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Reinhard Mohn

Entrepreneur – Leader –
Visionary

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Zum Buch

On the 100th birthday of the visionary entrepreneur

REINHARD MOHN (1921-2009) is regarded as one of the most important German entrepreneurs of the 20th century. Returning home from World War II, he took over his parents' publishing company in 1947 and in the decades that followed, beginning with the founding of the Bertelsmann Lesering in 1950, set the course for Bertelsmann's development into an international media group with a corporate culture based on social partnership. The economic success of Bertelsmann AG, which Mohn managed from the East Westphalian provinces, was accompanied by a high reputation as one of the most attractive and progressive employers in the Federal Republic. In 1977, Mohn established the Bertelsmann Stiftung, which is dedicated to promoting a democratic civil society and is today considered the most important of Germany's foundations.



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put himself in the limelight. While the company »bore the mark of Reinhard Mohn's signature,«⁶ he himself, a true Protestant in this respect, attached more importance to his work than to the portrayal of his own life. And he didn't live to see the publication of »175 Years of Bertelsmann. The Legacy for Our Future« (2010), which honored his work as an entrepreneur.

So, who was this entrepreneur who placed great value on modesty, who nevertheless radiated awe-inspiring authority and, directing matters from behind the scenes, created a global corporation? Why would he be an »entrepreneur par excellence,« as the German newspaper »Die Zeit« put it?⁷ Revealing the person behind a business personality is one of the most difficult tasks of a biographical study. W. Somerset Maugham summed up the problem of authorship beautifully when he said, »There are three rules for writing a novel. Unfortunately no one knows what they are.«⁸ Perhaps this is why it happens that corporate histories largely ignore personalities and examine structure instead. And yet it has been proven time and again that theoretical questions, e. g., about Bourdieu's categories such as »forms of capital,« while relevant, are of little help when it comes to properly understanding individuals, their life paths, and their decisions. Often what remains are »mostly merely metaphorical speeches« with which the »empirical findings are to be given a kind of higher consecration.«⁹ In other words, life histories, now that the time has passed when they could be regarded as an outdated form of historiography,¹⁰ once again form a cornerstone of corporate history, at least when they comply with the requirements of a modern biography.

movement, to which future generations of publishers remained committed well into the 20th century. In 1881, the granddaughter of company founder Carl Bertelsmann, Friederike, married Johannes Mohn, also from a pastoral family, who took over the publishing house in 1887 after the death of his father-in-law. Reinhard Mohn's father, the publisher Heinrich Mohn, in turn married a pastor's daughter, Agnes Seippel, in 1912. Except for a four-year period in Braunlage, where the family lived in »a simple townhouse made of plain bricks,« the small town of Gütersloh remained the real center of their home lives.¹¹ The home Heinrich Mohn built there in 1928 on Kurfürstenstrasse had a five-hectare garden, but otherwise it lacked the luxuries that characterized other industrialists' mansions. According to Reinhard Mohn, his parents »brought him up to be thrifty,« and there were no »Persian carpets.«¹²

Reinhard Mohn was born on June 29, 1921, the fifth of six children and the third-eldest son. He first went to Gütersloh's Protestant elementary school before transferring to the local Evangelisch-Stiftisches Gymnasium (Protestant high school) in 1931, in keeping with family tradition. Looking back, he always emphasized that he was the second youngest: his siblings had set the standard at school, which had »rather negative consequences« for him because he felt he was by no means as gifted as they were.¹³ Throughout his life, he considered his admired eldest brother Hans Heinrich, older by eight years, to be particularly capable. In interviews, Reinhard occasionally mentioned his brother's outstanding talents and intellectual esprit. On the other hand, Reinhard »demanded a lot of himself.«¹⁴ While his school

Religiosität, Sittenstrenge, Ordnung, Pünktlichkeit, Sauberkeit, Korrektheit und Pflichtgefühl charakterisieren sicher meine Mutter ebenso wie Liebe zu ihren Angehörigen und stete Hilfsbereitschaft und Fürsorge. - Diese Pflichterfüllung hat sicher auch ihre Kinder, zwar unterschiedlich, aber doch spürbar beeindruckt. Für meine Mutter ergab sich so sicher das Gefühl eines sehr erfüllten Lebens, - das aber im wesentlichen für andere gelebt wurde.

