



MINUTES OF THE 136th ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
FEBRUARY 20, 2021
Via Zoom Conferencing Due to the Ongoing Covid-19 Pandemic

The meeting was called to order at 4:35 PM.

President's Greeting

Ruedi Sandmeier extended a warm greeting to everyone, with a special welcome to our guest, Consul Silvia Gerber; Silvia will later conduct the reelection of Board members and Auditors. This marks Ruedi's 11th year as President. Tonight we have four recipients of our scholarship program, namely Leah Coale, Maurice Ruttimann, Saskia Tingey, and Ethan Kogon-Schneider as our guests. They may tell us a little about themselves later. Finally, we are happy to welcome former Board member Susy Lutsky. Above all, thank you, our trusted members who are attending this meeting. Your generous contributions over the years are very much appreciated.

Our records show that we have 111 dues-paying members at this time. By law we have to have 10% of the membership to conduct the Annual Meeting. With 17 members present and 15 proxy statements received, we have a quorum and can therefore proceed with our Agenda.

Copies of the minutes of the 2020 Annual Meeting have been posted on our website. Are there any questions about the minutes? Susy Lutsky made a motion to approve the minutes, seconded by Andy Egger.

Committee Reports

Treasurer's Report

Treasurer John Zeiter indicated that the P&L statement has been reviewed by our auditors, and then proceeded to read the details of the financial profit and loss statement and endowment balances.

In conclusion, John Zeiter said we experienced a rollercoaster of a year, but we came out OK.

Auditors Report, presented by Pius Kampf

Pius Kampf presented the report of the audit that he and Stefan Welter conducted for the period of January 1, 2020 to December 31, 2020 for the Swiss Benevolent Society's General Fund, the Amstutz Fund, the Canonica Fund, the Isler Fund, the Silvia and Jacques Iselin Fund, as well as the Walter Munz Scholarship Fund. They examined, on a test basis, the evidence supporting the amounts and disclosures to obtain reasonable assurances that these statements are free of material misstatements. In conclusion, they found that the balance sheets and the statements of operations fairly represent the financial position of the Swiss Benevolent Society and that the books have been kept in an orderly manner.

Finally, Pius reiterated that John Zeiter has been doing a fantastic job and we hope he can continue for many more years.

Investment Committee Report, presented by Andy Egger

Andy began by recalling that he concluded his remarks a year ago with a caveat that, as it turned out, became a self-fulfilling prophecy shortly afterwards. We're talking of course about the Corona Virus, its rapid spread around the world and its impact on the global economy.

As a marked contraction began around the world, fiscal policy makers and central bankers responded with gigantic spending bills and huge infusions of liquidity into their economies in order to keep them afloat, in other words a mix of policies known as money supply financed deficit spending. We have currently a

spending bill of nearly 2 trillion dollars before Congress and, if approved, it will have surpassed any such bill since World War II, and America will be saddled with a government debt larger than GDP. Prolonged, excessive government profligacy coupled with enormous debt built up does not bode well for the stock market; rallies cannot be sustained endlessly against this backdrop. And there is something else going on now. The recent uptick in long-term bond yields could foreshadow the end of a long period of historically low interest rates and usher in a new era defined by rising inflationary expectations as well as economic stagnation. These and other telltale signs, such as off the charts valuations and margin debt at all time highs, suggest that the current bull market may have run its course and could soon come to an end. The consequence would be a bear market with declining portfolio values.

At the SBS our conservative approach to investing is focused on preservation of principal and cashflow. Our portfolio returned 6.75% last year, almost all of it from our investments in equity ETFs. As such, we keep a significant portion of our portfolio in cash because of the negligible return on bonds and other fixed income securities, and the more cash we have, the better our cushion will be in a market downturn.

Ruedi thanked Andy for a job well done and his golden touch with our investments.

Welfare Report, presented by Carla Twitchell

The Society assisted in four cases in 2020: A woman living in Arcata, is a self-employed physical therapist who had to shut down her business when the government instituted restrictions on indoor businesses. She is financially responsible for three of her four children, and her loss of income made it difficult to pay her mortgage and utility bills. She was granted \$4,000, and another \$250 in December to use for Christmas expenses.

