

The Swiss – Japanese treaty of Friendship and Commerce of February 6, 1864

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by Roger MOTTINI

Ladies and gentlemen!

In order to appreciate the significance of what we are commemorating today, we only need to try to imagine how different, even strange, the two nations must have seemed to each other when they established official relations 140 years ago. On one side a fiercely independent and proud, albeit sometimes rather quarrelsome Democracy, dominated by warriors turned merchants, on the other side of the globe an equally fiercely independent nation ruled by a class of fearless and proud warriors still sticking to their ancient code of conduct. With the signing of the above-mentioned treaty, Switzerland became, after the USA, the Netherlands, Russia, Britain, France, Portugal and Prussia, the 8th nation to establish official relations with feudal Japan and the first non-maritime nation to do so.

Today we commemorate 140 years of Swiss – Japanese relations, but we might as well commemorate 200 years since the first Swiss set his foot on Japanese soil. His name was: Johann Caspar Horner (1734 – 1834), physicist and astronomer from Zurich.

On November 1, 1804 he went ashore in Nagasaki as a member of a Russian frigate named "Nadeshda" – "Hope" sent there by the Russian Czar Alexander I in order to explore the possibilities of diplomatic relations with a reclusive Japan. Horner was hired by the Russians as a scientist and he was part of a multinational crew, commanded by an admiral from Estonia called Iwan Fjodorowitsch Krusenstern. The Russian endeavor proved to be a complete failure, at least with regard to the diplomatic side of the mission. Since 1603, under the Tokugawa shogunate, Japan

had been following a policy of strict seclusion from the world, allowing only a handful of Dutch traders living under quarantine-like conditions in the harbour of Nagasaki to tend to Japan's external trade. After six months of unsuccessful negotiations, the Russian ship and her Swiss member left Japanese waters with empty hands. Unfortunately, apart from a scientific report dealing with physical and astronomical observations, Horner did never publish a personal account about his Japanese experience.

It was up to the US Admiral John Calbraith Perry to prize open the door to Japan in 1854 with a show of force in the bay of Edo, today's Tokyo. The resulting treaties of Kanagawa 1854 and Edo 1856, forced upon the Shogun, were hugely biased in favour of the USA, stipulating a ridiculously low tax on imports to Japan; the Japanese side was also obliged to grant all potential concessions obtained by a future treaty-partner to all the other countries which had a treaty with Japan. A clause, Switzerland was to profit from later on.

In Switzerland, the American move was attentively watched; two private organizations were to play a crucial role in the Swiss endeavors to sign a similar treaty with Japan: The Watch Makers Association in La Chaux-de-Fonds and the Textile Business Association in St. Gallen.

Sponsored by these organisations, a German travel author arrived in Japan on September 20, 1859 on a merchant ship, his name was Rudolph Lindau (1830 – 1910). Armed with only a letter of recommendation from the federal government, he claimed to be in charge of negotiating a treaty on behalf of that government; the Japanese officials, however, were puzzled by this strange kind of ambassador, lacking the proper diplomatic credentials and having arrived on an ordinary merchant vessel. They furthermore had difficulties in locating the country he was coming from; their first report referred to it as the "confederate republic of Swedenland"! Even after

this misunderstanding had been resolved, Lindau's position was weak, exacerbated furthermore by the economic and social crises that had gripped Japan after the opening of her market. As a consequence of the unequal treaties with the great powers, Japan's economy was flooded with cheap foreign goods threatening her domestic manufacturing base and leading to high inflation as a consequence of increased foreign demand for Japanese products like silk, tea and raw materials. In the end, Lindau's negotiations with the shogunate failed. He succeeded, however, to obtain a written promise from his Japanese interlocutors to inform the Swiss government as soon as the situation would allow the conclusion of further treaties. The Japanese side kept its promise and, two years later, Berne was informed by the Dutch foreign ministry that the shogunate was now ready to negotiate with Switzerland. The Swiss government appointed the president of the Watch Makers Association Aimé Humbert (1819 – 1900), a teacher and social scientist by training, to head an official mission to Japan in order to conclude a treaty similar to the existing ones with the shogunate in Edo. This time, Switzerland was slow to react, haunted by the famous "Kantönligeist" or confederate acrimony, it took Humbert more than a year to complete the necessary preparations; several cantons had to be reminded more than once to contribute industrial products which were intended to be presented to the Japanese side as gifts.

The federal government, much more cost-conscious than nowadays, was faced with the dilemma of providing a mission large enough to impress the proud samurai officials without spending too much on it. The solution was creative: Aimé Humbert from NE and Caspar Brennwald from Männedorf/ZH were paid by the government, whereas the other four members of the Swiss mission were granted the status of attachés but travelling at their own cost as businessmen.

The four attaches were:

- James Favre-Brandt (1841 – 1923) from Le Locle
- Edouard Bavier from Chur
- Iwan Kaiser from Zug
- John Bringolf from Unterneuhaus/SH

The Swiss arrived on April 27, 1863 at Yokohama aboard a gunboat named "Medusa" chartered from the Dutch government.

However, when they arrived in Japan, the Swiss had run out of luck, the window of opportunity was already closed. Domestic unrest had reached a new climax and the shogunate in Edo was fighting for its survival; their main rivals were powerful feudal lords from southern Japan who had gained a dominating influence at the imperial court in Kyoto. In the name of the emperor they were openly challenging the rule of the shogun based in Edo.

