

## The Opposite of Grey

Why it is important to facilitate transparency concerning one's own past

*By Ansgar Wimmer, Hamburg*

Among foundations, too, openness and transparency are becoming increasingly important. It is not just a matter of disclosing the source and scale of the foundation's funds and its income, i.e. the economic data which characterise the work of a foundation. The way in which decisions are made when assigning funds and the way in which conflicts of interest are handled in the everyday running of the foundation, are increasingly attracting public attention. The so-called "Principles of Good Practice for Foundations", which were unanimously approved by the Federal Association of German Foundations in 2006, are also an indication and a result of this process. Another aspect of the debate over transparency and ethical behaviour in foundations that is often underestimated is the question of how foundations deal with their own past or with the biographies of their founders.

In view of Germany's history and its shameful chapters in the 20th century, this question is particularly pertinent to foundations in Germany in several respects. If a foundation operated continuously as an institution during the years of Nazi rule, for example, it is necessary to account for its activities and possible involvement during that period. This is all the more important if such institutional complicity is accompanied by personal failings on the part of the founder, or if other people with close ties to the foundation collaborated with the Nazi regime. Finally, it is necessary to determine the extent to which the foundation's wealth is based on dubious profits made during that period, for example through the war economy, the horrors of the Holocaust, or other forms of exploitation.

### A DIFFICULT BALANCING ACT, INITIALLY PURSUED RELUCTANTLY

In the past, only a few foundations have tackled these issues, among them for example the Schwarzkopf Foundation, originally set up as the Heinz Schwarzkopf Foundation, or the Volkswagen Foundation – which did so at a very early date due to the nature of its programme. At the moment, the foundations established by the Quandt family are setting about examining their own origins – as a part of looking at the biography of Herbert Quandt and the history of the family and the company. The starting point for such self-examination has almost always been critical questions asked from outside the foundation, sometimes public scandals triggered by journalists. For Hamburg's Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F.V.S., too, the path to transparency and openness in handling its own past has been a difficult balancing act, one that it initially embarked upon reluctantly, and that has not always been free of controversy.

Up until the death of its founder, the Hamburg merchant and patron Alfred Toepfer, who had been highly successful in the international grain business, questions were rarely asked in public about the founder's role or the activities of his various foundations during the Nazi era. Isolated inquiries were met with considerable indignation by his companions and the Foundation's staff, who pointed to Toepfer's efforts in support of European reconciliation after the Second World War, the foundation's numerous exchange programmes and scholarships, and his extensive philanthropic activities in the fields of

culture, science, nature conservation and international understanding. On the few occasions he was willing to discuss the matter, the founder – who was himself involved in the foundation’s work up until his death at the age of 99 and who was the recipient of more than 100 national and international honours and awards – usually cited as evidence for his clean track record his contacts with resistance circles, his one-year imprisonment in the late 1930s, and his efforts on behalf of Jewish fellow grain merchants in Hamburg. As a result few people took offence when, on his death in 1993, the foundation he had set up in 1931 with the somewhat cryptic name “Stiftung F.V.S. zu Hamburg”, the largest of the four charities he had created, was renamed “Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F.V.S.” at the suggestion of his family.

## FROM “A COMMUNICATION PROBLEM” TO TAKING ON RESPONSIBILITY

It was not until the summer of 1995 that an article published in an Alsatian magazine, by a teacher from Mulhouse with an interest in history, set the ball rolling; after many controversial discussions, this ultimately brought to the foundation to examine its own past in depth. In this article, the author made serious accusations against Toepfer on account of his alleged “nationalistic, pan-Germanic” past, asserting that even after the Second World War Toepfer had clandestinely continued to adhere to political convictions and aims with a Nazi slant. As a result of this article, and further publications, both the city of Strasbourg and its university decided to discontinue their collaboration with the foundation without any further examination of the facts, and thus ended the Strasbourg Prize for Franco-German Cooperation which had been jointly awarded for many years. The dam had burst.

Initially, the foundation viewed the incident primarily as a “communication problem”, and instructed a PR agency to draw up a plan of action for responding to this “attack”. This assessment changed fundamentally, however, when the foundation appointed an independent scientific committee of historians. This committee had been asked by the Foundation’s Board of Trustees and the Executive, also with the support of the Toepfer family, to research Toepfer’s activities during the Nazi era. It met from 1998 until 2000, chaired by Arnold Sywottek, then head of the Hamburg Research Centre for Contemporary History, and included among others Hans Mommsen (Feldafing), Gerd Krumeich (Düsseldorf) and Georg Kreis (Basel). Its results were presented in a book, which showed that, in view of the founder’s many contacts and dealings with the Nazi regime, his person had to be subjected to a comprehensive, critical and impartial re-assessment.

