

Wyoming Tribune Eagle, Saturday, July 18, 2015: “Big Tobacco targets our kids”

Casper Star Tribune, Sunday, July 19, 2015: “When so-called choices are decided by a trade group”

When my brother died of smoking-related health problems at age 46, it was a devastating blow. Years earlier, during courtship I gave him a Meerschaum from Germany—when he recognized, his constitution reflected his childhood polio. His decision prompted me to relinquish my addiction to sweets; naturally, I hoped our efforts would help Karl, who lived nearby and visited often. Eventually my brother, two years younger than I, did forgo his cigarettes. His death was doubly troubling as, in its wake, my 27-year marriage came to an end.

Off I went to graduate school, University of California at Davis having offered me a spot in its fiction-writing program. Davis had anti-smoking laws so stringent, city employees could not smoke near doorways. Though California is so compassionate in the medical uses of cannabis, which the state's voters had recently legalized.

Degree in hand, I applied for a job with the San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce. The group needed someone who was figured, wasn't far from writing fiction. From what I've learned since then, am I ever so glad they turned me down.

What I know today: At home and abroad, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, America's largest trade group, is a powerful force in the tobacco industry. Its relentless actions are wide-ranging and deplorable.

As a fourteen-year-old, Karl imitated our dad's smoking. Father lived past eighty, though that's nothing to brag about. He was a non-smoker until the German economy lay in ruins, with cigarettes supplied by American GIs at the close of WWII. Soon Germans soothed their hunger pangs with cigarettes supplied by American GIs. Today, cigarette production at the British-American Tobacco factory in Bayreuth travels at a steady pace.

Nevertheless, the tobacco industry has had to face falling profits because of a global treaty, negotiated through the World Trade Organization that mandates anti-smoking measures and also seeks to curb Big Tobacco's influence in policy making. That treaty was ratified by 179 countries.

Guess who are the holdouts? Cuba, Haiti, and the United States, where the Chamber of Commerce goes into overdrive to protect Tobacco.

Developing countries suffer terribly from the Chamber's lobbying against global antismoking laws. In poor countries, the damage is even worse than previously thought, reports Danny Hakim of the New York Times.

From Ukraine to Uruguay, from Moldova to the Philippines, the Chamber and its foreign affiliates engage in a global campaign against antismoking laws, according to interviews with government ministers, lobbyists, lawmakers, and public health officials. In America and the United States, reports Mr. Hakim.

His investigation looked at letters, emails, and other documents the NY Times obtained from the Chamber and various governments. The sources prove the Chamber's embrace of a global campaign to advance Big Tobacco's interests.

For example, in a recent court case in the Ukraine, the defender of Big Tobacco was none other than the Ukrainian Chamber of Commerce, Taras Kachka, who argued that several “fantastic tobacco companies” invested in tobacco factories. These companies now export tobacco products to many other countries; hence, it's in Ukraine's interest to protect its investors—to the point of filing lawsuits even against Australia, where the Ukraine does not sell tobacco products.

international challenge to Australia's right to maintain antismoking laws on its own soil.

Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the Ukrainian prime minister, revealed that his country's case against Australia grew out of the Chamber of Commerce.

Not only does the Chamber pit various countries against one another but also its U.S. chief executive, Thor Halvorson, is in Washington on behalf of Big Tobacco's desire to sue under the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The TPP, which includes the United States and several Pacific Rim nations, has been called NAFTA on steroids. Imagine the race to the fatter on "trade" agreements! Big Tobacco also wants the right to sue under any other future international trade agreement.

"We all choose our own poisons," said a friend, puffing away. If only she knew! Our so-called choices are often dictated by the weight of American businesses behind it. For the sake of profits, the Chamber will use whatever it takes. In America (and in countless other countries) hooked on cigarettes, health considerations be damned. As for my childhood hunger leave me with sadness and enormous regrets.