





Reinhard Mohn

Entrepreneur – Leader – Visionary

Joachim Scholtyseck

In respect to links in the book, Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe expressly notes that no illegal content was discernible on the linked sites at the time the links were created. The Publisher has no influence at all over the current and future design, content or authorship of the linked sites. For this reason Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe expressly disassociates itself from all content on linked sites that has been altered since the link was created and assumes no liability for such content.



Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe FSC® N001967



First published in 2021

© Penguin Verlag, Munich 2021

A member of Penguin Random House Verlagsgruppe GmbH

Neumarkter Strasse 28, 81673 Munich

Cover design: Büro Jorge Schmidt, Munich

Translation: Lara Wagner

Editing: Nicholas Latimer, Alissa Nordmeier

Typesetting: Uhl + Massopust, Aalen

Separations, printing and binding:

Mohn Media Mohndruck GmbH, Gütersloh

Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-328-60236-1

www.penguin-verlag.de

Contents

Who Was Reinhard Mohn?

- 9** Who Was Reinhard Mohn?
- 11** Childhood, Youth, Military Service, POW Years:
Early Influences
- 30** Reconstruction in a Society of Ruins –
Reinhard Mohn in the ›Land of the Economic Miracle‹
- 62** Entrepreneurial Leadership as a Lifetime Responsibility

›What Makes Reinhard Run?‹ – The Attempt to Separate Entrepreneur and Personality

- 87** ›What Makes Reinhard Run?‹ – The Attempt
to Separate Entrepreneur and Personality
- 97** Internationalization
- 110** Publisher or Entrepreneur?
- 121** Codetermination and Its Limits
- 129** The Supervisory Board and Succession Issues

A Reformer, a Liberal, a Conservative

- 137** A Reformer, a Liberal, a Conservative
- 149** »Red Mohn,« »Social Capitalist,«
Closet Manchester Entrepreneur, »Fake Leftist«

Foundation as Legacy

- 161** Foundation as Legacy
- 184** Farewell to the Day-to-Day Business?

- 197** Notes **210** Bibliography **220** Timeline
- 222** Index **224** Image Credits





Who was
Reinhard Mohn?



Who was Reinhard Mohn?

Without the entrepreneur Reinhard Mohn, one of the founding civic leaders of the Federal Republic of Germany, there would perhaps still be a medium-sized publishing house called C. Bertelsmann, but not the Bertelsmann media group of today with its global operations. The 100th anniversary of Reinhard Mohn's birth provides an ideal opportunity for a portrait that also analyzes the value horizon that guided the entrepreneur, founder and citizen. The developments of companies, as Werner Plumpe once convincingly noted, »can only be understood through the actions of individuals under specific conditions.« These actions are »always part of a complex overall context [...] that eludes causal judgments, and certainly eludes mono-factorial explanations.«¹ A biography of Reinhard Mohn is not an easy undertaking, because surprisingly there is hardly any preliminary work. Bertelsmann, the company, has been comprehensively acknowledged or reviewed in commemorative publications and critical academic works, and Reinhard Mohn's contributions have been duly acknowledged. But there is no separate biography. Although Mohn himself had considered writing down significant events in his life as early as the 1950s, he never got around to it in the hectic postwar years.² He didn't write a memoir, and he didn't want a »character portrait« written about himself. He rejected the idea of an official or authorized biography,³ and in interviews spoke of not wanting to create »a monument« to himself.⁴ When, with his approval, a history of 150 years of Bertelsmann was published in 1985, the year of the company's exuberantly celebrated anniversary, it was also intended to serve as a lasting »image booster« for the company,⁵ and he may have felt this was justified. However, it was not a matter of personal priority, because he did not want to

Reinhard Mohn in 1967 in front of the portraits of his grandfather Johannes Mohn (1856–1930, on left) and his father Heinrich Mohn (1885–1955). In 1947, Reinhard Mohn took over C. Bertelsmann Verlag in the fifth generation.

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.

Childhood, Youth, Military Service, POW Years: Early Influences

Reinhard Mohn was born into a traditional, middle-class publishing family. The Bertelsmanns, rooted in Gütersloh in eastern Westphalia, were shaped by the proverbial spirit of a pastor's household strongly influenced by the Minden-Ravensberg revivalist movement. Founded in 1835, the publishing company C. Bertelsmann served as the publishing home of this devout lay



The **children of Agnes and Heinrich Mohn** around 1928: Ursula, Sigbert, Gerd, Hans Heinrich, Reinhard and Annegret (from left). There were large age gaps between the six Mohn siblings, who were born between 1913 and 1926. As the firstborn, Hans Heinrich («Hanger») played a special role in the family structure and with a view to his later management of Bertelsmann. There was nothing to indicate that Reinhard, the second-youngest, would in the future be entrusted with the task of steering the company's fortunes.

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



Engagement photo of Agnes Seippel and Heinrich Mohn, Reinhard Mohn's parents, dated 1911. A year after he joined his father's publishing company, Heinrich Mohn and Agnes Seippel – a friend of his sister Sophie – who was four years younger, announced their engagement. Agnes was the eldest of six children of a Gütersloh pastor and his wife, who came from a merchant family in the city. The couple celebrated their wedding in June 1912.

performance wasn't bad, he remembered throughout his life his mother's discreet suggestion that he become a carpenter. In retrospect, school was an »arduous path« for Mohn.¹⁵ This statement probably wasn't simple coquetry on the part of a man looking back on a successful life.

