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High-Tech Entrepreneur of the Year: 1986

Innovative and full of go

Six hi-tech enthusiasts from the Zurich Oberland won the Branco Weiss Prize for the high-tech entrepreneur of the year.

Entreprising Swiss high-technology companies who, with outstanding skill and creativity, have succeeded in developing new products or opening up new markets, or both, are honoured by this Prize. The prize, endowed with SFr. 50,000.-, is donated by the Zurich entrepreneur Branco Weiss and the publishing firms of Jean Frey and Ringier. The jury is composed of personages from business, science, administration and the press.

On arrival at the HQ of the firm of Tecan AG in Hombrechtikon (Zurich), you at first think you have come to the wrong address. It is in front of a stable, with a lively pony, and the main building itself is more like the abode of a homely burgher of the Zurich Oberland than the headquarters of a high-technology enterprise. The midday visitor catches sight of a table laid for forty persons in the large ground-floor dining room. The head of the firm, Heinz Abplanalp, is helping the two children sitting beside him to juicy slices of a magnificent roast. Irresistibly, the atmosphere reminds one of the imaginary phalanstères (communes) of Fourier or, nearer to our own time, an «alternative» community.

Environmental protection and high technology

This facade, however, conceals a spectacular business success: in 1980, Heinz Abplanalp (42 years old), chemical engineer, Heini Maurer (41), biologist, Gallus Blatter (36), electronics engineer, Heini Möckli (38), motor-car technician and self-made electronics specialist, founded Tecan. They were soon joined by Martin Stoffel, aged 34, also an electronics engineer and Daniel Ryhiner (40), likewise a motor technician. Barely six years later their enterprise numbered 80 persons and recorded a turnover of 19 million Swiss francs. The six partners have also become top experts on environmental pollution detection methods. From

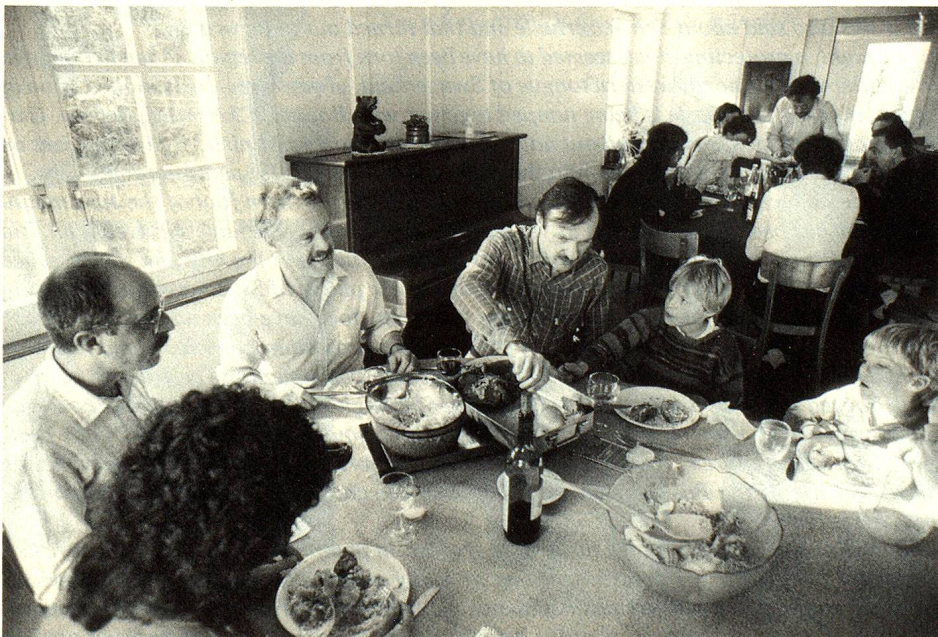
1983, when the phenomenon of the dying forests began to make itself felt, Tecan launched a system for measuring nitrogen-oxide emissions (mainly motor car exhaust gases) by which even the minutest toxic emissions can be determined and measured. Tecan has also specialized, in co-operation with the Sandoz Group, in the field of automation of laboratory processes for medical and chemical analyses. For this venture, Heinz Abplanalp and his co-workers developed a simple but fast-working robot. «Tecan's strength lies in its basically multi-disciplinary character», says Heinz Abplanalp. Micro-electronics, programming, mechanics, chemical engineering: the company has more than one iron in the fire.