Der Tod meines ältesten Bruders hat meine Mutter seelisch schwer getroffen. Über Jahre war sie innerlich gelähmt. - Den Lebensweg ihrer Kinder hat sie immer mit größter Anteilnahme verfolgt. Die Schicksale ihrer Söhne im Krieg und in der Gefangenschaft bereiteten ihr manche Sorge. - Sie durfte das Weiterleben ihrer Familie in vielen Enkeln und Urenkeln bewußt mit vollziehen.

Am Ende ihres Lebens konnte sie aus ihrer gewohnten Rolle der Verantwortung für ihre Familie nicht gut herausfinden. Sie machte sich Sorgen um jeden und um alles. Sie konnte den Entwicklungen der Zeit kaum noch folgen. So verdüsterte sich ihr Zukunftsbild durch große Sorgen um die Zukunft der ihr nahestehenden Menschen. - Im Tode vermittelte das Antlitz meines Vaters Gelassenheit und Zufriedenheit. Meine Mutter starb in großer Sorge.

Einzelheiten über den ersten Kontakt zwischen meiner Mutter und meinem Vater sind mir nicht bekannt. Es liegt aber nahe, anzunehmen, daß die persönlichen und geschäftlichen Kontakte meiner Großeltern zu dem Gütersloher Pastor Seippel, dem Vater meiner Mutter, hier eine Rolle gespielt haben. Damals kamen Ehen ja nicht so liberal zustande wie in unserer Zeit. Es gibt Gründe, anzunehmen, daß die Eltern meines Vaters und meiner Mutter der Auffassung waren, diese beiden Kinder würden eine gute Ehe miteinander führen können. - Ein Draufgänger ist mein Vater gewiß nicht gewesen. Ich erinnere mich daran, daß meine Großmutter einem Klassenkameraden meines Vaters fünf Mark angeboten hat, wenn dieser meinen Vater zu einer Dummheit verführen würde. - So weiß ich von den Kontakten zwischen meinem Vater und meiner Mutter nur so viel, daß mein Vater, der im Besitz einer Schildkröte war, die Vorführung dieses Tieres zu gelegentlichen Besuchen benutzte.

Reinhard Mohn's memories of his mother Agnes, written in 1984 (excerpt). As part of the preparations for Bertelsmann's 150th anniversary celebration, Reinhard Mohn recorded sections of his family's history for the author Walter Kempowski.

He characterized the personality of his mother Agnes in particular detail. Her life was shaped by her religious anchoring in Protestantism, self-discipline, and familial duty – »My mother lived in the world of her family.«

which people voted for the DNVP and read the conservative »Kreuz-Zeitung.«¹⁷ Although his father left his mark on the family home as publisher and master of the house, Reinhard Mohn has always gratefully remembered his mother, who was forced to assume responsibility for the children at an early age: »Growing up in a parsonage and later marrying my father, who came from a very religious/church-oriented publishing house,« were as important to her as »regular attendance at church services, morning and evening devotional prayers at home, grace at table, evening prayers at the children's bedside.«¹⁸ In keeping with the times, his mother remained in the background and was responsible for the family, especially since – at least as her children tell it – she was not a particularly sociable person. In her down-to-earth demeanor, luxury, unnecessary expense, and striving for recognition were »completely alien« to her.¹⁹ Asked about his mother's influence, Reinhard Mohn's answer was: »Religiousness, strict morality, orderliness, punctuality, cleanliness, accuracy, and a sense of duty definitely characterized my mother. She loved her family and was always helpful and caring.«²⁰ These were values, enriched by organized thinking and analytical aptitude, that were also to define his own life, even if, in the conflicting priorities of business and morality, the concept of »Protestant ethics«²¹ increasingly faded into the background. Nevertheless, Mohn, a »Westphalian with Prussian virtues,«²² would later recall an upbringing that was both loving and strict: his mother would look over his shoulder while he was doing his homework, and she would grumble when his school performance was poor and his report cards less than stellar. Then she would float the subtle question about whether he wouldn't rather learn a »practical pro-