Another resident of Arcata is the mother of two young children. She receives disability insurance from the state, and the court granted her ten hours a week of supervised visits with the children. The Swiss Benevolent Society granted her \$500 for visits with the children in March and April. The payments were discontinued when she moved out of California. She was given \$200 in December for Christmas expenses.

A self-employed architect living in San Francisco suffered a loss of business when the Covid-19 restrictions limited her access to business opportunities. She was not eligible for government help in the first stages of the pandemic and the Swiss Benevolent Society granted her a no-interest loan of \$5,000 to be repaid beginning in October of 2021. It should be noted that we provided pertinent information to her about the CARES Act - of which she was unaware - designed to provide some financial relief to the self-employed.

An elderly man with mental health issues was hospitalized but needed assistance to get to his other medical appointments. His friends worked together to drive him to his various appointments. One of these devoted friends asked if the Society could provide some compensation to those drivers. She was given \$500 to set up an account to pay each driver \$40 per visit. The patient was eventually moved to a senior citizen care facility but continued to need transportation help. An inquiry into other care facilities found that they were not appropriate for his situation.

We had other requests for assistance, but those individuals were ineligible for help because they were not registered with the Swiss Consulate. In addition, a woman who was in the U.S. on a J-2 visa (non-immigrant status) was advised to ask for help from her husband's company, which is based in Switzerland. Another woman asked for assistance for an elderly Swiss friend, but later retracted her request, saying she had misunderstood the friend's situation. Two other ill, elderly men were offered assistance, but declined because they felt they had adequate financial assets.

Ruedi added that we heard of a family that lost their home in the Paradise fire; they did not need assistance from us.

Scholarship Committee Report, presented by Ariana Ghelfi

The Scholarship Committee (Susann Sandmeier, Ariana Ghelfi, and John Andrew) is pleased to report that in 2020 the Society awarded \$71,000 in scholarships to 22 young Swiss in Northern California. For comparison, in 2019 we made 22 awards for a total of \$72,000. s

We received a record 31 applications, of which 14 were re-applicants. Awards were made from all named funds (Munz, Canonica, Amstutz, Isler, Iselin) and the General Fund.

This year we awarded students in a diverse set of schools including California State Universities, University of California Berkeley, Davis, Los Angeles, USC, St. Mary's College, University of Mass. and various liberal arts colleges. This year we saw a vast majority of majors in Science, Business, and Engineering. Many of the recipients sent us notes telling us how much they appreciate receiving the scholarship from the Swiss Benevolent Society.

Ariana closed by thanking John Andrew and Susann Sandmeier for their excellent work on the committee and together they would like to thank the membership for its continued support of this program and for making these scholarships possible by its generous contributions.

Ruedi added that this is our most important program. Thank you, Ariana!

Membership Committee Report, presented by Doug Twitchell

Our membership support continues to be strong and consistent during these trying times.

We consider active members to be those that have donated at least once during the past two years. For the years 2019-2020 we have 94 active members/households. There were 9 donations of \$1,000 or more. The average donation amount was \$330 and a mean of \$100. The San Francisco Helvetia Society dissolved in 2020 and closed out their books with a \$5,000 donation to SBS. The Swiss community is sad to lose this long-standing Swiss club, but it is good to know that their donation will continue to benefit scholarship recipients and other needs of the Swiss community for many more years.

For the annual fall mailing, we use the criteria of those that have donated during the past 4 years. For the years 2017-2020 there were 143 members/households.

For 2021 to-date we have received 14 donations with 8 of these being \$100 or more. One of these was a generous stock donation of almost \$2,000, which will be matched by the donor's employer.

Ruedi then asked our four young guests to introduce themselves and tell us about their studies.

Leah Coale of Novato is studying biology at St. Mary's College, with a goal of helping people with diseases and disabilities. She also works part-time at Hilltop Restaurant.

Ethan Kogon-Schneider was born in Switzerland but attended school in the U.S. Currently a student at University of Massachusetts Amherst, and hoping to return to Switzerland or the Bay Area upon completion of his studies.

Maurice Ruttimann, currently at UC Berkeley, is majoring in economy and international business and development, with a minor in Turkish. In this first year as a UC Berkeley student, he is satisfied with the way the online courses are conducted. He hopes to go to Turkey this summer.

Saskia Tingey, whose grandparents were from Schwyz and St. Gallen, is studying viticulture at UC Davis (online only). Her interest is in regenerative viticulture, and she is currently assisting vineyards in Sonoma and Mendocino counties.