Under these circumstances, the shogunate reneged on its original promise and Aimé Humbert's request for a treaty looked hopeless. The Swiss tried to gain favor with the officials of the shogunate by lavishing gifts on them; to their astonishment, however, the Japanese side returned every little gift with a gift of their own, keeping thereby the balance. The negotiations stalled and the Swiss were kept waiting. Whereas the Swiss 'attachés' soon sought to establish businesses of their own, Humbert and Brennwald chose to explore the Japanese environment and write about their findings. Brennwald wrote an extensive report about Japanese silk manufacturing, intended for the Swiss textile industry. Humbert described the social life of ordinary Japanese city dwellers in Edo and Yokohama, covering every imaginable aspect from education to funeral ceremonies. His findings were later published in two large and lavishly illustrated volumes titled "Le Japon illustré".

Back home, the federal government grew impatient with the slow progress of the negotiations and instructed Humbert to return by the end of the year 1863. In a

desperate attempt to gain more time, Humbert wrote back he would return by the end of the Japanese year, thereby gaining another month of time due to the lunar calendar used in Japan.

The Swiss tried in vain to enlist the support of American and the French diplomats in Yokohama. Humbert was running out of time. Things finally moved when the Dutch Consul General intervened on behalf of the Swiss; he openly threatened to recommend to his government to abstain from extending an invitation of a planned diplomatic visit by officials from the shogun. That worked !

On January 26, 1864 the negotiations between the Swiss and officials from the shogunate began in earnest and proceeded quickly.

On February 6, 1864 the first treaty between Switzerland and Japan was officially signed, making Switzerland the first non-maritime nation to establish relations with Japan.

The Swiss government expressed his satisfaction with the treaty, which granted Switzerland the same privileges enjoyed by all the other nations dealing with Japan, proof of the fact that one did not need to carry a big stick in order to be respected. The federal government of that time stated that (quote) "the diligent and intelligent character of the Japanese people" (end of quote) will certainly make these relations fruitful and lasting ones – words, which sound true until today.

What happened to the members of the Swiss mission to Japan ?

Aimé Humbert's books about society in the closing days of feudal Japan became classics; a hundred years later they were translated into Japanese and used as teaching materials for Japanese students in order to bring back to them part of their own heritage; the Japanese title reads: The late feudal Japan seen through the eyes of a stranger.

Kaspar Brennwald, his young secretary, teamed up with another Swiss businessman, Hermann Siber; together they founded 1864 the trading house that is hosting today's event and still very successfully doing business throughout Asia: Diethelm Keller Siber Hegner.

James Favre-Brandt, with barely 22 years of age the youngest member of the Swiss mission, did never return to his native country; he married a Japanese woman and founded a successful import company. He also guarded an important secret. In the violent power struggle between the late shogunate and its opponents from the southern feudal domains of Satsuma and Chôshû he played an important role. A keen and intelligent observer, the young Favre-Brandt quickly realised how shaky the government of the Shogun really was by the time of the Swiss – Japanese treaty of 1864. One day the Swiss was approached by young leading samurai from the southern domains of Satsuma and Chôshû who asked him for support. As a consequence he supplied them with a large number of modern French infantry rifles increasing the rebels' firepower considerably. After the collapse of the shogunate in 1867, his connections reached into the highest echelons of the new imperial government of the Meiji which was dominated by the same samurai he supported in their quest for power. Like a Swiss banker, however, he kept a lifelong silence about his connections and influential friends. Favre-Brandt is buried on the Foreigner's cemetery in Yokohama.

Edouard Bavier entered the silk trading business founding his own trading company which lasted until 1987.

Iwan Kaiser worked from 1864 – 1867 as an independent civil engineer in Yokohama before returning to Switzerland.

John Bringolf accompanied the mission as a journalist and wrote extensively about Japan in the newspaper "Schaffhauser Nachrichten".

To conclude my remarks, let me put forward a simple question: what can we learn from that experience, now that Japan and Switzerland are both mired in economic stagnation, trailing behind all the other industrialised countries with regard to growth?

Do we need to look to America for re-discovering the entrepreneurial spirit we are supposedly lacking nowadays? No! The story I just told you is the answer: we only need to look back into our own history – 140 years ago the Swiss ventured abroad into what was a truly remote and even alien country at that time; they did so, just to see with their own eyes what can be done over there. In today's language we would call it "investment in an emerging market".

And what about Japan?

A few years after the signing of the Swiss – Japanese treaty, the shogunate collapsed and a young, open-minded generation took on the huge task of transforming feudal Japan without falling prey to the colonial powers. They succeeded in a way that an American journalist, a century later, wrote indignantly about: Perry opened up Japan, but we didn't go in – they came out!

Ladies and gentlemen !

Yes, today we do feel rather insecure and maybe even disoriented, strong words are cheap and no substitute for good politics. However, rather than wait for politics to change, let the signing of that treaty serve as an inspiration for our own deeds – remember, those men did not care about what they could lose, they wanted to discover new opportunities by moving beyond their horizon !

Thank you very much for your kind attention.

About the author

Roger MOTTINI was born 1959 in St.Moritz/GR. Graduation from the University of St. Gallen 1984 with a Master's degree in international relations. 1987 – 1988 postgraduate studies at the "Institut de Hautes Etudes Internationales (IUHEI)" in Geneva with a focus on international security policy. 1990 - 1992 research fellow at the University of Tokyo (Tôdai) on a grant from the Ministry of education of Japan (Monbushô).

1998 PhD at the University of St. Gallen with a thesis about Swiss – Japanese relations during the Meiji (1868 -1912).

At present lecturer at the universities of Berne and St. Gallen (Political philosophy and Japanese constitutional history) and several Universities of Applied Sciences (International Strategic Management).

Research Focus: politics and economics of Japan and China.