sciousness. The role of religion and the church was largely limited to formal aspects, and the Bible, which he was obviously familiar with since childhood, remained a decorum of his life and world, so that it is difficult to construct a Protestant business spirit from Mohn's religious references.²⁴ And yet he was a modern man of business in the sense of Max Weber, if one uses as a reference his model of a Protestant work ethic: a certain bourgeois structure, a rational and process-oriented business organization and a strict separation of business and personal life as its essential characteristics.²⁵

He cherished the church's message for society, even if he had little time for everyday Protestantism. In 1966, he wrote: »Form of leadership of the church not adequate. Unsatisfactory effect, overworked pastors, declining influence.«²⁶ And when asked much later, in an interview with the Austrian journalist Peter Schier-Gribowsky, whether he was a »devout man,« he evaded the question with the partial answer that religion had always been a component with the Bertelsmanns.²⁷

The family's lifestyle was spartan. There was no smoking and no drinking, he later reported.²⁸ The family didn't purchase its first car, a modest small vehicle from the now forgotten manufacturer AGA, until 1927.²⁹ The emphasis was not on flaunting luxury, but on conveying inner values. In a school essay from January 1938 on the subject of »My Thoughts in Choosing a Career,« 16-year-old Reinhard wrote with astonishing circumspection about responsibility and a sense of duty, without naming a specific career goal: »For I would rather take upon myself all the doubts and questions that will come to one otherwise, and struggle to solve them, than to merely be a dead tool while I am

8.) Schüler(in) Reinhard M o h n .

Mohn ist gut begabt, zeichnet sich aus durch selbständiges Denken auf den meisten Gebieten, besonders auf naturwissenschaftlichem. Er bringt sowohl praktische als auch theoretische Eignung zum Ingenieurberuf ~~mit~~ mit. Er tritt jedem an ihn herangetragenem Stoff vor allem erst einmal kritisch gegenüber, wobei er zu starkem Selbstbewußtsein ~~neigen~~ neigen kann. Andererseits kennzeichnet ihn wiederum ein Schwanken zwischen Schüchternheit und einer erfreulichen Offenheit. Ehrgeiz und Einsatzbereitschaft sind noch ~~wei~~ zwei andere Merkmale. Er war Scharführer in der HJ und bewies stärkste Anteilnahme am Segelflug. Auf körperlichem Gebiete: guter Einsatz und Leistungswille.

Undated report from the Evangelisch Stiftisches Gymnasium in Gütersloh. Like all his brothers, Reinhard Mohn was a student at the Evangelisch Stiftisches Gymnasium from 1931. On December 1, 1938, as a primary school student, he submitted an application to the school's examination board for admission to the school-leaving exam. In this application, he emphasized his interest in the natural sciences and flight physics, and announced his decision to become an engineer. Mohn passed his Abitur, the German high-school diploma exams, at the ESG around Easter 1939.

in fascist Italy, with which the »Third Reich« was allied. When a mission to protect the Göring estate Carinhall was nearing, he asked for a transfer to the front, he later said, although this cannot be verified in the files. In early April 1943, Mohn was airlifted from Sicily to a tank reconnaissance section of his regiment in Tunisia as part of the Afrikakorps' operations.³⁹ Although he was only in the service for a few weeks, he received the Africa sleeve ribbon, the Luftwaffe ground combat badge, the Italian »Medaglia commemorativa della campagna italo-tedesca in Africa settentrionale,« and the »Verwundeten-Abzeichen,« the Wounded in Action Badge in black.

