



## Member Interview



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**Q:** *Today's interview is with one of the founding members of the Austrian Business Council. He is a lawyer, practicing in Burma, Singapore and Ras Al Khaimah. I'm sure that most of you know him, its Mr. Theodor Strohal and today in this interview, we will try to find out if there are any aspects in the life of Theodor that we are not aware of. Theodor, welcome to this interview.*

**Theodor:** Thank you very much and thank you for inviting me.

**Q:** *Please introduce yourself.*

**Theodor:** Theodor Strohal is born in Vienna Austria in the beautiful year of 1949, four years after the end of World War II. I studied in Vienna and went to a quite famous high school, the Theresianische Akademie, and then I studied Law after my army time. I practiced Law from 1974 on until 1979, as an assistant in various law firms and in court. In 1979, I founded my own law firm. Actually, I'm coming from a legal dynasty. My grand grand uncle, Emil Strohal, was a very famous professor already in Göttingen, Leipzig and Graz. And he was actually the founder of the Austrian real estate law. And he also was commenting and even drafting the German inheritance law. Also, my grandfather was a lawyer, so I continued actually this profession. So from 1979 on, I started my career in Austria, first as a single law firm with one secretary, then expanded quite fast with one lawyer, then two lawyers, then three lawyers. Of course, I did a lot of legal work in Austria. One of them was insolvency and bankruptcy law, as I did a short webinar a couple of days ago.

But I was always interested to look a little bit beyond the Austrian borders. So I started actually my first foreign office already in 1980 or 1981 in Indonesia, because I had very close contacts to Indonesia. I was traveling during my study time as a backpacker and I traveled through Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and so on. So I made friends and I started a first office in the palace of the Sultan of Yogyakarta.

He is still in charge, Hamengku Buwono X.. And he invited me and gave the rent for free for a small office room and the secretary and I took care for his European business. So I went to Indonesia about three, four times a year, always for a couple of weeks. And I enjoyed these foreign actions. And my next, let's say adventure was Paraguay for two years. I had a nice mandate to set up quite a big company and big enterprises in Paraguay. And I travelled from Paraguay to Vienna every one month, two months there, two months in Vienna. So my intention to do business abroad then finally resulted in our first now permanent office in Singapore, 1996. I was a foreign lawyer in Singapore for quite some time until my retirement. Then I started in Ras Al Khaimah in 2005. And our youngest, let's say branch is in Burma and in 2012, just after Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from her house arrest. I opened the office there and was one of the first foreign lawyers in the country. And we still have our office there, which is running quite well. So far, that's my legal way of doing business since my younger ages.

**Q: *That's what I call quite an international career. There is one point that I found very surprising: you once told me that you also had a career as a Buddhist monk?***

**Theodor:** Sure, it is some kind of a career. Yeah. Well, this is, let's say my life has three main focus points. One is my job, which always played an important role in my life, but not the most important one. Most important was always my family. I have five children and now I have five grandchildren. This is, let's say, the center of my strength. And besides, my job, I always was interested in esoteric, in religions. So already in young ages, let's say with 19 and 20, I became Sanyashin. Maybe the elder members of the ABC or whoever sees this video will remember these Bagwan Sri Rajnesh people dressed in orange clothes trying to promote Hari Krishna and their master. So Sanyashin was one of my first steps. But then I found out this is not really the way I wanted to go. And after my second trip to Thailand, I was lucky to meet the very well English speaking monk who explained Buddhism to me in a little bit more in detail. And then I started to practice in Vienna, and I became already in 1985 the representative when the Austrian Buddhist Association was acknowledged by the government as an official religion. So according to my appeal to our constitutional court, I could manage that this religion became of the same level and the same importance as the other religions, like Catholic, Protestant, Mosaisch and so on. I was also elected as vice president and I studied and also practiced Buddhism for many years. And then finally in 1995, I got an offer by a Korean monk to become ordained in a Korean Zen monastery. And I accepted the offer. And then I went to Korea many times and I was wearing the monk robe for 10 years, not in court. I got a special permission by the abbot of my monastery that when I have to do my legal work, I am allowed, of course, to dress in normal lawyer's clothes with a jacket and tie. Just my hair was a very, very short, not really bold, but let's say about two or three millimeters. So I was accepted at the court as a lawyer and not as a skinhead. And these 10 years really were very important for my life because I learned something I haven't learned before, namely to be humble. And when you look at a lawyer's career, when it is successful, humbleness is not the first thing you learn. But to become a monk, like in my first weeks in the monastery in South Korea, even though I was, maybe 45 or 50 years old, I had to clean that 2000-year-old toilet because I was a novice. And in the monastery, not the age counts. It counts how long have you been ordained as a monk. And I have been ordained one week. And the young guys with 19, 20, 25 years old have been ordained three - five years ago. So actually, I was younger than them and I had to do that really low, low work, and this gave me a new way of thinking about life, thinking about what's going on in humanity and what is really behind it. And I tried to keep this philosophy also in my profession.

And when I said at the beginning, there are the three main branches of my life, family, religion/esoteric and going my spiritual way also in my profession. I think that the middle one, esoteric and spirituality had the strongest influence on both other sides. And one of my main, let's say, principles was to follow the spiritual way, whatever comes to you.

And I got many offers as a lawyer to make a sidestep, like from arms dealers, from well, some people who were doing business, which I didn't appreciate. And I guess I would have been a millionaire now if it would have taken these cases. But I rejected it.

