

Walter Meyer, Bangkok : successful entrepreneur, generous donor

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Successful entrepreneur, generous donor

Actually, Walter Meyer's dream was to be a journalist, he always says. But as often happens in life, things turned out differently. And he has no regrets at all.

BY HEINZ ECKERT

LOOKING BACK at the age of ninety on his richly fulfilled life, Walter Meyer is not sorry that family finances in Lucerne precluded him from studying philosophy. He simply attended commercial training school instead. With his heart set on living in a tropical country, he then spent a trial year with the Swiss trading company Volkart in Winterthur, and in 1938 joined their branch office in Bombay.

After a disagreement with the company management, Walter Meyer left India and embarked for Japan on the way to see his brother in Chile. But he soon ran out of funds, and only reached Shanghai. There he launched into journalism, first as a corrector with the "Noon Extra", a German-published newspaper in English. Thanks to his knowledge of India, he was appointed one year later as India correspondent at the Bangkok office. That suited him very well, because Walter Meyer preferred Thailand anyway, and Bangkok was known in those days as the "Venice of the East" due to its multitude of canals.

When the Second World War came to an end and his mandate as a journalist was terminated, this enterprising young Swiss decided to enter commerce again. Through his Thai wife Olivia he got to know the Berli and Jucker families, owners of the prosperous trading company Berli Jucker & Co.

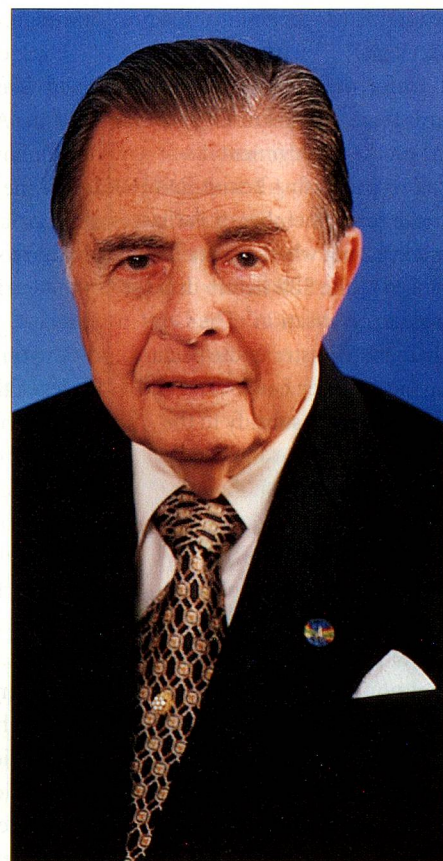
Founded in 1882 by Swiss businessman Albert Jucker, this became one of the most reputed companies in the Kingdom of Thailand.

However, the Second World War almost put paid to this highly successful trading firm, whose offices were closed down when the Japanese invaded Bangkok. On starting up again after the war, it only had a staff of two and 600,000 Baht capital, about CHF 20,000.

Walter Meyer began as assistant to one of the two managers, later on becoming a partner, Managing Director, and finally Chairman of the Board before retiring at the age of 78. During his time with this company he was general representative for reputed brands such as Agfa, Hoechst, AEG, MAN, Bayer, 4711 Eau de Cologne and Wella, and also imported Swiss products including Toblerone and Sugus. When Walter Meyer left in 1993, Berli Jucker Co. Ltd. had a share capital of 1500 million Baht (about CHF 50 million), 4500 employees, and operated production plants for glass, paper, cosmetics and foodstuffs.

Walter Meyer was not only a successful businessman and entrepreneur, but also a generous benefactor and donor. For example, it was his initiative that led to the founding of the Swiss School in Bangkok, inaugurated on October 5, 1962. And in the Thai beach resort of Pattaya he made national headlines with a Swiss chalet copied from an original in Wolfenschiessen, as 60th birthday present for the King of Thailand.

Since Walter Meyer and his Thai wife Olivia as devout Catholics did not want to travel all the way to Sriraja each Sunday, he donated about 11,000 square meters of land in Pattaya for building the Church of St. Nicholas and its adjoining cemetery. In July 1957 Walter Meyer was one of the founding members of the Royal Varuna Yacht Club in Pattaya, under the patronage of the King of Thailand. He first got to know this popular resort more than fifty years ago, when Pattaya was still an idyllic little fishing vil-



Walter Meyer, Entrepreneur

lage before Thailand opened up to tourism. There he built the "Casa Olivia" as a weekend residence for his family. However, the Meyer family used to spend every summer in Lucerne, where they still have an apartment today. In fact Walter Meyer never lost contact with his homeland: "I'm still Swiss at heart", says the successful Swiss businessman who celebrated his ninetieth birthday on 19 May this year.

Walter Meyer has been honoured with some distinguished awards for his charitable activities. Pope John Paul II appointed him to the order of Saint Sylvester, the Italian government bestowed upon him the title "Commendatore", and from the King of Thailand he was doubly honoured: with the White Elephant and the Crown of Thailand for promoting Thai trading interests. 