“THIS MAN NEVER LOSES HIS COMPOSITION, HE IS A ROCK IN THE MIDST OF A STORM”

REMINISCENCES FOLLOWING THE 300th SCHWANKE AUCTION

IN HAMBURG

So wrote the *APHV-Nachrichtenblatt* [National stamp dealers’ association newsletter] more than thirty years ago about Paul Günther Schwanke. One could say the same today without qualification, about his son Hans Joachim Schwanke who has led the auction company which he founded together with his father in 1972, for twenty-five years. Another similarity: Father and son were always association-minded, one with the national stamp dealers’ association (APHV), the other with the national auction association (BDB). This is sufficient reason, on the occasion of the 300th auction at the beginning of December in Hamburg, to move into the limelight a small “family saga” which thoroughly deserves recognition.

The father's biography at first glance reads just like one of the biographies of many who were born after the first World War. Born on January 14, 1920 in Hamburg, he graduated from a commercial high school which he attended from 1937-1939, was then drafted in 1939, and wounded shortly thereafter. In 1948, he married Dorothea Möller, who thereafter stood by his side as a faithful partner and helped to strengthen and expand the stamp business which had been begun in 1950 as a mail order business. The latter was initially run from the small home in Niendorf on the Kollau in Hamburg. Evidently there was enough space, especially since they could not yet afford a big move into central Hamburg. But this would soon change.

Before any such move, it was wise to gain experience. Schwanke went to school, so to speak, with Gustav Seeberger, who was then widely known as an auctioneer. There he learned the trade of auctioneer within the wide world of philately, from 1954-1967, and did it so well that he soon became one of the leading members of the firm. He was someone who one knew well and valued greatly.
It was his Hanseatic humour, the fine art of irony, as well as his relaxed nature and reliability, in other words all those qualities which even today mark a true Hanseatic personality, which impressed many business partners. One could rely on his word and his agreements – and one was never left in the lurch.

His colleagues in the APHV were able to attest to these qualities later in the nineteen sixties as they watched his total commitment. He, as a member of the APHV (Allgemeiner Deutscher Postwertzeichen-Händler Verband), soon became Vice-President in the Association of North German Stamp Dealers, and in 1967 simultaneously the Chairman and Vice-President of the APHV. In the same period, i.e. from 1966 to 1981, he was the editor and publisher of the *APHV-Nachrichtenblatt* and member of the Executive Board of the Wirtschaftsgenossenschaft des Deutschen Briefmarkenhandels e.G., Stuttgart (Trade association of German stamp dealers) later on, he became a member of IFSDA [International association of stamp dealers], for which he produced a guidebook in 1980.

How did he manage to do all that? As already mentioned, his wife Dorothea was a valuable and important support for him. But his son Hans-Joachim also appeared to follow in the father’s footsteps, faithful to the motto that the apple does fall far from the tree. Born on January 20, 1950, Hajo as his friends call him, already collected stamps as a seven year old and learned the auction business from his father early on. After his graduation and training as a wholesale and retail merchant in a then prominent stamp and coin dealership (Otto Hellig, Hamburg) he joined the family business in 1972. Father and son jointly founded Schwanke and Sohn Briefmarkenauktionen with its offices at number 1 Kleine Reichenstrasse in the centre of Hamburg, still a good address today.

The invitation to the first auction alone, which took place on the 24th of February 1973 in their own auction hall, marked both of the Schwankes more than words alone can describe. Both understood the need to give a special touch to the event and produced an original antique-looking invitation. The invitation spoke of a public notice by the “Hohen Rathe der Freyen and Hansestadt Hamburg allgnädigst ertheilten Erlaubnis zur Abhaltung von Briefmarken-Auctionen” (Old German for the “High Councils of the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg have graciously granted permission for the conduct of a stamp auction”), and those interested were even given instructions for the use of the elevator: “Persons, especially those who may be perhaps burdened with all kinds of disabilities, and who may find the burdensome stairs a torture, are herby informed that in the building there they may find of course two of the modern elevators, which make the scaling even of the highest floors into a happy outing and even ladies with a blessed belly will be spared any kind of difficulties.”

This pure humour was precisely what helped the customers not to forget the evident knowledge and trustworthiness. This first auction counted as a “philatelic family celebration” and attracted many visitors, among them numerous prominent philatelists from Germany and abroad.

Month after month one auction followed another. It is difficult today to grasp what logistics were involved here – to send 5000 catalogues and to service 1000 accounts of sellers and buyers within fourteen days. This effort, requiring the services of the whole family, noticeably impacted them all, but with the success of the firm additional employees were added. Sabine Tegetmeyer, to whom Hans Joachim Schwanke became engaged in 1975 and then married became part of the family business. There was plenty of work, especially when three children,
all sons, gave convincing testimony to the fact that Hamburger were able to value more than mere work.

