

The commission and forwarding business

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Basel's position at the junction of routes between France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy made it a centre of the commission and forwarding business. Goods passing through the city had to be unloaded, stored, cleared through customs, reloaded and forwarded to their destinations. Merchants in distant cities who sent goods through Basel needed agents who would handle these operations on their behalf, pay the duties and freight charges, insure the goods and forward them. The commission agents and forwarders of Basel, who provided these services for a fee, became an important part of the city's economy.¹

The forwarding business had a financial dimension. The forwarder advanced the costs of transport, customs and storage and was reimbursed by the owner of the goods, often months later. He dealt with multiple currencies and settled accounts with correspondents in many cities. He often extended credit to his clients and received credit from carriers and warehouse owners. The forwarding business was thus closely connected with the handling of bills of exchange and the management of credit, which is why several forwarding houses developed banking activities.

One of the most famous forwarding companies of Europe had its origins in the Basel region. In 1815, Louis Danzas, a former officer of the Napoleonic army, joined a forwarding business in Saint-Louis, on the French side of the border near Basel, which became Danzas & Cie. The company moved to Basel and grew into one of the largest international forwarding companies in Europe, with branches throughout the continent. Deutsche Post acquired it in 1999 and integrated it into DHL.² The Basel region remains a centre of logistics, with the Rhine ports, the EuroAirport and a concentration of forwarding and logistics companies that Part H examines.

The commission and forwarding business of Basel illustrates the close connection between logistics and finance. Because the movement of goods

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requires the movement of money, the intermediaries who organise the first often organise the second. The modern trade finance business, which the companion volume on Geneva examines in connection with commodity trading, is the heir of the financial services that the forwarders of Basel provided to the merchants whose goods passed through the city.

1 Notes

1. On the commission and forwarding business (Kommissions- und Speditionshandel) in Basel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see HLS, article "Spedition"; the literature on the transit trade of Basel. To be verified. ↩
2. On Danzas, founded in 1815 in Saint-Louis near Basel, its development into an international forwarding company based in Basel and its acquisition by Deutsche Post in 1999 (integration into DHL), see HLS, article "Danzas". Dates to be verified. ↩

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