



HOW IT ALL BEGAN. A PERSONAL RETROSPECTIVE

Klaus Wiegandt

Looking back, my decision to turn my back on the world of business at 60 and to devote myself to life's basic questions and major societal challenges on a scientific basis was probably one of the best decisions I ever made. To me, resigning voluntarily at the pinnacle of my career, doing without all the comforts it entailed, and not regretting it for a minute in all the years that followed is like a gift of life. To others, it may seem more like an indication that I was not and am not a dyed-in-the-wool executive; after all, it is rare for executives to be able to let go in time and on their own terms. Of course, my decision was possible only because of the financial security I was able to achieve during the golden days of retailing.

There were two main reasons for establishing a not-for-profit foundation called Forum für Verantwortung (Forum for Responsibility) and endowing it with capital of my own: For one thing, I wanted to make clear to my family that this idea was not a whim, but rather a long-term undertaking. And for another, I wanted to give something back to the society to whom I owe so much. My friend Arno Krause, who has dedicated his entire life to education and in particular to the great European idea, emphatically encouraged me to take this path.

So I left my life as an employee behind and delved into scientific literature on the basic questions of life and the vast topic of sustainability. At this early point in time, I derived important impulses from the publications of Josef H. Reichholf and Klaus Hahlbrock; both authors later became personal counterparts.

From the beginning, animated and eye-opening discussions with Ernst Peter Fischer accompanied my studies of the scientific literature. We met during the activities to establish an institute of higher education in Holzen (near Kandern in southwest Germany) that was to be devoted to scientific education for seniors.

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In our conversations, ten concrete subject areas quickly emerged that I wanted to focus my efforts on—including evolution, humankind and the cosmos, cultural values, as well as questions relating to the world religions, the origins of modern societies, and above all, the sustainability of our societies on our planet.

In discussions with Ernst Peter Fischer, Arno Krause, and Annette Maas, who as a historian and founding member of the Board of Trustees has accompanied the foundation from its beginnings, we developed the idea to host one-week colloquiums with leading scientists at the European Academy of Otzenhausen. For selected topics, the state of research and possible options for action were to be

presented to and discussed with participants, in particular seniors. Following the colloquium, a scientific edited volume written in accessible form was to be published. The publisher S. Fischer Verlag agreed to publish at least the first three volumes.

When we tried to make this concept a concrete reality, difficulties emerged that I had not anticipated in the slightest. Despite generous fees, leading scientists could hardly be moved to give lectures in a framework they felt to be unfamiliar and untested, much less to write contributions for the later publications. I came up with the audacious idea to win over a Nobel laureate for the first colloquium who would solve this problem for me in one bold stroke. Ernst Peter Fischer succeeded in arranging a meeting with Nobelist Prof. Werner Arber in Basel, Switzerland, in which he proved open to my concept and willing to support it. He liked the ten topics I had planned, spontaneously agreed to attend the first colloquium and give a lecture, and from that moment on, the "image problem" had disappeared. When the first volume on the colloquium on "Evolution" sold 7,000 copies instead of the 800 to 1,000 that had been expected, the ice was broken with S. Fischer Verlag as well.

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Together with Ernst Peter Fischer, who had agreed to serve as a scientific advisor to my foundation, and Annette Maas, we worked our way through the long-term agenda year by year. The fourth colloquium "The Future of the Earth" changed the orientation of my foundation. From now on, education for seniors was no longer the focus of activities. This colloquium made it clear to attendees that this was about nothing less than the sustainability of our societies on the globe.

And not least with a view to our children and grandchildren. As a result, I broadened both the target groups and the mission of the foundation Forum für Verantwortung.

Even at that time, it was clear to me that the scientific community had already been putting sustainability topics on the political agenda for more than two decades, urging action. Notwithstanding numerous global activities by progressive forces and three global summits on the environment: humankind was moving further away from the goal of sustainable development every day. I was convinced that either civil societies would be galvanized into action in time, thus giving the political community the opportunity to put the underlying conditions for sustainable development in place, or humankind would take action only when the consequences, especially in terms of the climate, would be recognizable and perceptible to everyone. But then it would be too late for sustainable development.

So I decided to win over scientists who were willing to explain the state of research as well as possible options for action concerning the most important topics in the field of sustainability in language comprehensible to civil society. In late 2005, I had finalized contracts for twelve books. Published by S. Fischer Verlag with Forum für Verantwortung by late 2007, the volumes were subsidized by the foundation and were offered for sale for less than ten euros per copy.

All this had significant consequences for the now more comprehensive work of the foundation. First, I had to build a competent team. Biologist Dr. Hannes Petrischak, the executive director of the foundation, strengthened the scientific aspect. From the beginning, Annette Maas managed the colloquiums and the book series, later joined by educator Petra Laueremann and communications specialist Anne Marschner—thanks to the generosity of the ASKO EUROPA-STIFTUNG, which initially made all three available to the foundation. Since early 2012, the team has been rounded out by Simone Petrischak (coordination and organization) and Birgit Hamm (office management). It is thanks to the entire team at the foundation, but also to the close partnership with the ASKO EUROPA-STIFTUNG and the European Academy of Otzenhausen, strong associates who were always there to help us with advice and support, that we were able to carry out such an ambitious project.

Ambassadors for sustainable development

The establishment of the Association of Friends of the Foundation in 2011 was a milestone in the foundation's development. Besides providing support as ambassadors for sustainable development, the Association of Friends has contributed funds that have enabled the foundation to intensify its activities, especially the colloquiums for young scholars as well as an online portal for journalists.

All the actors in the broad field of sustainability deserve mention too, of course: individuals, institutions, and networks that collaborate with us, make suggestions, and offer constructive criticism.

It is this positive, strong environment that makes Encouraging Sustainability a reality—also for me personally—and I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to everyone supporting my foundation in so many ways.

Yet the sphere of action I had envisaged for the newly established foundation could not be realized with the revenues from a three-million-euro endowment. Our collaboration with the ASKO EUROPA-STIFTUNG and the European Academy of Otzenhausen, which had already been close and based on mutual trust, was formalized in our joint sponsorship of the initiative Encouraging Sustainability, headed by the foundation Forum für Verantwortung.

Here, I would like to express my most heartfelt thanks to my two most important allies. Arno Krause, as chairman of the Board of Trustees, was decisive in helping to shape the scope and direction of our activities. And Klaus Peter Beck, Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the ASKO EUROPA-STIFTUNG, has been a constructive driving force for ensuring that the topic of sustainability is anchored firmly in the not-for-profit organizations linked to us as partners, and that they provide robust support for it.

All the other developments that we will describe in this report on our activities have been possible only against the background of this special partnership.

All the same, there has been one personal regret: During my time as a corporate executive, I had promised my family, and of course especially my wife, that I would devote myself entirely to the family once I had retired and that I would finally take the time to travel with them to see the world's sights. I did not keep this promise, and I am profoundly grateful particularly to my wife for her support of my work.

Klaus Wiegandt

Klaus Wiegandt attended the Hochschule für Wirtschaft und Politik in Hamburg. In 1976, he was appointed Authorized Representative of the Rewe Leibbrand Group; from 1991 to 1995, he was CEO of ASKO Deutsche Kaufhaus AG; following its merger with METRO/Kaufhof, he served as CEO of the new conglomerate METRO AG. In 2000, Klaus Wiegandt established the foundation Forum für Verantwortung and in 2006 the educational initiative Encouraging Sustainability. In 2008, he was appointed to the German National Committee of the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development. He was awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany in 2009.