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CENTENARY OF VOLKART BROTHERS 1851 — 1951.

The World famous firm of Volkart Brothers of Winterthur, has recently celebrated its centenary.

To mark this 100th milestone, the firm has initiated the "Volkart Stiftung" with a capital of 1 million Swiss francs and 4 million rupees.

The object of this Fund is to aid works of charity, science and art in Switzerland, India, Pakestan and Ceylon.

A first substantial payment from this Fund, has already been made to the victims of the Swiss avalanche disaster.

We have much pleasure in reproducing below an article, which our late collaborator "Kyburg" wrote on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the firm, and which was published in the issue of the Swiss Observer on February 13th, 1926.

A PROUD FLAG.

Born in 1816 at Niederglatt-Zurich, where his ancestors had exercised the calling of millers and builders for many generations, Salomon Volkart, his studies at the "Landknabeninstitut" at Zurich and the "Hueni-Institution" at Horgen ended, his subsequent apprenticeship with the firm of Kaspar Schulthess' Erben at Zurich absolved, wandered abroad, his wander-budget fortified by 50 guilders given him by his father, and entered the important firm of Andrea Croce, olive-oil merchants at Genoa. There, among Genoa's foreign colony of the time, Volkart soon won a reputation as one of the best horsemen, swimmers and singers, and was soon known as "il grande Svizzero." A few years were spent in India, where his brother, Joh. George, was working, and then he entered the service of the Winterthur firm of Gebrüder Rieter & Greuter, where he also met his future wife, marrying in 1848.

During this time Volkart carried out several missions, one of which merits recording. It was a question of entering Venice, getting through the close lines of the Austrian army then besieging that town. Salomon Volkart succeeded and collected an important debt due to his house. The paper money, which soon afterwards became worthless, he converted straightaway into Venetian beadware, a commodity of comparatively stable value, and, his mission achieved, he left Venice, not without encountering great difficulties in getting through the cordon of Austrian troops — difficulties accompanied by serious risks, inasmuch as he carried, sewn in the lining of his coat, letters from Manin, President of the hard-pressed Venetian Republic, to whose adherents at Padua Volkart was successful in handing them.

During his short stay in India, the idea of founding a business of his own had already occupied his thoughts, and as soon as he judged the moment opportune, he carried those thoughts into effect, and, on the 1st February, 1851, together with his younger brother Joh. George Volkart, he started the firm of Volkart Brothers at Winterthur and Bombay.

The ruling idea in starting this venture was to establish direct commercial relations between India and the Continent of Europe, an idea which had only become practicable in 1849 through the repeal of the Act of Navigation, a British Act prohibiting transport by sea from British Possessions by any other than

British ships, and further enacting that the first European port entered by such vessels should be British.

The effect of this Cromwellian edict was to give the Port of London a virtual monopoly of trade in the products of India, and so the start of Salomon Volkart's new venture, soon after the repeal of this Act, brought about a real economic revolution, being practically the first to establish direct trade relations between India and the Continent of Europe. It was Volkart Brothers who loaded the first sailing vessels and steamers in India for direct shipment to the chief ports of Europe, and through them were consigned the first shipments of European manufactures to Bombay and other European ports.

A small room on the second floor of the house "Zum Wasserfels" in the Oberthorgasse in Winterthur contained the first office of the firm, and there Salomon Volkart, with his wife as the only assistant at first, coped with the whole work of the business. The firm still possesses the first press copy book of that time, in which may be seen many letters written by Salomon Volkart and others by his wife. Neither telegraph, telephone, nor typewriters were then in existence, railways were still in their infancy, and the route to India was then by way of Cape of Good Hope; the Suez Canal had not yet come into being.

Such was the beginning of a firm which, by sheer force of work, personality, fair dealing and circumspection and, above all, I think, by its policy of training its young men most carefully for its particular and specialised service and fostering in them a splendid and not often met with *esprit de corps* which turns them into disciplined soldiers rallying round the proud flag of Volkart Brothers, was destined to achieve a leading position in the international trade from and to the Indies, and to maintain that position.

