

125 Years of AHK: The German Chamber Network abroad

Similar to the foundation of DIHT – the German Association of Commerce and Industry in 1861, the Chamber of Commerce and Industry Mannheim played the “mid-wife” for the Chambers abroad. In 1888 they presented an elaborate petition to the imperial office of home affairs proposing the set-up of German chambers of commerce and trade abroad.

The role model was the British Chamber of Commerce in Paris, the 26 French Chambers in Europe, America, Africa and Asia, the Italian and Austrian, Hungarian Chambers abroad. The first German Chamber was founded in 1894 in Brussels followed by Shanghai, Yokohama, Tokyo, Tsingtau and Bucharest.

1894 was indeed an interesting year that has relevance till today. The international Olympic committee was started at the Sorbonne in Paris today Thomas Bach being the first German President. In Berlin, the Association of German female societies was founded. This year on the 8th of March in Berlin, a public holiday was declared on the occasion of “International Women’s Day”. In Paris, the first car race was conducted where besides petrol and steam cars, electric cars competed too.

The Chambers of the first few years had a short inning. Brussels and Bucharest closed in 1904 due to lack of funds, then China and Japan, they closed with the outbreak of World War I. Only the Swiss Chamber started in 1912 in Geneva could survive the same as the Chambers in Latin America in 1916. Soon after World War I, the Chambers in Brussels, China, Japan and the US were restarted only to be shut down again during World War II. The third attempt then came after World War II, and this time it has been sustainable to date. In 1946 the first reopening of a Chamber took place in Milan, Italy followed by New York in 1947, the Chambers in South America and Cairo in 1951.

The real expansion only happened after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. In the last 25 years, the Chambers expanded from 60 offices to 140, more than in the previous 100 years, especially in Eastern Europe and in booming Asia, specifically in China. There are 28 additional regional offices in the host countries, whereas in Germany alone there are almost 170 offices.

50,000 members, 2,159 honorary committee members, 2,114 staff – many of whom work in the network for decades – 2.4 million participants at events, almost 1,200 delegations with 15,000 participants, 13,500 exhibitors and 3,15,000 visitors at trade fairs, 3,20,000 queries out of which 2,00,000 from SMEs and nearly half of them answered free of charge, 8,200 trainees, 10,000 certifications per year and 8.1 million enquiries on the websites. This is the AHK Powerhouse of today.

Our network covers more than 95% of the German foreign trade. When a German wants to go abroad to do business, he comes to us and is at home. And it is not just one way. The whole world comes with us to Germany, and more and more we match make our members and partners within our global network. Bilateral and multilateral – The Global Chamber Network!

When we look at the development of the last 25 years, one can get an idea of how the future is going to look. On the 26th of February, Chancellor Angela Merkel spoke in Berlin on the occasion of the handover of the Chairmanship of APA – the Asia Pacific Committee of German Business in front of the who’s who of the German Asia business. This was a sort of delayed 25th anniversary of APA. The trade with Asia-Pacific grew from Euro 80 billion to Euro 420 billion, almost half of which was with China alone. If one is impressed or even frightened by this development one should have a look at our near East neighbours, the so-called Visegrad States – Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia. The trade with them grew from a mere Euro 23 billion to a staggering Euro 293 billion, 50% more than with China. The German export since 1994 increased by 273%.

If you read the daily headlines today, one might doubt that this will continue: BREXIT, Trump, Belt-and-Road, Climate change, trade barriers, this is really frightening.

On the other hand, the last 25 years were also not free of problems either. The Dotcom bubble, September 11 attacks, Afghanistan, Iraq, Subprime, Euro crises, financial crises, Fukushima, Ukraine, Refugee crises, Syria, Iran, you name it. In spite of that Germany’s export-dependent industry

has not only survived but grew from strength to strength, just like the slogan “wir schaffen das” – “we manage”.

The strength of the German industry was proved again at the recent Hannover Fair. Chancellor Merkel highlighted in her opening speech that the German industry and the trade-fair business have to be flexible and the way she described the closing and reintegration of CEBIT into Hannover Messe after almost 50 years of existence as a natural happening proves how adaptable we are. One of the cornerstones of the AHK expansion is Africa – a region that could repeat the spectacular development in Asia and Eastern Europe. It is a continent of the size of the US, China, India, Japan and Europe without Scandinavia put together with the world’s largest population growth and some of the highest natural resources. In 2044 on the occasion of 150 years of AHK, there will be a lot to celebrate.

The 100 years celebration of the AHK happened twice in quite an unusual manner. On 16th June 1994, the AHK World Conference took place in Bonn with Chancellor Kohl, DIHT President – Stihl, CEO Dr. Schoser and the AHK World Speaker at that time – Dr. Guenter Krueger, Director General of IGCC. The slogan was “exit recession, fit for the world market”. What kind of importance 100 years of AHK had at that event is still unclear, but the slogan itself has been a huge success in the last 25 years.

On the 17th November 1999, DIHT celebrated 50 years in the Federal Republic of Germany at the recently inaugurated House of German Industry along with the slogan “100 years AHK”. However, this was more because of the presentation of a book on the topic by Joerg Wiesemann.

So the German Chambers are flexible and party as it comes.

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