

Whistleblower Birkenfeld: “I helped Switzerland”



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[Bradley Birkenfeld](#), the former UBS employee who helped bring down Swiss banking secrecy, explained to Swiss public television SRF why he [blew the whistle on the bank's tax evasion](#) violations in the United States.

Birkenfeld claims he acted after the discovery of an internal document at UBS which contradicted the working practices of bankers. The memo protected the bank against criminal liability but left its staff in the cold.

Birkenfeld told the Tegesschau program that he went to the US authorities “to hold people accountable who were lying to myself, my colleagues, clients and the shareholders of the bank[.]” He continued,

“Hopefully Swiss citizens understand that this isn’t targeted at them, it’s targeted at the wrongdoings at the highest echelons of the bank.”

The US Department of Justice (DoJ) has acknowledged that Birkenfeld’s testimony was crucial in bringing UBS to book for tax evasion offenses in 2009 that cost the bank \$780 million in fines. It has since snowballed, implicating several other Swiss banks and forced the government to effectively end Swiss banking secrecy.

During the televised interview, Birkenfeld repeated previous claims that he went to the DoJ only after being rebuffed by UBS’s internal whistleblowing scheme. “As a director of the bank with a CHF10 million signature power, I felt it imperative that I brought it to legal and compliance at the bank and ask for an answer. They buried the investigation, there was no investigation,” he said.

UBS did not comment on Birkenfeld’s interview claims. “We put this matter behind us years ago,” a spokesman said.

Return to Europe

Birkenfeld, who is now writing a book about his experiences, denied that his motives were impure. He stated that he was not motivated by a dispute with UBS about a bonus nor by fear of implication in a US tax investigation into a former client.

Despite receiving a \$104 million (CHF97 million) reward for his whistleblowing activities by the US authorities, Birkenfeld resents spending 30 months in prison for failing to divulge everything he knew about his work with tax dodgers.

“It’s clear now that you can’t trust the Department of Justice; not only do they lie but they cover up evidence, and they withhold things from the public domain,” he said. Birkenfeld accused both the DoJ and the US government of covering up for the rich and powerful tax dodgers in the US.

Birkenfeld has recently testified before a French court that is also investigating UBS for alleged tax evasion violations. He has expressed a desire to leave the US and move to Europe, but would undoubtedly face legal problems in Switzerland after breaking banking secrecy laws.

“At some point I think I’ll visit Switzerland to help some of the people who don’t know me, to understand exactly what I did and why I did it,” he told Tagesschau. “I’m sure there will be some folk who are upset and angry and many people who understand hopefully that this was the right thing to do and that I helped Switzerland.”

“I certainly hope that the Swiss citizens will finally say: ‘We are going to hold [UBS] accountable, we want more transparency.’”