And for me, one of the main ideals of my life was when I wake up in the morning and I look into the mirror, I want to see a human and not a crook.

**Q: *It brings us back to the present. You said you have three offices. So how do you split your time and what are you focusing on?***

**Theodor:** When I came to Ras Al Khaimah it was 15 years ago, so I was 55 years old and at this time, my full power went into this office. And right now, I have excellent lawyers in all the three offices I can trust. And they are doing really good business. And I am a little bit drawn back and I enjoyed my life. I live mostly in Thailand. If there are flights, I come to Ras Al Khaimah or to the UAE once a month, sometimes twice a month. I'm flying quite a lot. I come to Singapore about every second month. I take the one-hour flight to Yangon quite often. But still I enjoy more supervising and I enjoy the cases I am doing. And I'm concentrating mainly on international taxation, helping my clients to pay less taxes in their high tax home countries. And I am enjoying insolvency and corporate law, so I'm picking out the cases I really like to do. And the day-to-day business is run by the lawyers in my three offices.

**Q: *Let's get back to the Austrian Business Council. We mentioned before that you are one of the founding members. You are a member since the very beginning. You always supported the Austrian Business Council in many, many aspects. At the beginning. I remember I met you in the board as our legal counsel. How can you personally or your offices, how can they support other members of the Austrian Business Council?***

**Theodor:** I think from the very beginning, when Dr. Penzias asked me, why don't we set up such a business council? I already had the idea that the Austrians and people who are making business with Austrians, should have advantages. So besides offering them some discounts on our fees, we tried to concentrate on legal fields, which are maybe, let's say, more convenient or more interesting for ABC members than other legal fields. So I know from other German speaking law firms that they are concentrating in maritime law, which is excellent, and they are doing a great job. But I don't think many Austrians will have any contact with maritime law. So, we are in the north, in Ras Al Khaimah, the only foreign owned law firm in the mainland. There are some other law firms in the free zones, but in the mainland, we are the only ones for 15 years now. We are forming free zone companies. We are forming onshore mainland companies. We are doing taxation. We do conveyancing. So we help them to buy the right property. We help them to transfer their ownerships. And of course, we do everything that's connected with business law. Our lawyers are at least two times per week, sometimes three times per week in Dubai, which is, of course, the hub and center of foreign business. So even though our office is based in Ras Al Khaimah we try to cover all the seven Emirates, which we are allowed because we are a mainland company.

**Q: Is there anything else that you would like to tell us about yourself?**

**Theodor:** Well, maybe it's interesting how I came to the Arab Emirates, because this is a story I like to tell; it's a little bit also connected with my family. In 2005, I had my child number four. She was three years old, a daughter, Aisha. My Indonesian wife at this time and I decided to make holidays in Dubai. So we booked through a travel office and we landed in Dubai. And then they put us into a bus and drove us to Ras Al Khaimah. So I exited the bus and said, is that Dubai? He said, no, this is Ras Al Khaimah; but the hotel was nice, so we decided not to complain that it was not Dubai. And on the second evening in this Al Hamra Fort Hotel, now it's a Hilton, an Austrian guy, Mr. Prager came to me and said, "tonight we will have a big dinner together with the deputy ruler Sheikh Saud. It only costs 400 dirham per person. Please join:". And I said, "actually, I'm on holidays. I'm not interested in the big business". "No, you have to come". So we paid the 800 Dirhams, my three-year-old daughter, was free and we were lucky to sit very close to the now ruler of Ras Al Khaimah, at that time, the deputy ruler, the son of Sheikh Saqr. And I explained, of course, to my three-year-old daughter that you're going to meet the Prince of Ras Al Khaimah. So when we sat down, she walked over to Sheikh Saud and asked him, "are you the prince?" And he said, "yes, I'm the prince." And because she was quite extrovert at this time, Sheikh Saud took her on his arm and walked around and tried to talk to her. And then he walked over to me and handed me back my daughter and said, "what are you doing here"? I said, "I'm a tourist". "How do you like my Emirate?" "It's beautiful. Great. Just being here one day." So, he asked, "what's your profession?" I said, "I'm an international lawyer". "Really? We need you. We need you because we are a young and very active emirate and we want to attract foreign investors, but we only have Arabic lawyers in our Emirate. So, we need an international lawyer, because the foreign investors are usually afraid to mandate an Arabic lawyer. They're afraid they will not really represent their interests." And I said that I never thought about opening an office in an Arab country. So, 15 years ago I received my first license as a legal consultant. And since that time, I stayed permanently in Ras Al Khaimah for eight years. And I do not regret it. And it was a great time to set up this office and also, of course, Sheikh Saud, said you will not regret it. We will think about your business and we will help you to build it up. And he really did. So, until now, we are representing quite important people in the Emirates and we have excellent contacts.

And looking back, I have to say a big thank-you to this Emirate and the present ruler who has been paving my way. I wouldn't be here so relaxed right now in Thailand, in a new house supervising my three offices from my office chair without having any troubles, not even because of Covid, and all of the offices are still running well. The United Arab Emirates and mainly the Ruler of Ras Al Khaimah, my sponsor and helper, have paved my way within the last 15 years.

**Q: It's amazing how a three-year-old kid can basically change your career, your destiny. I think that was a very, very nice story. Theodor, thank you very much for the interview and a lot of greetings to Bangkok**

**Theodor:** Thank you very much. And all the best. Thank you very much.