All students are happy to have a chance to meet the Board and SBS members and are very grateful for the awards.

President's Report by Ruedi Sandmeier

"Our traditional Senior Party and Spring Dance was cancelled due to the coronavirus situation. When the Board decided this action, I thought we were forward thinking and extra careful. Ten days later, we went into our first lockdown, seemingly for only three weeks. How naïve were we then!

What I can tell you about 2020 is that our main goal, to help students shoulder the heavy expenses of education, and to help Swiss in need, was achieved. The Board held its meetings over Zoom, as we do today, and was able to conduct business as normally as possible, but our social events like today's dinner did not happen, as was true for all Swiss clubs.

I would also like to inform you of discussions we have had with the Swiss-California Foundation (SFC). A number of our members are also supporting this organization: SFC approached us last year about forming an alliance, as their organization has changed considerably: SFC was founded 20 years ago in Santa Rosa by Bruno Schurter and Tom Neidecker to enable a graduate of the University of St. Gallen to work ten months in the US as a fellow. In the last couple of years, Bruno moved to Switzerland, Tom to Arizona and the Sonoma Economic Development Corp. had a change in leadership. Also, the last two fellows were working in San Francisco and no longer in Santa Rosa.

With these changes, SFC was looking for a new home and thought that we, as an education-oriented charity, could help as an umbrella organization. We ruled out a merger but are in discussions of SFC becoming a subsidiary of SBS. The exact form and details have not been worked out, as SCF needs to formalize their ties with U St. Gallen. Today, we do not need to take any decisions, and this is for your information only.

At this point, are there any questions or comments about what you have heard?

Since no matters requiring a vote were submitted by the audience, we can now proceed to the elections.

As I said before, I have an excellent Board helping me to run the various tasks of our society. I hope you can honor that by confirming our Board members and our Auditors. Our Board works well together as a team and I am honored to work with such a fine group.

Under our By-Laws, the Directors are elected based on a system of rotation over a three-year period. Five Board members are up for re-election for three-year terms, and we also need to re-elect Pius Kampfen and Stefan Welter for the Auditor positions. Now it is time to hand over the meeting to Consul Gerber."

Silvia Gerber began by saying how glad she was to be able to meet the participants and thanked the Board for all the good work they do. A great spirit of mutual cooperation exists between the Society and the Consulate.

As far as the Consulate is concerned, it never closed during the pandemic but it became necessary to implement visits by appointment only. There is still much doubt about resuming normal travel to and from Switzerland, with tests and quarantine, of course. It may even be more difficult in 2021.

She then proceeded with the reelection of the Board members for a three-year term, and Auditors for a one-year term, which were approved by acclamation:

Marianne Aubert, Board Secretary
Daniel Eggen, Membership
Andy Egger, Investments
Ruedi Sandmeier, President
John Zeiter, Treasurer
Pius Kampfen, Auditor
Stefan Welter, Auditor

Thank you, Ms. Gerber, for conducting the elections so efficiently.

"I would also like to express our deep appreciation for the steadfast support we have been receiving from the Consulate. It has been a pleasure working with your team and we look forward to a continued close cooperation.

We may hold an event outdoors in May, a decision which will be discussed at our March meeting. However, it's still iffy based on the current situation. By the end of April many seniors will have been vaccinated, but we'll have to see.

At this point, are there any questions or comments about what you have heard? "

Justin Cox said he appreciates the work done by the SBS for the future of these students and the Swiss values of democracy and representation from the Swiss leaders.

Carla Twitchell expressed her pleasure at meeting the students in the audience.

Pius Kampfen commented that older people have a hard time with Zoom. Ruedi offered to help anyone interested prior to the meeting, but there was no response. Doug Twitchell added we do not have everybody's email address or phone number in our contacts, as most business is conducted by mail.

With no further questions or comments from the audience, John Zeiter made a motion to close the meeting, seconded by Andy Egger.

Meeting closed at 5:25 PM.

With the closure of the public portion of the meeting, Vice President Carla Twitchell then conducted the reconstitution of the Board following the reelection of 5 members, for the coming year:

Ruedi Sandmeier, President
Marianne Aubert, Board Secretary
John Zeiter, Treasurer
Daniel Eggen, Membership
Andy Egger, Investment