

A New Leading Lady

Bertelsmann owner Reinhard Mohn decides who is next in line

By Thomas Schuler

Reinhard Mohn has published a new book in time for the Frankfurt Book Fair. In it, he announces who will be in charge at Bertelsmann: his daughter Brigitte.

At the Frankfurt Book Fair in October, Reinhard Mohn will present his fourth book – “his most personal one,” as the publisher C. Bertelsmann advertises. Mohn is hardly as well known as John Grisham, Hillary Clinton or Dan Brown, whose books are also published by the world’s largest publishing group, Random House. None of Mohn’s works were best-sellers. They deal with decentralized management and corporate

ning the corporation again in the future. The book was seen as the coronation of his wife Liz, the driving force behind the buyback of the 25 percent share from a Belgian investor. Bertelsmann paid €4.5 billion (\$7 billion) in that transaction in 2006.

The Mohn family controls the company completely through the foundation of the same name and the “Bertelsmann Administration Company” (BVG). Aside from Reinhard and Liz, their daughter Brigitte is also a member of the BVG. For a long time, Reinhard Mohn’s three sons Johannes, Chris-



Bertelsmann patriarch Reinhard Mohn picks a successor: Daughter Brigitte is to take over the group’s helm. At the Carl Bertelsmann Prize ceremony, they are joined by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Reinhard Mohn’s wife Liz (from left).

culture. They don’t make for pleasurable reading. Yet he is a very special author for Random House. That is because Mohn, 87, owns media giant Bertelsmann – Random House’s parent company.

He is the last great entrepreneur of the German postwar era, a living legend. A few years ago, the newsweekly *Die Zeit* called him Germany’s “entrepreneur of the century.” He has expanded his family’s publishing company into one of the world’s largest media groups. Today, aside from Random House, Bertelsmann owns RTL, Europe’s leading television group. With Arvato and Gruner + Jahr, it owns the largest printing group and the largest magazine publisher (*Stern*, *Geo*) in Europe. The Bertelsmann Foundation that owns the company also engages in political consulting and is considered the most influential of its kind in Germany.

Five years ago, Chancellor Angela Merkel, then still opposition leader, had rushed to the company headquarters in Gütersloh for the sole purpose of presenting Mohn’s book “*Die gesellschaftliche Verantwortung des Unternehmers*” (Corporate Social Responsibility). As a physicist, she was particularly happy that Mohn thought systematically, she said. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper was less enthusiastic: “The book does not offer new ideas. It is an agonizing read.” That was due to a complete lack of self-criticism and tiring theoretical disquisitions, the newspaper wrote.

Nonetheless, the book was an event because in it, Mohn justified firing former CEO Thomas Middelhoff (he had become too “vain” for his liking); why, despite previous statements to the contrary, Bertelsmann would not be going public; and why the family – not outside managers – would be run-

toph and Andreas were considered possible successors. Johannes and Christoph both worked in leading positions at Bertelsmann – Johannes in the printing and service division, Christoph as the head of the Lycos Internet subsidiary.

But Johannes had the wrong mother (he is a child of Mohn’s first marriage); in August, he announced he would be leaving the company. Christoph is on the supervisory board but is struggling with Lycos’ tepid business. That leaves Brigitte, on both the supervisory and foundation boards. Two daughters from Mohn’s first marriage and his youngest son Andreas have nothing to do with Bertelsmann.

Brigitte was once the problem child, Mohn writes. Just like her grandfather and father, she suffers from asthma. As a little girl she was repeatedly in critical condition. Once a doctor even advised: “Let the child die.” But her mother took care of her. Later Brigitte studied in the United States. Today, the 44-year-old runs the German Stroke Foundation as well as the Bertelsmann Foundation’s Center for Hospital Management. Mohn writes that she will assure continuity on the board of the foundation. And with that, he practically promotes her to the role of successor to Liz Mohn. That is the message of the book.

The book’s title is: “To Learn from the World.” At barely 140 pages, it is a slim volume. Mohn wrote it with an author who also wrote the screenplay for a biographical film about him. The movie was a gift from his managers for his 85th birthday in 2006, produced by a Bertelsmann company.

The astonishing thing about the film was the story it didn’t tell: A historical commission chaired by Saul Friedländer had come to the conclusion that the Nazis had not shut down the publisher because of its alleged opposition to Hitler but for paper trafficking. So Bertelsmann was anything but a resister to the Nazis. There is no word about the controversy in the film.

Mohn ignores that as well, despite the fact that he had personally propagated the legend to receive a publishing license after the war. He only wants to present his personal memories, he writes. He does not want to remember negative things. He sticks to the legends. At Bertelsmann, people just call it the “book of the film.” ■