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Women in the bank – an historical snapshot

On May 26 at the annual event hosted by the Historical Association of Deutsche Bank, Professor Lothar Gall gave an introductory speech on the topic of the evening “Woman – a key factor in the 21st century”, which is reproduced below in a summarized form.

Years ago, women found it difficult to gain a foothold in a bank. The banking profession remained dominated by the male sex right up to the middle of the 1920s. In 1878 there were only four female apprentices in the entire banking sector in Germany. Bank apprentices were required to have completed higher school education which, as a result of traditional upbringing prior to the First World War, was something only few girls had acquired. The prevailing idea at that time was that women should “focus their future thoughts only on getting married and not on the unsteady and unsatisfying world of work”. In principle, banks had no objections to employing women. General bank manuals published between 1908 and 1924 contained the advice: “women cannot and shall not be held back”. Indeed, women would even “be useful for most positions in banks – except in managerial positions”. Protesters against women working in banks, in contrast, drew quite different conclusions: women were apparently quite unsuited to a career in banking due to the abstract nature of the work and the female “soul; unique and quite different from that of the male”.

As a result, it was mostly men – at least until 1918 – who had a lifetime post as a bank employee or *Bankbeamter*. They belonged to a social group of employees which was created as the incorporated banks emerged in the 1870s, developing into large banks. Within the multi-class group of white-collar employees it was mainly the *Bankbeamte* who considered themselves the elite. In 1929, the journalist Siegfried Kracauer described his notion of the profession as a

“group of men who considered themselves superior to all other social classes”, going on to say: “At least among bank employees, there is a widely held view that the crest of the employee creation is the bank employee. This belief can be traced back to the roots of the industry, is certainly connected to the banker’s intimate dealings with money and is confirmed for all to see in the princely Renaissance-style palaces that are bank buildings.”

The “old school” bankers were particularly vehement in trying to prevent women from invading their profession. A comment from one male banker in Berlin in 1914 on the work of his female colleagues: “The practice of hiring womenfolk in local big banks is highly objectionable”. Among the arguments against women in the labour force were claims that the office air is bad for women’s health, that they couldn’t work as hard as men and lacked the necessary intelligence and ambition, and that they were merely a form of cheap labour undercutting their wage levels. Besides these far-fetched notions, some male colleagues even lodged bizarre complaints about “the appalling smell of violets” in the office. And in 1927 in the *Deutsche Bank employees’ club*, or canteen, which was primarily there “to provide employees with cheap and substantial mid-day meals and dinners”, meals were still being served in areas segregated by rank and gender. There was one dining room for senior employees; two for employees, one room for women and another for industrial employees.

Women workers also encountered opposition from bankers’ associations, including the *Verein der Bankbeamten*, founded in 1890, and the German Association of Bank Employees (*Deutsche Bankbeamten-Verein*). Founded in 1894, this most influential association did not accept any female

members until 1919 – something which was



Smelling of violets? Frankfurt branch, filing office

quite normal in many of the larger employee associations founded since the 1880s. Even in 1915 the German Association of Bank Employees considered employing women to be superfluous and made the following statement in its official newsletter: “In the interest of our profession, we will always support the view that the employment of women in banks is to be discouraged at all costs, and it can only be in the best interests of the banks themselves to leave the running of their business to the men, instead of organizing the bank like some kind of department store”.

The emerging big bank business led to a substantial increase in bank employees from the 1890s and as the jobs become more varied, alongside qualified bank employees, banks were able to employ an ever-growing number of unqualified people or, for some areas, a cheap work force which they trained up on the job. Besides applicants without any higher education and bank training, women now represented the new group of employees in banks and elsewhere in the world of work. One main reason behind this was the typewriter, which was introduced into offices around 1900, offering numerous women – apparently because of their nimble fingers – positions as typists. The invention of the telephone, which was being used more and more in offices from the 1880s on, also created jobs; telephone calls had to be put through manually and it was mostly women who were found sitting at switchboards. Other women found work as clerks, dealing with all kinds of office work, or as accountants.

According to a census conducted in 1912 by the German Association of Bank Employees, however, only 2,408 women were working at banks and in banker’s offices. Half of them carried out bank work; the other half

unskilled labour. It was not until a substantial amount of bank employees were called up to serve in the First World War that vacancies appeared – as they did in most branches of the German economy – which could no longer be filled with male workers, inciting banks to engage women in larger numbers. “Only by the utmost exertion of the remaining staff and managers was it physically possible to properly conduct the Bank’s business. A number of female clerks have been added to our staff”, Deutsche Bank wrote in its 1914 Annual Report.