As a great ship, sailing upon the high seas, records all happenings in its log-book, so has this great House of Commerce kept its records of the 75-year-long journey through the manifold seas of commerce, and, believe me, a glance through the log-book of Volkart Brothers is about as interesting and fascinating an adventure as reading a great epic.

Perhaps my readers will allow me to give them a few choice morsels out of that "log," so that they,

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too, may realise, better perhaps than they did before, what a wonderful, adventurous story Commerce can unfold.

1852 — Volkart Brothers are admitted to membership of the Bombay Chamber of Commerce.

1857 — Year of outbreak of Indian Mutiny sees the opening of a branch at Colombo for the export of coconut oil, coffee, cinnamon, Tinnevely cotton and pearls.

1863 — May 29th Joh. George Volkart dies at Bombay. His widow, unaccompanied, makes the return journey of nearly six months by sailing ship round the Cape to Marseilles, and thence by diligence to Switzerland.

1865 — First opening of telegraphic communications between Europe and Bombay, revolutionising the system of giving quotations. The first cable to Bombay brought the news of the ending of the American Civil War!

1869 — Suez Canal opening, greatly reducing time of transport.

1870 — The "log" mentions that the Franco-German war had only unimportant effect on the firm, trade with the belligerent countries not being interrupted.

1873 — Amalgamation of three large Indian press companies under the style of "Volkart's United Press Co., Ltd.", Bombay, having at its disposal five cotton presses.

1883 — February 1st witnesses the installation of the first public telephone at Winterthur.

1886 — Arrival of the ss. "Westergate" at Ghent, carrying a cargo of 9,416 bales of cotton from the firm. A special official testimonial, accorded to the firm by the Town of Ghent, contains the following sentences regarding this event: "Cet événement marque une date dans l'histoire du Port de Gand. Il inaugure ses relations directes avec les Indes."

1893 — Salomon Volkart dies, 78 years old.

1894 — July 1st. The passing of a new Swiss law, prescribing precision in the style of business houses, compels the firm, in order to avoid altering its own name, to transfer nominally its headquarters to London, where the London Agency is registered as head office under the style of "Volkart Brothers, London," but the control and management of the firm remain, as heretofore, in Winterthur.

1900 — For the first time in the firm's history,

use is made of a typewriter, a Hammond, at the Winterthur office.

1908 — The first motor-car owned by the firm comes into use at Karachi. To-day the firm owns 22 cars, 4 motor-cycles and 1 lorry.

1914 — Outbreak of the Great War. The "log" states: "For upwards of a fortnight, owing to censorship, all postal and cable communications between the head office at Winterthur and the branches are interrupted. A considerable portion of the staff is mobilised. All bank credits are suspended; even deposits cannot be withdrawn, while money is withheld from circulation. Although being a neutral firm, with head office in a neutral country, the fact of our establishment on British territory brings us under the provisions of the Royal Proclamation forbidding all relations with the Central Powers. The vast outlet afforded by these countries remains closed for several years."

1915 — Sees for the first time the engagement of a lady on the staff of the firm!

1916 — Inauguration by the firm of their "Provident Fund" to make old-age provision for the non-European employees in India, the administration of this being confided to the Bombay house.

1918 — The "Volkart Brothers Employees' Pension Fund" for the firm's European workers is started with a donation of 1 million Swiss francs by the firm. (Since then the firm or some of the partners have given another 1,750,000 Swiss francs for that fund.)

1919 — The firm promotes a Limited Company in Japan in which prominent Japanese business men also participate.

1920 — "Volkart Brothers' Agency, G.m.b.H." is founded at Bremen. A branch is opened at New York for business in cotton chiefly.

1921 — In consequence of serious trouble on the Malabar Coast, the result of conflicts between Moplahs (Mohammedans) and Hindus, official orders were given for the wives and children of our employees at Tellicherry to take shelter in Mangalore for a fortnight.

1922 — The firm shares in promoting the "Sicmat Società Italiana Commercio Materie Tessili" at Trieste, its object being dealings in cotton, chiefly in Italy, Poland, and countries formerly under the Austrian crown.