On May 5, 1943, about 70 kilometers northwest of Tunis, the World War came to an end for him, as he later crisply reported: »I was shot through my sleeve, shot through my shirt and shot through my leg, so I thought: ›It might be time to start unwrapping your first-aid kit‹. While I was still busy doing that, a Texas boy appeared in front of me and ordered me to put my hands up.«⁴⁰ As a U.S. prisoner of war, he was taken to Algeria in June 1943, and in September 1943 from there by troop transport via Norfolk in the U.S. state of Virginia to the Concordia POW camp in Kansas in the Midwest, which operated as an officers-only camp starting in mid-1944.⁴¹

Mohn's »American« time left a lasting impression on him. Like many of his generation, he was impressed by the spirit of freedom he felt in the U.S.: by the discovery of individualism as opposed to the Nazi »Volksgemeinschaft« (»National Community«) as well as by the possibility of the »Pursuit of Happiness.« While interned at the camp, he not only learned English, but also prepared himself for work as an engineer – which as we know he would have liked

to pursue – at the camp’s university.⁴² Discussions with American officers in Kansas and the experience he gained in some 30 companies left a deep impression on him. The U. S., he confessed decades later, had »decisively influenced« him: »Instead of an exaggerated community mentality, I was won over by the promise of freedom and self-realization for individuals that is enshrined in the U. S. Constitution. I learned about the theory and functioning of democracy, as well as about the dynamic forces of a liberal economic order. If there had been an opportunity for me to stay in the U. S. after the war, I certainly would have done so.«⁴³

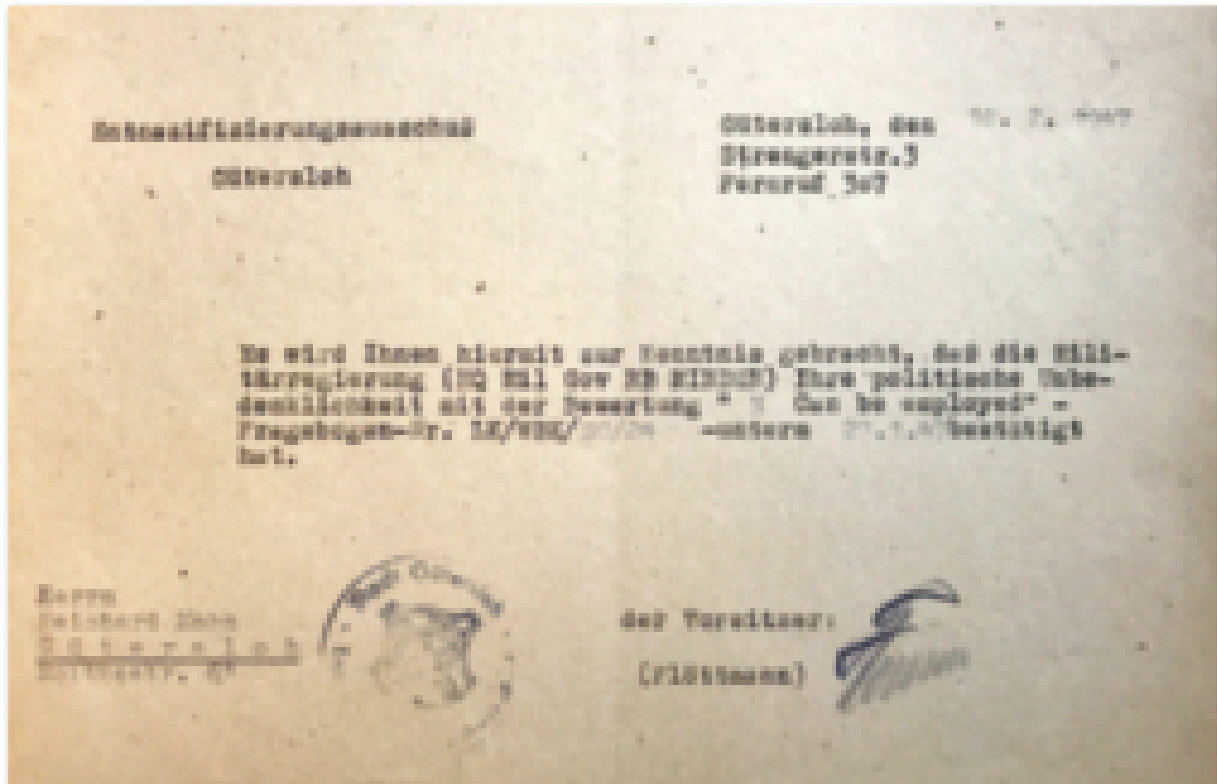
However, this opportunity did not come up for the young POW. When the guns fell silent, he remained temporarily interned at Camp Atterbury in the state of Indiana for a few more weeks beginning in September 1945, and he was then transferred back to Le Havre via New Jersey in mid-November 1945. An interlude in a tent camp near Paris followed in December 1945. This »very bitter time« did not end until January 7, 1946, when he was released from captivity. Mohn returned to Gütersloh at the end of January 1946.⁴⁴