Although the number of women at work in banks rose, this increase still lagged behind that seen in other sectors. Banks were a lot less open to the idea of having women in their ranks than other branches of industry. Among the Berlin-based big banks, Deutsche Bank was particularly resistant to this movement: “As you know, the Head Office of Deutsche Bank does not employ ladies”, was the way Carl Michalowsky, Board Member responsible for personnel matters, responded in 1910 to the request from a Member of the Reichstag, inquiring into the possibility of finding “appropriate employment” for a young lady. He could not offer her any other job either as “there are no positions available in the bank’s branch offices which would be commensurate with her fine educational background”. So, while it was clear that Deutsche Bank made a distinction between positions at its Head Office and branch offices; the Head Office not employing ladies, it would seem that Disconto-Gesellschaft, Deutsche Bank’s main competitor, had a less restrictive policy. In any case, Michalowsky reported that he had “approached in confidence the Board of Directors at Disconto-Gesellschaft, which has ladies in its employ”; nevertheless, they replied that they already had more applications than available placements. In 1913, the Head Office of Deutsche Bank engaged its first female employee in the archive/library department. Among the wider banking circle, only the Bank für Handel und Industrie, which became part of Dresdner Bank in 1931, had female workers in its employ. From the First World War onwards, roughly 200 women worked in a number of its bank departments.

And in the inflationary period between 1920 and 1924, more and more women began to work in banks as requirements for office workers grew: the total number of female

bank employees in Germany increased from 13,000 (1919) to 90,000 (at the end of 1923); this represented 10 and 27%, respectively, of all bank employees. Nevertheless, the majority of women worked as unskilled labourers on office machines, and in 1924, as part of a rationalization process which saw a large number of job cuts – even among male bank employees – their employment contracts were terminated. In 1925, the number of female bank employees had shrunk from the above-mentioned 90,000 down to 25,000, now at 20%. This represented an increase of more than 15 percentage points over 1907.

While women's salaries in banks were between 20 and even 50% lower than their male colleagues' before the First World War, the first *Reich* collective agreement, dated 1920, served to place them on an equal footing, at least officially. Nevertheless, bank employees could be classified according to three tariff groups with differing salary levels according to education and years of service. Owing to the fact that women often had little education, female bank employees now found themselves predominantly grouped in the lower-paid tariff groups. They were also worse off as far as the wide range of allowances was concerned. And among the 1,245 directors, holders of power of attorney to act for the company and other executives working at Deutsche Bank in 1927, there were "of course" no women.



Norddeutsche Bank, Hamburg, in the 1920s

The global economic crisis between 1929 and 1932 increased unemployment among employees substantially, with unemployment rising more significantly among women than among men. This was the peak of an outcry against working married women which had been simmering since the mid-1920s; against what was referred to as double earning. One example of this dates back to

1926, when a female employee employed on the telephone switchboard of Süddeutsche Disconto-Gesellschaft in Mannheim (this became part of Deutsche Bank in 1929) and who was planning to marry was called to the Personnel Department. Here, she was asked "how she envisaged continuing her job as telephonist in our bank while at the same time being the wife of a successful businessman, adding that she would then be considered by the works council as a double earner". The lady concerned, however, explained that she had no intention of keeping her job, but rather intended to give notice as of the end of the year. And so it was that in 1925 a testimonial for Hermine O. stated: "She is leaving [...] our services because it is Deutsche Bank's policy to replace female employees after their marriage with unmarried women for social reasons".

The National Socialists persisted with the resentment against working women which had bloomed during the global economic crisis and propagated confining the role of woman to the household, family and children. Marital loans were set up to support this, on the condition that the wife gave up her job. Karl Ernst Sippell, Personnel Director of Deutsche Bank at the time, spoke at a company meeting in 1933 of jobs that were presently vacant, owing to a number of female employees who had returned to the kitchen stove: "Happily, there is a healthy change among our female employees; they provide constant fluctuation either by marrying or returning to the parental home." At the same time, a leading article on personnel policy in the Deutsche Bank staff magazine in July 1933 stated: "There is no doubt that there are tasks in the banking business that are especially suited to women. To exaggerate the point: the typewriter needs a female hand. If not just because men are so reluctant to befriend it. And at this point, we should certainly sing our praises for the good secretary once more."

