

The San Francisco agency

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For more than a decade the agency in San Francisco was the heart of the bank. By 1909 it held deposits of about CHF 6 million, against only about CHF 1 million at the head office in Locarno. The agency kept a large cash reserve in coin and notes, about CHF 2.5 million in 1909. It was large enough to attract thieves, who in that year attempted to reach the vault through a tunnel.¹ The investment policy reflected the origin of the funds. Before 1909 American securities regularly made up more than half of the bank's portfolio. The deposits of Ticinese emigrants in California were thus invested in part in American assets, while the head office in Locarno managed the flows to the families at home.

In 1909 this structure came to an end. Regulatory restrictions introduced in the United States obliged the bank to cede its agency in San Francisco. Its balance sheet was halved while the share of American securities in the portfolio fell below ten per cent.² In 1910 the portfolio consisted of 56 per cent Swiss bonds, 31 per cent foreign bonds and 13 per cent foreign shares.³ The bank thus became a Locarno bank with emigrant clients whose foreign investments moved from America to Europe, above all to Italy and France. The shift exposed it to the same risks as the other Ticinese banks.

In figures. The Banca Svizzera Americana in its first quarter century: - founded in Locarno on 12 November 1896, agency in San Francisco from 1897,⁴ - share capital CHF 1.5 million (1897–1901), CHF 3 million (1902–1908), CHF 2 million (1909–1913), written down by 40 % in 1914, reconstituted at CHF 3 million (1915–1919), - deposits in San Francisco about CHF 6 million in 1909, against CHF 1 million in Locarno, - portfolio in 1910: 56 % Swiss bonds, 31 % foreign bonds, 13 % foreign shares, - absorbed by the Union Bank of Switzerland with effect from 1 January 1920, approved by the shareholders on 25 August 1920.

1 The Sottoceneri and Argentina

The emigration from the Sottoceneri followed a different geography. Cheda estimates that almost 12,000 people from the southern part of the canton went to Latin America between 1850 and the Second World War, above all to Argentina and other Latin American states. There they practised a wide range of trades, and not a few of them rose into the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie that controlled industry and commerce around the Río de la Plata.⁵ No Ticinese bank opened an agency in Buenos Aires comparable to the San Francisco agency of the Banca Svizzera Americana. How remittances from South America reached the Sottoceneri, and with which banks the savings of returning emigrants were deposited, has not yet been studied in detail.⁶ Their importance for the Sottoceneri was nevertheless considerable, as the success of many emigrants in the economy of the Río de la Plata suggests. The Argentine crisis of 1890 and the fluctuations of the peso are likely to have made these flows irregular, and the houses built with money earned overseas are a familiar feature of many villages of the Malcantone and the Mendrisiotto.⁷

2 Notes

1. Nosetti 2013 (as above). ↩
2. Nosetti 2013 (as above): "En 1909, lors de la cession de l'agence suite à des restrictions réglementaires survenues aux États-Unis". Nosetti does not name the American rule in question. ↩
3. Nosetti 2013 (as above). ↩
4. Nosetti 2013 (as above), for all figures in the box. ↩
5. Cheda, "Appunti per una storia dell'emigrazione ticinese oltremare" (as above), for the figure of almost 12,000, the destinations and the social position of the emigrants in the region of the Río de la Plata. ↩
6. Source as cited in the printed edition. ↩
7. Cheda, "Appunti" (as above), on the position of the emigrants in Argentina. On the "case degli americani" see Giorgio Cheda, *L'emigrazione ticinese in California*, 2 vols (Locarno 1981). ↩

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