Mohn was completely cured of anything to do with National Socialism, surely a result of his self-reflection and American »re-education.« In a lecture on the transformation of Bertelsmann from a patriarchal-theological publishing house to a modern, large-scale publishing company, Mohn looked back at the »failure of a social order,«⁴⁵ that he also extended to his own background: On the one hand, his father had been a member of the »Bekennende Kirche;« on the other hand, he had been a businessman who earned good money selling millions of copies of »Feldpost« literature in the »Third Reich« and as a supporting member of the SS. The publishing house was forced to close

in 1944. This was the result of legal proceedings against it concerning illegal paper procurement⁴⁶, among other things. These, however, did not include its religious-theological orientation or publications that were critical to the regime. For years, Reinhard Mohn went along with the widespread and reassuring version that his father had been a man of the resistance; there was no proper examination of the company's history during the Nazi era, even in the commemorative publication for the company's 150th anniversary.⁴⁷ However, when this master narrative was publicly challenged in the 1990s by historians, Reinhard Mohn changed his mind, as the reputation of his own company was in danger of being damaged. He soberly realized that the days were over when entrepreneurs could burnish their corporate-historical images with »public relations« and hagiographic publications.⁴⁸ In 1998, with his explicit support, an independent study was commissioned which involved interviewing contemporary witnesses, for which he agreed to make himself available as well. The glorifying, apologist picture that the publishing house had painted of itself for the years from 1933 to 1945 was decisively corrected.⁴⁹

Mohn didn't learn a lot from his time as an officer in the Wehrmacht; for him, they were wasted years, even if, as he once said, one at least had gained »knowledge of human nature.«⁵⁰ He did, however, take away one further impression from this time: the »relative importance« of possessions and a standard of living.⁵¹ When Mohn returned from captivity, he knew that he was not destined to become the successor in the family business. But his father was already in poor health and was considered by the British occupying authorities to be »tainted« by National Socialism.⁵² His older brother Sigbert had gone missing; a letter from him written

Closure order issued by the President of the »Reichsschrifttumskammer« (Reich Literature Chamber) for the publishing house C. Bertelsmann on August 26, 1944. A few months before the end of World War II, it was no longer possible to avert the closure of the publishing house, which had been headed by Heinrich Mohn and had grown into a high-turnover company. All remaining resources were now mobilized for the war effort of the German Reich; moreover, Bertelsmann was embroiled in investigations of illegal dealings for paper procurement.



Letter from the denazification committee of the city of Gütersloh to Reinhard Mohn, dated February 10, 1947. Immediately after his return to Gütersloh in January 1946, Reinhard Mohn had helped with the work of rebuilding Bertelsmann. As part of the denazification process that was underway at the same time, the authorities confirmed that the British military government had classified him as politically inoffensive. Following the withdrawal of his father Heinrich – who had initially concealed his supporting membership in Nazi organizations – in April 1947, this cleared the way for Reinhard Mohn to take over the management of the publishing houses C. Bertelsmann and Der Rufer.