From 1936 onwards, the National Socialist government attempted to achieve a balance in the growing gaps in the labour force, also among employees, by engaging a female workforce. And in 1937, the conditions for marital loans were changed to allow a woman to work. In the Second World War, the state continued to push for women – even married women – to join the work force. The number of women in Deutsche Bank's

employee ranks rose from 2,200 at the end of 1934 to 3,400 at the end of 1940, 14.4% and 17.6%, respectively, of all employees.

Views on working women have done an about-turn since the Second World War and certainly as part of the emancipation movement. As early as 1956, the private bank sector in Germany had 45 women out of every 100 employees; today, women in banks make up a half or more of the work force.



Finally on an equal footing: Saarländische Kreditbank trainees in 1974

It took some years, however, for women to be able to embark on a "career". In 1973/74, Deutsche Bank launched a campaign called

Our oldest employee

This article was published in the monthly magazine for the company officers of Deutsche Bank in January 1928:

Our oldest employee celebrated her 86th birthday on January 1. It is the charwoman Karoline Behlau, who has worked with us since October 1, 1872, that is, for 55 years! Her husband, having served in the campaigns of 1864, 1866 and 1870/71 and with us as a bank messenger, passed away a few months ago. Except for our former Director Consul Hermann Wallich and the Chairman of our Supervisory Board Privy Councillor Steinthal, she is the only one to have experienced the development of Deutsche Bank nearly right from the start.

When she came, Deutsche Bank was still located in the rooms in Französische Strasse in Berlin – where the company Boenicke has its offices. Dr. Georg von Siemens and Wallich were the only Directors, and they sat together at one green table. Later, Max Steinthal joined them as a third at this table. Mrs. Behlau handled with one single

"Women in Management Positions": "A career in banking should not remain a privilege for men," numerous advertisements proclaimed. The result: every third trainee – the bank's future high potentials – was female in 1974. At the same time, the bank launched "women seminars" to train women for management positions.

An analysis of the careers of German big bank executives between 1980 to 2000, which was published at the end of 2001, gave the following picture: fluctuation in top management had increased; more and more were coming in from other backgrounds as "lateral hires"; international experience was increasingly asked for, yet: "By contrast, one particular phenomenon has (so far) persisted: women are not present among the members of boards of managing directors." One exception to this is Ellen Ruth Schneider-Lenné who was appointed as member of the Board of Managing Directors at Deutsche Bank in 1988, to which she belonged until her death in 1996. She was the first and is still the only woman to have served on the board of managing directors of a German big bank.

colleague the entire housekeeping chores. Soon afterwards, Deutsche Bank moved into Burgstrasse 29, and from there, on April 26, 1876, into Bernstrasse in the building of Unionbank, which had been taken over. Mother Behlau, at that time still a young woman, had to climb up onto the moving lorry with cleaning pails and brooms amongst the lecturns and cabinets, but the next morning, when the big "spring cleaning" was to begin, the cleaning pails had been stolen. Things had to be set up initially in the Bernstrasse building on a very provisional basis. The Directors' offices were in the basement. For the charwomen, who still only numbered two, the work was not all that easy, seeing as there was no running water, let alone warm water. It had to be fetched from wells in the street. The bank buildings also contained the flats of Siemens and Wallich, and later also that of Rudolph Koch. But the operations of the bank claimed more and more space.

The old building no longer sufficed. And thus the front was opened in Mauerstrasse. The

operations swallowed one building after another, until the entire block was in the bank's possession, in order to subsequently cross over to the facing blocks with the flying arches. Mother Behlau was joined by more and more colleagues. Although earlier she even took care of the Directors' flats, step by step she was limited to a certain territory, the main cashiers' hall in Block 1, which she has been keeping in tidy order now for decades. She could have retired long ago with the same wages, the Direction has offered her this more than once, but she does not want to.

The morning work at Deutsche Bank, she says, is for her like a walk is for others. Her health is outstanding. Although rheumatism does twinge somewhat, she no longer feels it anymore. She has come to know generations of Deutsche Bank employees and speaks of some of them. Georg von Siemens was the nicest. Consul Wallich was sometimes very

difficult to satisfy. Director Mankiewitz still owes her a dustcloth, seeing as he wanted to wipe the dust away from certain objects himself. Then there was the bank officer Kerl in the main cashiers' hall, who was always saying: "To hit the jackpot just once!" Shortly before his retirement, he did actually win the lottery. And she tells of the doorman Buchholz, who turned out to be a poor soothsayer: When Director Mankiewitz was still an accountant, he was not among the most punctual, and one morning when he was late and ran up the stairs so quickly that he stumbled, the doorman called to him in jovial sarcasm: "What's the hurry? Slow down, Mr. Mankiewitz. You're never going to become a Director anyway!" Mother Behlau has all this faithfully stored away in her memory. But she still does not want to retire, because she believes that someone else would not do her work as diligently as she does.