**Paul Günther Schwanke** died quite unexpectedly on the 16th of September 1981 as a consequence of the effects of war injuries. This loss was not easily overcome not merely by the organization, but especially by the family members. The widow **Dorothea** continued to contribute but now it meant even harder work for them all.

In 1982 the 100th auction took place, with as many as 2,500 lots and, as before, with offers which were aimed at collectors. The rapid settlement after an auction turned out to be a positive move, because the customers appreciated it and passed the word. The attitude of the **Schwankes** not to take philately so desperately seriously, as shown by so many funny and light-hearted lot descriptions which gave rise to smiles, were also well received.

In the nineties, **Hajo Schwanke** changed to only six auctions per year, although with more wide-ranging, internationally mixed offerings from around the whole world. He even succeeded in attracting the collections of famous collectors, such as the **Mehrtens** Collection (1999); Bremen – philatelic precursors from the beginning and postal history to 1875; USA 1847-1861 Exhibition Collections of postal rate changes, intercontinental mail, and transatlantic mail; Great Britain - Special Collection (2000); Transatlantic Mail Connections (2002); the “Goldbek” Collection: World-Wide Covers (2003); Senator-Collection Part I (2004); and **Wolfgang Diesner**: Postal History Studies. In the 300th auction we have the Corona Collection Part I (Rarities from 1933 to 1945) which clearly continues the tradition.

**Exciting Auctions**

The right admixture, as much in the offer as in the buyers, together with often quite original advertisements with plays on words and clever humour were only one of the many formulae for lasting success. This is surely easier said than done, but it still works as well today. Years ago **Hans-Joachim Schwanke** introduced the concept of “The 100 Euro-Starter Lots” and thereby garnered headlines world-wide. They featured a few or many rarities, always worth far more than 100 Euros, which are offered without reserve. Whoever is then in the room experiences a real auction atmosphere, namely heated battles of bidders and raises in the bids, which far exceed the minimum bid.

Attributes which today are considered anything but obvious or belong even to the category of public property, such as **Schwanke’s** drive for real auctions where the auctioneer acts above all as representative of the interests of a third party, transparency visible in the case of shipments by strangers, and the publication of lists of prices realised all count among them. He did not approve of hidden items from his own stock or calling a hundred or more lots at the same time. Better to be small and refined than a mass organization, in which the individual customer drowns.

That the membership of the Bund Deutscher Briefmarken-Versteigerer (BDB) [Association of German Stamp Auctioneers] strongly subscribes to the values of ethical behaviour on the basis of legal regulations, was obvious among the majority of his colleagues when they gladly saw him as President of the organization from 1990 until 2002. After his service he wanted to devote himself again to his auction house. Before he left office, in the wake of the almost
legendary Volker Parthen, he was able to set the standard as auctioneer and businessman and as a fair and trustworthy mediator among the Associations.

A Heart for Literature

Schwanke is in essence a collector. More precisely, he has always remained a philatelist but also a hopeful idealist. Otherwise, one could hardly comprehend why he supports his wife's commitment to philatelic literature so strongly and maintains now, as before, his passion for postal history.

Sabine Schwanke, who is a trained graduate librarian, managed a small specialized bookstore for fifteen years and is still in charge of a mail order bookstore and therefore that background alone explains why she remains enthusiastic and supportive of philatelic literature. This finds expression not only in regular offerings of literature items in the auctions but found special expression in the four superior literature auctions held to date. In addition, with her husband, she holds a singular German record: in one of the literature auctions, they realized what up to then was the highest price for a philatelic literature article, namely 16,000 DM [About £5,300.] for Woodward: The Postage Stamps of Japan and Dependencies (1928). It will be no small task to exceed this price in the future.

Both of them emphasize their specialties, exhibit their common undertaking at big fairs and exhibitions but also on the internet, where they were one of first auctioneers to do so. One has to march with the times. Those who are familiar with the important foreign publications will often find the advertisements of Schwanke and thereby recognize the good reputation and success of the firm. Schwanke's membership of the PTS and APS, the British and American dealer organizations respectively, further supports this impression.

Since 2002, Sabine Schwanke has headed the Philatelic Library of Hamburg. Since 2005, both of them have been members of the AIJP, the world union of authors, journalists and friends of philatelic literature. Both of them have long understood that the two “Bs” belong together: die Briefmarke und das Buch [The stamp and the book]. And that is true not only of the past but also for the future.

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