Some Notes about the Swiss Colony in
SRI LANKA 55 YEARS AGO
by Thilo W. Hoffmann

Thomas Daetwyler, President of the Swiss Circle, has asked me, as the most Senior Member, to write something for the second issue of the Newsletter. I am happy to oblige, especially as I have just been made an Honorary Life Member. I came to Ceylon in 1946.

During my early years in Ceylon, then a British Crown Colony, (which became independent in 1948 and Sri Lanka in 1972) the Swiss Community was small and consisted of a few clearly defined groups:

The employees of A. Baur & Co. Ltd. with a maximum number of about 15 at a time, which included 4 or 5 Planters, the employees of Volkart Brothers numbering perhaps 6 or 8, a few Managers and Chefs of Hotels and a small number of Ingebohl Nursing Sisters at the Jaffna General Hospital. The highest total was perhaps in the region of 25 or 30 plus families in about a quarter of the cases.

Volkarts was then one of the world’s largest trading houses (chiefly cotton, but also coconut fibre, spices, essential oils, copra, etc.) and dealt in insurance, shipping and imports. The Colombo Branch had a large office in the Hong Kong Bank Building and owned a superb property at Ward Place (Volkart Gardens) where the Head of the Branch resided in a large bungalow, with lesser lights in the adjoining Dutch-built house. In Dutch and early British times that area was a Cinnamon plantation and there were still some gnarly old Cinnamon trees in the large gardens. Volkarts had a Branch at Galle with a Swiss in charge (there were also several British Business Managers in town at that time and a number of Planters in the district). Volkarts was housed in the Fort in a former Hotel of the Dutch Colonial period which was pervaded by the pungent smells of Citronella and Cinnamon Oils. They had a spacious godown a little out of town towards Closenberg beach, then a superb bathing spot with a small club house and no habitations.

Volkarts disposed of their business and holdings in the East (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Japan) in the 70’s and 80’s when prospects looked bleak for foreign enterprises in those countries.
A. Baur & Co. Ltd. the second Swiss firm then (and still) operating in Ceylon was confined to the island in its activities. Its main business then and now is the importation, blending and distribution of fertilizers. It also imports pharmaceuticals and chemicals and deals in a variety of other goods and services. Of late, traditional exports have been added. In 1946 it owned four up-country tea estates and one large (later two) coconut estate a little North of Chilaw; these estates were managed by Swiss Planters and Assistants. The Head Office was (and is) in Baur’s Building a Swiss designed block of offices and apartments at a prime location in the Fort of Colombo overlooking the sea.

Baur's also own an extensive property at Grandpass with offices and warehouses. The imposing fertilizer factory and godowns are located in spacious grounds at Kelaniya along the railway line, and another industrial property lies on the banks of the Kelaniya River. The six plantations were lost in the 70’s due to nationalisation.

In 1946 there were only a few Hotels in Colombo and the country at large which could be used by visitors from abroad. In Colombo there were the Grand Oriental Hotel and the Galle Face Hotel. The best known was the G. O. H. overlooking the harbour, then very much larger than now (after a period as Hotel Taprobane!). To many thousands of ship passengers and seamen from the West the G. O. H. was synonymous with Ceylon, as they all patronised it during the few hours or days of their transit stay in the island. In the early 50’s the General Manager, the Assistant Manager and the Chef were Swiss.

The Galle Face Hotel was British owned and never Swiss managed, but at times there were Swiss Chefs and Sous-Chefs. In recent years the old building has been altered in many ways and is now a far cry from the splendid Colonial Hotel we knew.

Then there was the Mount Lavinia Hotel, an extensive old mansion on a grassy knob above the sea, looking towards the Colombo skyline, then modestly low! Afternoon tea, sundowners and romantic dinners under a starlit sky (even this has faded since then due to pollution) were taken on the front lawn fringed by coconut palms. Today this is the concrete roof of the concrete box which forms the new part of this Hotel.
There was a changing room for bathers at the rocky sea shore - below the old Hotel, as the small bay was the only all-year-round safe bathing spot for miles up and down the coast.

