

After the reform of the currency in June 1948, everything had changed in Western Germany. There was a general feeling of a new beginning, which paved the way for the so-called "Wirtschaftswunder" of the next decade. Also, Wiechers & Helm began again to receive export orders from abroad. My father was, therefore, of the opinion that it would be best if I came straight to the office, in view that there was a lot of work to be done. The dream of the literary activity as an editor had no further chance. After a few days of saying farewell to the earlier ideas, my future life as a foreign trade merchant started on the 2nd of January 1949.

The company Wiechers & Helm was founded in 1892. Of the two partners, Paul Helm was the elder brother of Karl O. Helm. His firm started in 1900 and was later developed by Hermann Schnabel after 1950 to great importance in the worldwide trade of chemicals under the name of Helm AG. Henry Wiechers was responsible for providing the enterprise with the necessary capital. He remained a partner until his death in 1925. Paul Helm had already died in 1908 and his place was taken over by Alfred Kaiser. My father had reported to Alfred Kaiser when he was sent to Karachi, where the company had a subsidiary under the name of Wiechers, Kaiser & Levy. The third partner, Max Levy, was an important part of the business until 1939. All sales contracts were completed by mail or telegraphically, and he provided the only personal contact with the numerous agents and direct customers throughout India.

On my first trip to Asia the prime destination was Karachi. The flight was with an SAS Super Constellation which took 18 hours, with stopovers in Rome and Lydda, the airport of the new state of Israel. The name of the Beach Luxury Hotel in Karachi sounded pretentious. In reality I had to share my room with a loudly snoring Indian. The misery of the refugees in Pakistan, which had only become independent three years earlier, was indescribable. The number of inhabitants of Karachi had tripled in this time.

In order to get to know the country and the people, I spent the first weekend joining a family excursion with one of our representatives to Hyderabad. They wanted to visit a cotton ginning factory of friends up-country. The 8 hour trip was by a night train, in freight cars which were modified for the transportation of people by the installation of a wooden bench. There was no idea of getting some sleep, because coloured sweets were offered all the time. The factory was interesting; however, the meals were troublesome and indigestible. The men, who were sitting on the ground, using their fingers and without knife, fork or spoon, were eating rice and spices from a large tray with bits of meat, which were blackened on the outside from the open fire, but raw on the inside. The women were standing around and watched eagerly at how I managed to eat this kind of food. During the ride back, one of the railcars went off the rails on a bridge. I was happy to finally return to my Indian in the hotel. For the next days it was impossible to think of eating anything again.

As to our business, the customers were rushing for my samples. They needed, however, individual Import-licences, which were available only on a limited scale. For instance, Ahmed Brothers could import 3000 embroidered woollen shawls. Before the war, this was a well known article in the size of 96 x 48 inches, and was ideal for the cool nights in the north of the country. The light woollen fabric was woven in Helmbrechts in Bavaria and subsequently embroidered with coloured floral designs in the Russian occupied part of Germany, within the bizonal agreements. The price was 60 shillings per piece. At first the customer offered 50 shillings. After three exchanges

of telegrams with Hamburg and complicated negotiations with our suppliers partly across the iron curtain we finally came to terms at 57 shillings and 6 pence. When the contract was signed in the evening, Mr. Ahmed disclosed, that he could sell these long awaited shawls at 200 shillings. This experience has become for me a key event for the trading mentality of the Asiatic customers.

The next stay was Bombay. There I got a room in the traditional Taj Mahal Hotel close to the port. At this point, one could feel how attractive it must have been in earlier days to arrive in India. Now the consequences of the partition of the former British India were also visible here. With me was a list of names, representing more than 100 companies with whom we had worked before the war. There were both agents and direct customers, Hindus, Parsees and also Mohammedans, who were not expelled. My idea was to see everyone at the available address, in order to determine the actual business prospects, after such a long time. However, that was easier said than done. In many streets the houses had no numbers. The vast markets were dominated by a confusing pell-mell. The distances were enormous, and taxis were hardly available outside of the hotel.

When it became known that I was staying at the Taj Mahal, a kind of siege started. Many customers wanted to see my samples first. In the morning I often had one party up in my room, whilst two others waited down in the lobby. I have a fond memory of the invitation of a well-to-do Parsee to a restaurant at the upper part of the extended Bombay-Bay, with the legendary 5 Towers of Silence behind us, the burial place of this religion going back to Zarathustra. At night I usually returned late to the hotel. Then I had still to cable the most important news, to reorganize my samples and pricelists, and to finish my daily report on my small type-writer. Naturally, I also sent a detailed sign of life to Clarita.

The three weeks in Bombay was followed by five days in Delhi. The flight up there in a 2 engine DC 3 was very bumpy. The air sickness bags offered by Air India could hardly meet my demand. I stayed at the Maiden's Hotel in Old Delhi, with its famous fortress made out of red square stones, and different mosques from its times as the center of the mogul reign. The customers I was looking for had their offices or shops nearby. Naturally I also went to New Delhi to get my entry visas to Burma, Thailand and Singapore. Additionally, I wanted to visit these countries, because I realized already in Bombay, that our chances in India remained limited, on account of the total unavailability of import licences for any kind of textiles.

This impression was confirmed during the next two weeks in Calcutta. I showed my list of 60 textile customers to the manager of the Chartered Bank; he considered about 55 of them as still being first class companies, yet without an import license none of them could import even one yard of cloth. It was a disgrace. Consequently we were limited in India to the toilsome and competitive range of sundries, tools and household articles, in which a privileged position could be reached only under special circumstances. All the more, the sight of Calcutta was depressing, quite different from Bombay, and seemed more comparable with Karachi. Often there were cows in the streets, even in front of my Great Eastern Hotel. Wherever one looked, the poverty was oppressive. Therefore it was with no sadness that on the evening of 23rd December, I drove to the Dum Dum Airport, to catch the plane to Rangoon, which should depart at about midnight.

My cousin Herbert Tiefenbacher worked in Rangoon for a few months with the influential firm Steel Brothers. I wished to spend the Christmas holidays with him, though at the Calcutta Airport I had still to while away the night before Christmas-Eve, because my plane did not arrive before 6 o'clock in the morning. But about midday I arrived in Rangoon and found a comfortable accommodation in the Strand Hotel. Since the rooms were decorated with balloons instead of fir branches, they could not create a seasonal atmosphere like at home. But we saw "Gone with the Wind" in the cinema and were content to be together. As to our business, there was little to be done in Burma like in India. The political circumstances of the country remained unstable for decades.

After the worldwide success of the e-mail and the mobile telephone it is hardly believable that my connection with my home existed during the whole journey of four months only by letters and in urgent cases by cables. The letter ones had to be handed personally to the post-offices in Pakistan and India after long waiting times. I sent to Clarita 75 fully typed pages and twice as many to the firm. There was not yet a dictaphone or a fax. It also took a long time before the letters arrived. But this did no harm the intensity of the emotional connection. Consequently the happiness was great when I returned early in March to Hamburg.

The "Hamburger Abendblatt" reported on 12.03.1951: "Of the misery of the refugees in Karachi, after millions of Hindus and Mohammedans were driven away vice-versa in consequence of the partition of British India, of Bombay, where the food is insufficient even in the most beautiful hotel, of the destroyed Rangoon, which is still separated from its up-country land by rebels, of Bangkok, where still a great number of Germans live, of the order and wealth in Singapore and of many other impressions reported Dr. H. Kruse very intuitively, who returned only a few days ago from a journey through South East Asia as youngest member of the Eastasiatic Association." Before the war such speeches were customary at their annual dinner. After the war such a report remained unique, because journeys multiplied rapidly.