An additional study, also backed by the foundation, was carried out by the historian Jan Zimmermann, who looked into the prize-giving activities of the foundation Stiftung F.V.S. between 1935 and 1945. He demonstrated that the foundation’s work during that period also needed to be reappraised. The committee uncovered new, incriminating evidence and pointed out gaps in the existing research. At the same time, however, it became clear that many of the accusations levelled against the founder and his foundation, in some cases highly polemical and without detailed knowledge of the sources, could for the most part not be upheld. Nevertheless, the overall results of these research efforts encouraged the foundation to continue its efforts in bringing transparency to its own history.

## LATEST RESEARCH FINDINGS ACCESSIBLE TO ANYONE

Nowadays, anyone can examine all the relevant findings on this topic on the foundation's website and through its publications. Among other things, they mention Toepfer's sympathetic attitude towards and active support of the *Volkstumspolitik* (folk politics) of the Third Reich, especially with regards to German minorities "along the borders of the Reich", as well as his strong support for German nationalist activities in the Alsace. Similarly, information can be found on the homepage concerning his intense efforts to establish contact with individual leading representatives of the Nazi regime, and his support for the cultural activities and priorities of the Nazi regime, in particular by aligning the cultural prizes and the scholarships connected with them to the regime's ideology. His support for organisations that were either closely connected to the Nazi regime or even an integral part of it, is also openly revealed. The foundation's online resources also provide extensive information about Toepfer's role as an officer in the Wehrmacht in the German Counter Espionage operations between 1940 and 1945, as well as his support of former, some of them high-ranking, supporters of the Nazi regime; he gave some of them jobs in his enterprises after of the war. These included individuals who played a significant role in organising and carrying out the Holocaust in eastern and south-eastern Europe. After the Second World War, he supported, or at least tolerated, prizes being awarded by his foundation to people who had either actively supported or justified the Nazi regime during the Third Reich.

## HISTORY IS NEVER OVER

This research is a work in progress, and the same is true of the debate about what to make of them and about what consequences should be drawn. Questions continue to be asked of the foundation from time to time by outside parties concerning the biography of Alfred Toepfer, the history of the foundation and – very occasionally – the independence of the process of historic reappraisal. Again and again, such questions lead to renewed public attention, for example when a prize awarded by the foundation was turned down by the French theatre director Ariane Mnouchkine in 2005, or the – unsuccessful – petition by a British journalist to the University of Oxford in 2009, calling on it to discontinue its cooperation with the foundation. The foundation faces up to such questions, irrespective of the polemics or the quality of the underlying research, with an open mind, supports those interested in doing research by giving them access to the historic sources and by awarding archival scholarships, and makes every effort to foster a high degree of transparency concerning unresolved questions and conflicting interpretations.

This approach is ultimately also an expression of a two-fold self-assessment which rules out any form of "grey-washing" or relativisation. Firstly, an unreserved acceptance of the facts revealed by the research done and a complete openness in acknowledging them, are specific prerequisites for the foundation's present-day activities. There can be no question about the fact that the foundation distances itself from Alfred Toepfer's involvement during the Nazi era and from his support for members of that regime after the war, and that it regrets both unreservedly.

Where the foundation must apologise for its own actions, it does so unconditionally and assumes full responsibility. Pointing out Toepfer's numerous and extensive services and achievements as a sponsor and patron after the war, and the fact that the findings of the

committee suggest that Toepfer was neither a member of the Nazi Party nor involved in war crimes or the active persecution of individual sections of the population, must not and cannot mitigate these realities. It remains the duty of the foundation to encourage a sound and unambiguous approach to its history. Against this background too, the incorporation of the founder's name in the foundation's name, Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F.V.S., after Toepfer's death at his family's request is today not considered or communicated as a sign of indiscriminate respect, but rather as an act of transparency concerning the source of the foundation's funds.

Secondly, the foundation is nowadays taking responsibility for its history particularly through the work it does in its sponsorship programmes. Thus in recent years Alfred Toepfer Stiftung F.V.S. has given up the programme of prizes based on the idea of "cultural spaces", and instead has concentrated its resources for many years now on promoting artists, creators of culture, and scientists, who stand for an exchange of ideas across historical borders, for intercultural encounters and for mutual understanding in Europe and beyond. Promoting dialogue; encouraging the exchange of ideas about differences; and strengthening tolerance and understanding are core aims of the foundation's present-day efforts.

## IN A NUTSHELL

The first steps towards understanding one's own history are usually not easy. Particularly in view of the special structure of foundations and the often formative role played by their founders; such efforts hold the potential for conflict and are very rarely free of contradictions and controversies. But even though the struggle for transparency and openness may at times be a painful process of emancipation, there is no alternative to it; not only for a foundation if it wants to remain capable of action, but also if it wants to maintain its organisational integrity and credibility. New research findings and historical assessments, but also the ever-changing, new perspectives brought to bear on them by later generations, make it necessary for foundations to keep facing these issues whenever and wherever they arise. At the same time, a level-headed and straightforward approach is required to prevent unjustified scandal-mongering by the media and spotlight-seeking individuals from overshadowing any pertinent and genuine endeavour to deal responsibly with the past.