1923 — Inauguration of the first air mail between England and Switzerland.

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1924 — The firm floats the "Fohka Swiss-Chinese Trading Co., Ltd." at Shanghai, three fifths of the capital being subscribed by the partners, and two-fifths by prominent Chinese merchants.

1926 — February 1st. The firm celebrates the seventy-fifth anniversary of its foundation!

Thus the log-book. (Commemorative booklet by Geo. Reinhart, Winterthur. 1/2/26.) I have left out the almost innumerable entries recording opening of new branches, acquisitions of cotton presses, ginning plants, etc. I have left out records of fires which devastated factories, floods which made communications difficult, often impracticable.

The organisation of this huge business has developed along quite natural lines. The firm has, since its creation, preserved the legal status of a private company, the liabilities of its partners being unlimited, and this status is to be retained, the partners believing that "in a concern as theirs the supreme command should be in the hands of those by whom the capital is provided."

As a Winterthur citizen, "Kyburg," of course, feels a deep pride in relating these wonderful facts, these stories of steady achievement, this short narrative of how, from humble beginnings, this firm of Winterthur — the very last place, geographically viewed, one should think — has risen to the leading position in international trade to and from the Indies.

But there is another consideration which moves me. There is the fact that, largely owing to Volkart Brothers, the Swiss name sounds well among the great trading nations of the earth. And by Volkart Brothers I do not mean the three present-day partners only — and I know they would be the very first to wish me to give honour also and especially to their fellow-workers. Those young men, mostly from Winterthur and neighbourhood, who, after their training at the home office and perhaps London and some other near-at-hand branch, go out to the East, there to represent their firm — those fellows, braving as they did when prophylaxis was in its infancy, fevers and other dangers — those Swiss "Ueber-Seer," they are the men to whom we Swiss have a lot to be grateful for. They help to uphold the Swiss name, and they willingly suffer discomforts, dangers and privations — I know of one, a friend of mine, of whom I have not heard directly for many years, who is located somewhere umpteen hundred miles up some river in Siam, where the mail reaches him every three months or so, if he is lucky, and where he supervises the collection of produce, its transport down river to the coast, and from where he emerges every few years for a holiday in Europe, just like a whale coming up now and then for a breather! — they all do this, so that the firm may flourish, that they may testify to having learnt to subordinate private considerations for the benefit of the house, soldiers of which they are all!


The visitor to Winterthur cannot fail to feel the great influence of this House of Commerce. Its partners, from the early times, have occupied quite an especial position in the affection of Winterthurers. Perhaps because ostentation is unknown to them, perhaps because they have always been liberal supporters of the arts, of scientific research, they have, for instance, made possible the erection of the wonderful new Museum. Then, again, Winterthur possesses a Club House such as the Swiss Colony in London will be dreaming of possessing in another century or so —

a Club House which fills English visitors with wonder, as I can testify. This, too, has only become possible owing to quiet, unostentatious munificence on the part of the partners of Volkart Brothers. And withal, the present partners, like their predecessors, I presume, are ordinary mortals, very likeable fellows, always ready to help, always conscious of the obligations the position in which Providence put them imposes upon them. And that is far more than can be said of others similarly placed. And that is why Winterthur is proud of this House of Commerce and has a deep, silent, but true affection for its heads.

Perhaps I could not do better than close this article with a quotation from a speech delivered by the late Dr. Theodore Reinhart (partner from 1879-1919) on January 2nd, 1919, two weeks before his death, at a banquet at which all the co-workers of the Winterthur house were present:

"Fellow-workers of the rising generation, who serve under the banner of Volkart Brothers and are looking forward to making your career with the firm, we partners appeal to you never to lose sight of this, whether in the office, in the go-down, or in private life, that you belong to a *corps d'élite* in the business world, and that many eyes are directed on it in every country with which we work — above all, when its members are travelling on business or are on holiday. It ought, therefore, to be a point of honour with each one of you, especially when serving the firm in distant parts out of sight of your chief or your superiors, to have always a clear conscience yourself and to be considered strictly honourable by others."

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