In Kandy there were the Queens and the Swiss, In Nuwara Eliya the Grand and in Trinco the Welcombe serving mainly the British Navy.

At that time One Rupee was worth 1.30 Swiss Francs.

For us Swiss youngster’s social life (as most things) was pretty well regulated by our betters and elders. On arrival we had to make the round of Senior Community Members to introduce ourselves (“calling”) and when going on leave after 4 years in the island we had to “call” again in order to take leave (“p. p. c.” on a visiting card if the visitees were absent). We were told which club to join, very much also where and how to live; we were not allowed to marry during the first contract, told where and when to take our local holidays of 2 weeks per year. We were often invited by our Superiors and had to invite them in return. Dinner was always at least a lounge suit event, often dinner jacket was prescribed. Nevertheless we all enjoyed life in a town then rightly called the Garden City Of The East, clean, well organized, full of trees, spacious gardens and comfortable bungalows, all now drowned in noise, traffic, concrete and commerce. Ceylon then had six and a half million inhabitants.

There were 6 or 7,000 European residents in the island at that time, mostly British Planters (about 5,000). The Swiss colony, as already mentioned was very small but closely knit. We all knew each other quite well and had regular social intercourse at all levels of the ladder. There was no Embassy, no IRC and no aid organizations, no pensioners. The Heads of Volkarts and Baurs alternated not only as Presidents of the Swiss Benevolent Society but also as Honorary Consuls for Switzerland and both the Federation and the Swiss community were very well looked after at no cost to the Swiss tax payer.

A Senior Member, Mr. A. O. Haller was the single Honorary IRC delegate and in that capacity visited prisoner of war camps in Sri Lanka and South India. A large camp for Italian (Marine) prisoners was at Boosa near Galle, whilst civilian internees (mostly Germans with wives and children) were kept at Diyatalawa, already a prisoner’s camp in the Boer wars.
The first of August used to be celebrated in grand style with a full dress, 5-Course dinner at one of the Hotels (usually the G. O. H.). The collection for the National Day charity at home yielded almost embarrassingly large amounts, the two company Bosses competing for the highest contribution. We poor youngsters had to fork out Rs. 50.- each, a very high amount both in relation to our salaries as well as the cost of a badge in Switzerland. In the afternoon the shooting competition and the casual get together with tea and cakes usually took place at a suitable rest house close to Colombo. In 1948 we were at the Kaduwela Rest House situated high on the bank of the Kelaniya River under a magnificent rain tree which is still there, though the Rest House has long been demolished. We had monthly Jass evenings with dinner at the G. O. H. and these were usually well attended.

Salaries at that time were all inclusive. There were no allowances and no provisions for retirement. We had to buy our own furniture and fittings, our own car or motor bike, pay rent, provide for food and clothing, insurance, entertainment, sports and clubs as well as petrol for the car. The salary of a Swiss Commercial Assistant (per-pro was the next step, then Director) in 1946 was Rs. 450 per month which was barely enough for a bachelor. This situation, we were told was customary and intended, if only we stayed long enough rich rewards would be ours. The firm, of course, provided interest free loans (for instance to buy a car) and it took my wife and me eight years to be entirely free of this burden. We had to turn over twice every Cent before we spent it, literally.

Bachelors mainly were living in Chummeries, rented, furnished bungalows managed communally by the Members in turn. Chummery life was financially attractive and generally quite comfortable. Baur’s Chummery was in the former Managing Director’s bungalow at NO: 14, Bagatelle Road, with swimming pool and a large garden of nearly one acre.

During the first 10 or 15 years of our life in Ceylon we never had any money to spare. But we do not regret the enforced fiscal discipline; it stood us in good stead throughout life and did not prevent us from living full lives and enjoying all the attractions Ceylon had to offer, including plenty of adventure!

(Written in 2002)