Friendship as a recipe for success

If you question the members of the Tecan team about their motivation as entrepreneurs, you discover that none sings the neo-liberal paean to the glory of the «saints» of Silicon Valley. Likewise, not one of them steps into the breach for any theory developed by one management guru or another. The organization of Tecan, as exotic as it may appear vis-à-vis what is considered customary in Switzerland, is born not only of a liking for pragmatism as such, but also of the inclinations of its founders. Heini Maurer: «It's often said that you should never set up an undertaking with friends; on the contrary, our experience has shown that friendship can be a factor for success.» None the less, Tecan has got a boss: Heinz Abplanalp holds the title of Business Manager.

«I became the 'chief' by accident», he explained. «When we formed the company, no one wanted to take on the jobs of administration and management, but since I was the one who was perhaps the least reluctant, I buckled down to them. And in fact I'm really only the boss for external purposes.» As regards area, Tecan AG appears to be rather widely dispersed – and yet it is carefully structured. At the head of the organization is the «Founders' Club», which meets on an average every two weeks and which takes all the most important decisions on a collegial basis.

Tecan is divided into eleven different departments, none of which numbers more than 20 persons. The six founders swear by the cellular organization of Tecan; this should allow the firm to grow while still remaining fairly small, and turnover to be increased without destroying the advantages of a free-and-easy atmosphere. Each time Tecan records a surge of growth, the foun-



Heinz Abplanalp (2nd from l.) and Tecan employees: a free-and-easy but no «boy scout» ambiance.

ders add a cell instead of strengthening the already existing cells.

From America to East Asia

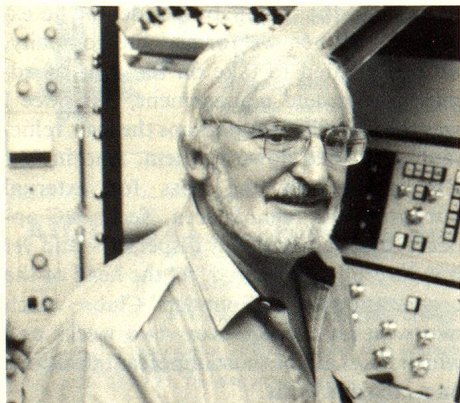
As long ago as 1982, Heinz Abplanalp opened a branch in North Carolina. The beginning of 1986 saw the launch of Tecan Asia Ltd. in Singapore, a bridgehead to markets in China and Japan. Today, Tecan exports as much as 90% of its production. Yet the founders of the firm want to go even further, and intend soon to place their shares on the bourse.

One or other member of the Tecan outfit is not loth at times to let fall an aside or two as to his political opinions: «'Green'»? «Yes, if you exclude all the pejorative connotations of the term», says Heini Maurer, «we would like to be able to prove that ecology can co-exist with responsibility and high technology». Against nuclear power?... Certainly. «For me, it is very important that our products remain compatible with my convictions».

Alain Jeannet (shortened article from «L'hebdo» newspaper)

Lowest strike rate

Even in the long term, Switzerland has proved to be the industrial country with the smallest strike frequency. Over here, on average, only 1.7 working days a year were lost per thousand persons employed from 1970 to 1985. «Top performer» in this respect is still Italy which in the same period had to record around 1,300 lost working days annually.



Nobel prize award

Switzerland again has a Nobel prize winner – for the first time for five years. Together with two German researchers, Heinrich Rohrer, a 53-year-old physicist hailing from Buchs (SG), has been honoured with the Nobel prize in physics for the joint development of the scanning microscope.

