

The merchants' directorate and the Basel post

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The merchants of Basel organised themselves not only in the guilds but also in a body that represented their common commercial interests. In 1682, the council established the *Kaufmännisches Direktorium*, the Directorate of Commerce, a board of merchants charged with the supervision of trade, the representation of commercial interests before the council and the administration of services useful to commerce.¹ Its most important service was the post. The Directorate organised a postal service that carried letters and parcels between Basel and the principal commercial cities, maintained postal routes and relay stations, and set tariffs. The post of the merchants' directorate operated until the creation of the federal postal service in 1849, when the Confederation took over the postal services of the cantons.

The Basel post of the Directorate produced one of the most famous stamps in the history of philately. In 1845, the cantonal post of Basel issued a stamp showing a white dove carrying a letter, printed in relief in three colours, the *Basler Taube*, the Basel Dove. It was one of the first postage stamps in the world, after the British Penny Black of 1840 and the stamps of Zurich and Geneva of 1843. Today it is one of the most valuable stamps of Switzerland.²

The organisation of the post by the merchants illustrates the close relationship between commerce and communication that the previous parts have noted. The merchants needed reliable, fast and affordable communication with their correspondents, which they organised themselves when the state did not. The Directorate also provided other services: it collected commercial information, arbitrated disputes between merchants, and advised the council on tariffs and trade treaties. It was, in effect, a chamber of commerce before the name existed. Its functions passed in the nineteenth century to the Basel Chamber of Commerce, founded in 1876, which today represents the business community of the two Basel cantons.³

The Directorate is an early example of the self-organisation of the business community in Switzerland, which remains characteristic of the Swiss system. Business associations, professional bodies and self-regulatory organisations play an important role in the regulation of the Swiss economy, including the financial sector. The Swiss Bankers Association, founded in 1912, has issued codes of conduct, among them the agreement on due diligence of the banks, which serves as a self-regulatory standard recognised by the supervisory authority. The self-regulatory organisations for the supervision of financial intermediaries under the Anti-Money Laundering Act are a modern form of the tradition that the merchants' directorate of 1682 represents.⁴

1 Notes

1. On the Kaufmännisches Direktorium of Basel, established in 1682, its functions (supervision of trade, postal service) and its later history, see HLS, article "Kaufmännisches Direktorium". Date to be verified. ↩
2. On the Basler Taube (Basel Dove), issued by the Basel cantonal post on 1 July 1845, and the earlier stamps of Zurich (Zürich 4 und 6, 1843) and Geneva (Double de Genève, 1843), see the philatelic literature. To be verified. ↩
3. On the Basler Handelskammer (today Handelskammer beider Basel), founded in 1876, see its publications. To be verified. ↩
4. On self-regulation in the Swiss financial sector, including the CDB of the Swiss Bankers Association (since 1977) and the self-regulatory organisations under Art. 24 ff. AMLA, see Part E. To be verified. ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-the-merchants-directorate-and-the-basel-post