginning, SFUSA was a pure men’s society, in which the ladies were only admitted to social events. Board minutes of 1953 state that the US ambassador explicitly wished that no ladies should take part in his farewell luncheon. It was not until 1982 that the board succeeded in abolishing this rule with a trick. They proposed to the general assembly to appoint the US ambassador Faith Whittlesey, who was also present at that time as an honorary member, which of course could not be rejected. Only one year later SFUSA accepted the first two full female members and in 2015 the members elected their first female President.

In December 1969, a member wrote to the SFUSA President: “In my view, the ILO (International Labor Organization) should address the problem of older workers and - in line with American research, which shows that older people are as efficient as younger ones - make recommendations to the Member States”. Some 50 years later, this topic was also taken up in Swiss politics.

Supporting young Talents

Having supported young talents for years, the initial scholarship program was canceled in 1969 for financial reasons. In 1982, the scholarship program was restarted with first grants being paid the following year. Following the increasing demand and number of grants, SFUSA decided in 2000 to found a tax-exempt scholarship fund.

Scholarships are awarded to support committed and motivated Swiss-educated students who wish to further their education by studying in the USA. The credo: cross-border experiences broaden the horizon, inspire, demand intercultural understanding and contribute to cultivating friendship and economic relations with the USA. Over the past 37 years, over 200 students could benefit from the support of more than CHF 550'000.

Still Going Strong

In 2007, SFUSA changed its name to "Swiss-American Society – Zurich", in order to give a moderate facelift to SFUSA. However, the spirit and the mission of the society namely to foster the friendship between Switzerland and the USA still remain the same.

The times when people spent 68 days on a "Swiss Mission of Economic Studies" in the USA, as our founders did in 1919, are long gone. Nowadays, the number of US residents of Swiss origin is estimated to be around one million. Business trips are shorter but more frequent and lead people to various places around the world. Technology enables us to access information anytime anywhere.

Today, the Swiss-American Society – Zurich has a diverse membership base, ranging from young professionals having just returned from a scholarship program in the USA to long-standing, very experienced members. Personally, I have lived and worked in the Silicon Valley for five years, where I have learned the value of vision, hard work, resilience and diversity to stay agile for the future.

Although diverse in backgrounds, age and experience, all of us share a common tie with the United States and appreciate the exchange in a family-like setting with varied and exciting events and speakers and support our scholarship fund to enable young talents to continue to grow.

2020 marks the 100-year anniversary of the Swiss-American Society – Zurich. The Grand Old Lady of the Swiss-American institutions has grown older, but is still going strong.

More information on the Swiss-American Society – Zurich can be found at www.swiss-am.net.

If you are interested in joining the Swiss-American Society – Zurich or supporting our scholarship fund, please contact us at swiss-am@amcham.ch.

About the author:

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