Commentary: the chemical disaster near Basle

A town awakes



Schweizerhalle. A suburb of Basle. Wide tracts with rows of factory building after factory building, hall after hall. Concrete, glass and metal constructions filled with drums and containers. Chimney-stacks, too, towering into the sky. The Basle chemical industry has transferred part of its production plant and warehousing facilities to Schweizerhalle. But this is no place to stay in: whoever gets off the bus here, must work here. Ever since November 1st, 1986, Schweizerhalle has no longer been a suburb like any other. Nor is Basle any longer just one of the many towns on the Rhine. And Sandoz is no longer simply one of many multinational chemicals producers. On the 1st of November, 1986, Schweizerhalle was an inferno: 1,200 tonnes of

toxic agricultural chemicals caught fire in a storehouse of Sandoz AG, Basle's third largest chemical concern. A part of the chemicals wafted in a poison gas cloud towards Basle; another highly-concentrated part was washed into the Rhine with the water from the fire hoses. That is how it happened; and what happened has as yet unforeseeable consequences.

The experience has become deeply engraved upon the memory. On this early Saturday morning the Basle region awakes between three and six a.m. – is awakened, rather, by the wail of sirens and by a penetrating, acrid smell which permeates the bedrooms. Up from the streets below booms the order from police loudspeaker vans to shut all windows, to stay indoors. Basle and its conglomeration lies there almost as if fossilized; even the trains no longer run into the disaster area.

These nighttime hours of endurance inside the shuttered houses; this waiting in the uncertainty as to whether the poison gas cloud threatens human life; this dawn as the Rhine turns red from the chemicals sluiced in by the firemen's hoses, when the fish – later to be dredged out in tons – float dead on the water's surface; these hours throw the region into deep shock – which still persists.

In the week after November 1st it seems that hardly a day goes by without more bad news of chemical accidents. «Schweizerhalle», the name given to the Sandoz chemical fire by most people, marks «only» a beginning. Now other chemical concerns report spillages and leakages from their operations: discharge of fumes containing phenol into the air, amylene that has leaked from a burst pipe, atrazine seeping into the groundwater. Since Schweizerhalle, people who live there at least know what they are having to smell – down to the last chemical detail. And each time there is of course no danger to human life or nature, or so it is said. But it was also said about Schweizerhalle and that turned out to be wrong.

In one night, a protecting cloak seemed to have been torn from the region. A harsh limelight now glitters on this north-western tongue of Switzerland, always previously looked upon as a dormant province. Basle is being lumped together with Bophal, Chernobyl, Seveso. German and French politicians hand out notes. Swiss Environment Minister Egli apologizes on behalf of the Basle chemical region to the Rhine states down as far as Rotterdam.

Below the surface of this town and its suburbs lying at the northern foot of the Jura mountains there has been a rupture that as yet hardly bears a name. We have survived it all, but confidence is shattered – the confidence, for example, between the city and the so-called self-responsibility of the chemical industries, one of the pillars of Swiss environmental protection. Our relations with the neighbouring countries, too, have been adversely affected, and the reputation of Switzerland as an environment-protection-conscious land has been stained. In the words of Alphons Egli to the national parliament: «The fruit of years of hard, dogged work has disappeared in the course of a single night». In retrospect, the slogan Sandoz gave to its centenary celebrations last summer sounds like a mockery: «100 Years for a Life with Future». Future? This question, this breach of confidence, pervades all spheres of life of the Basle region, for Basle and the chemicals industry are inseparably linked together.

The sense of helplessness breaks through in graffiti, in pamphlets, in the effigy of a fisherman. In a «Requiem for the Rhine», one of many artistically-organized Schweizerhalle demonstrations, black-garbed music students, playing their instruments, walk in procession over one of the proud bridges, over the beloved river of this town. The river flows on. The death of the fish and eel stocks is no longer so evident. But the ecological balance of the Rhine has been destroyed. Only micro-organisms have survived.

Erika Brugger, Basle