The »spirit of a Protestant parsonage« in a rural region dominated his years growing up.¹⁶ The developments in a disunited church, whose imperial head, the Kaiser, had abdicated in 1918, influenced the home, too. Economically, things were looking rather good for the publishing house, because its characteristic mixture of theological literature and – since the late 1920s – popular folk fiction was in demand during the Weimar Republic. Politically, after the fall of the Empire, the father Heinrich Mohn remained committed to the typical national Protestantism, in

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-

Group picture of the **Mohn family** in 1933 in front of grandmother Friederike Mohn's (née Bertelsmann) »Ivy House« in Gütersloh with (from left) parents Heinrich and Agnes with his brother Gerd, grandmother Friederike, siblings Hans Heinrich, Ursula, Sigbert and Annegret, and Reinhard Mohn on the far right.



fession.«²³ Nevertheless, from the age of 16, he no longer had to attend the usual prayers and devotions, having distanced himself from the church and from ecclesiastical beliefs. Although he did undergo a process of secularization, he never managed or wanted to shake off his religious side, asking questions of morality and the need for corporate values. Mohn was part of the Protestant educated middle-class milieu, in which economic profit-seeking was traditionally associated with a social and civilizing con-

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

Gr 137 -

5.1.38

Glaubenssatz.

Mein Gebotnis bei der Welt
des Lebens.

Es ist noch nicht lange her, als mir
niemand jemand sagte, man habe in
Möglichkeit nicht von dem Augenblick
ab, da man kommt, seine Aufgaben
und Pflichten zu erfüllen, und man
aufhört zu leben, auf die Erfüllung
seiner Aufgaben hin zu arbeiten.
„Nur ein von dem alten Moralgelehrten“,
sagte ich zuerst und suchte auf die weltliche
Moral setzen, was nicht mehr sei. Im allge-
meinen finde ich mich nämlich nicht sehr
gehört, wenn man mir meine Aufga-
ben und Pflichten empfiehlt. Zu einem Teil



Hans Heinrich Mohn in 1939, shortly before the outbreak of World War II. The good relationship that Reinhard Mohn had with his eldest brother was marked by admiration for his ambition and extraordinary perceptiveness. Hans Heinrich Mohn, a Wehrmacht company commander, was killed in action in Poland in the very early days of the war in September 1939, at the age of 26.

Left page: **Reinhard Mohn's homework essay** on »My thoughts on choosing a career,« written between fall 1937 and January 1938 (excerpt). Even as a 16-year-old pupil, Reinhard Mohn was very circumspect about the opportunities of his career choice and his expectations for the future. In an essay, he dealt intensively with the question of the fulfillment of duty and responsibility to the community. At the same time, he attached great importance to personal disposition and individual independence.

alive.«³⁰ Mohn added in his essay, which was completely free of National Socialist rhetoric: »I have resolved to always be ready to learn and to acknowledge when something is better, even if I would have to give up everything I have believed up to now and see it as wrong.«³¹

During the »Third Reich,« whose ideology offered Germans a temptation many succumbed to, Heinrich Mohn was close to the »Bekennende Kirche« (Confessional Church), which kept its distance to the regime. He kept his beliefs separate from his business, which enabled the publishing house to generate profits even under Hitler. Reinhard Mohn was influenced by the zeitgeist, and as a youth, while keen on sports, became a leader of a »Jungenschaft,« a group of 10–15 boys in the Hitler Youth organization from May 1933, and he eventually became a

Students from the **graduating class of the Evangelisch Stiftisches Gymnasium** in Gütersloh in 1939 with Reinhard Mohn (bottom row, 3rd from left). Reinhard Mohn had attended the Protestant humanist school, which was founded largely on the initiative of his great-great-grandfather, the company's founder Carl Bertelsmann, since 1931.

»Gefolgschaftsführer,« being in charge of more than 100 boys.³² That might have seemed harmless in itself, but considering the family company's involvement in the Nazi regime, these youthful sins lost the innocence they might have had in normal times. His eldest brother Hans Heinrich, whom Reinhard Mohn admired for his determination and scholarship, was more easily seduced by the regime. He passed his German high-school diploma exams, the »Abitur«, with flying colors, achieving the best possible score, then studied law and decided to become an officer so that he could later enter politics, perhaps via the route of a military attaché. In retrospect, the fact that Hans Heinrich was killed as a company commander during the Wehrmacht's invasion of Poland in the first few days of World War II seemed to Reinhard Mohn to be a tragic consequence of his personality. »His dedication and his early death were certainly in keeping with his nature.«³³



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 herangetragenen Stoff vor allem erst einmal kritisch gegenüber, wobei er zu starkem Selbstbewußtsein ~~neigen~~ kann. Andererseits kennzeichnet ihn wiederum ein Schwanken zwischen Schüchternheit und einer erfreulichen Offenheit. Ehrgeiz und Einsatzbereitschaft sind noch ~~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.

Reinhard Mohn on assignment with the »Reichsarbeitsdienst,« a mandatory Labor Service for young men in 1939. After graduating from high school, Reinhard Mohn, too, had to complete the six months of service, which he did at the Lippborg camp in Westphalia.



Reinhard Mohn, who was interested in technology,³⁴ had other plans for the future. On his application for the Abitur examination, he said he wanted to become an engineer. This met with approval from his teachers, but a terse yet typical aside from one of them added that he was characterized by a »vacillation between shyness and a pleasing openness« and could be »prone to strong self-confidence.«³⁵

After graduating from high school on March 3, 1939, Reinhard Mohn first completed the compulsory »Reichsarbeitsdienst«, the Reich Labor Service³⁶ at the Lippborg camp in Westphalia from April 1 to September 10, 1939. He later acknowledged that at the