Fifty years ago: David Hansemann House in Düsseldorf

Training the next generation of bankers and the qualifications of its young staff was perhaps the most pressing personnel issue at Deutsche Bank in the early fifties. The war had severely decimated an entire generation of young bankers and despite the fact that some Directors continued to work beyond the age of seventy, the bank only gradually managed to train a new generation of bankers and reduce the disproportionately high share of old employees. Providing good training to its young employees was an existential issue for the bank.

Against this background, the Rheinisch-Westfälische Bank, one of the successor banks of the broken up Deutsche Bank, began with the construction of a building which, according to Board Member Clemens Plassmann, was to become "the focus of our training efforts for junior banking staff." The building was located in Poststrasse 5-6 in Düsseldorf, only a few minutes walk from the bank's head office. The bank played a pioneering role with this building, being the first bank in Germany to establish such a nationwide company training center. It was intended not only as a training center for the bank's own staff, but also as a guest house for exchange staff from other branches and from abroad. It was opened in an official ceremony on August 4, 1954, the ninetieth anniversary of the death of its namesake,

David Hansemann, founder of Disconto-Gesellschaft. Plassmann made sure that guests were welcomed by an inscription at the entrance in an international language. Today one would, without giving it much thought, choose English. Plassmann, however, who did not hesitate to address a group of Catholic theologians in Latin, composed a chronogram especially for the occasion:

Juvenibus argentariis
alienigenis vernaculisque
discendi cupidis
portus et patria sis.
(Be harbour and home to
knowledge-hungry
young bankers
from near and far.)

Courses began on September 21, 1954. Subjects covered in this initial period were securities business, foreign exchange and foreign business, lending business and fund transfers.

Beyond purely technical courses there were courses such as "Bank officials at the counter and in advertising." Reports of course participants during the first years unanimously praised the atmosphere of the house: "We were generally housed in double rooms, containing for each person a bed, a closet, desk and leather chair and a small bookshelf. [...] Upon closer look, we found

that everything is furnished to make the stay as comfortable as possible for all residents," wrote Walter W. from Mainz Branch, who attended one of the first courses. "At David Hansemann House, every effort was made to make us feel at home," reported his colleague from Fulda, Karl N. Initially, women attending courses were not allowed to spend the night at David Hansemann House, but had to find private accommodation.



Double room for course participants

The spacious building was not only a perfect venue for seminars but also for lectures and meetings and was also used for external events. In February 1955, for example, a conference of the premiers of Germany's federal states was held in the building. In the first years, a "Chronicle of David Hansemann House" appeared annually, listing all events held. Apart from the usual events such as conferences, visits, lectures and even general meetings, the entries not only reveal worlds between Deutsche Bank in the fifties and the present but also a change in the *Zeitgeist*. The entry for March 21, 1956, for example, is: "Social evening organized by the house guests who invited and cooked

meals for members of the Board of Managing Directors, the Foreign Department and Personnel."



Everyone gets a turn: kitchen 1955

In the first ten years of its existence, 260 foreign bank officers, 166 German exchange program staff and 4,000 seminar participants were guests at David Hansemann House. "The importance of the house, not only for Deutsche Bank, but for the German economy as a whole, can hardly be overrated. David Hansemann House is one of those much-needed establishments which address the shortage of junior bankers and prepare the young generation for more responsible tasks. As business leaders increasingly move away from patriarchal structures towards teamwork, the training of young businessmen needs to be approached in a new fashion," wrote a newspaper at the time.

David Hansemann House lost its unique role when the bank opened further training centers in Jugenheim, Hamburg and Kronberg. It was shut down in the mid-nineties.

Lost and Found

Automatic telephone system

"If a connection is requested, it is first necessary to lift the receiver and, after the dial tone is heard (a short and long beep), dial the requested number. The number, e.g. 2436, is dialed as follows: move your finger

to the position on the dial marked with a two, turn the dial to the right as far as it will go and let go. Proceed accordingly with the next numbers four, three and six."

Deutsche Bank, Telephone Directory, Head Office Berlin, 1933

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