

THE “SOLDIER-KING” AND HIS POTSDAM ORPHANAGE

Presentation of the FOUNDATION “Great Orphanage in Potsdam”

In only a few years, one of Germany's oldest foundations will celebrate its tercentenary. Whether or not the founder himself, none less than the Prussian King Frederick William I, in the founding year 1724 trusted in the continuity of his institution for an impressive time span of three hundred years, is disputable. Nevertheless, he had a provision included in the statutes of incorporation, stating that his foundation should remain in existence “now and for all eternity”. His wish has been granted so far. To this very day the foundation has been operating in the spirit of its founder, aiding children and young people dependent on support in regard to their upbringing and education.

In Germany, foundations have been in existence since the twelfth century, i.e. ecclesiastical foundations. In the sixteenth century the focus broadened when a grand family of entrepreneurs, the Fugger family in Augsburg, endowed social institutions for their workers. As early as the first quarter of the eighteenth century the Prussian King Frederick William I, also known as the “Soldier-King” and named “Roi-Sergent”, founded an orphanage for his soldiers' descendants – unusual and remarkable in a time that did not even know the term welfare state. A king who is nowadays mainly remembered for his passion of all military matters and for the inhumane education of his own son, who was to become Frederick the Great in later years, ordered - inspired by Christian-Calvinist motives - a state care institution for his soldiers' offspring. Not intended for the children of generals or majors, but for those of ordinary soldiers who were unable to take care of the younger generation. The buildings of the orphanage were erected exclusively in the immediate vicinity of the Potsdam City Palace and the Garrison Church.

Under Frederick the Great, representative - and costly - baroque buildings for the orphanage were designed by Carl von Gontard, one of the star architects of his time alongside von Knobelsdorff. The Great Orphanage, soon also referred to as the “Military Orphanage”, initially took care of 600 children of soldiers belonging to the Prussian army. In the orphanage school, pupils were taught reading, writing and arithmetic. After their confirmation the orphanage provided them with a vocational training. Boys were taught a trade whereas girls learned domestic professions. The claim was to enable the children educated in the orphanage to “earn their daily bread with their own hands”.



The Potsdam Orphanage thus represented a means of implementing Prussian social policy. Over the centuries, the name of the orphanage or the competence of the foundation supervisory authority may have changed, not so the purpose of the foundation. The focus has always been on young people who, due to their modest backgrounds, were forced to rely on external aid in their upbringing and in their careers. This purpose has remained almost unchanged until today. It was not until the division of Germany after the Second World War and the founding of the GDR in 1949 that matters changed. The Soviet Military Administration did not recognise the Potsdam Military Orphanage as a military institution but judged the pedagogical alignment as the main purpose of the organisation. Thus they had it dissolved.

However, in the early years of the GDR, efforts were made to secure access to the foundation's considerable real estate and financial assets. Systematically, the foundation "Great Orphanage Potsdam", as it was officially called from 1946 onwards, was hindered in the execution of its tasks. At first, important parts of the orphanage properties were unlawfully transferred to state ownership. Finally, in February 1952, the government decided to dissolve the "Great Orphanage" foundation once and for all and to transfer all the remaining assets into state ownership.

Forty years later, after the German reunification, the dissolution was judged to be a serious violation of democratic principles and the "Great Orphanage Potsdam" was re-established in December



1992. In a legal sense, the foundation has thus existed without interruption since 1724 and was able to claim its old assets. The newly formulated constitution is oriented towards the will of the founder simultaneously relating his early modern concept of man to the requirements of the present. The education of children and youngsters as well as their development into mature, responsible personalities is still the focus of attention today.

Nowadays the foundation operates its educational facilities through a subsidiary. These are above all accommodation and care services for children and young people who, for various reasons, can no longer live in their family homes or find themselves in critical circumstances. A second pillar is the development and financial support of exemplary youth welfare projects. Since its re-establishment in 1992, the foundation has been able to fund 3.5 million euros from its income. Now an organisation under public law, the foundation is financed solely by renting and leasing its properties.

After 1992, the foundation was able to recover the expropriated properties sometimes being embarked upon lengthy protracted proceedings by means of restitution applications or compensation payments were made. At the same time, the foundation received as a supplementary endowment the real estate of former GDR special children's homes, some of which used to be manor houses and residences for the aristocracy. After extensive renovation and conversion work by the foundation, these buildings are now home to residential groups of children and adolescents. Large parts of the former orphanage buildings in Potsdam are rented to ministries of the State of Brandenburg.

The "Waisenhaus-Karree" as part of the foundation “Great Orphanage Potsdam” in the middle of the Potsdam's historic city centre must be regarded as one of the most impressive testimonies of late baroque architecture. The magnificent façades suggest a noble city palace. Carl von Gontard, the architect commissioned with the execution of the building, was considered one of the greatest master builders of the era in Prussia. He crowned the Great Orphanage with a dome, called “Monopteros”,



supported by eight sandstone columns, with a golden Caritas figure enthroned on its roof. Due to this tower construction, destroyed in 1945 during World War II and not rebuilt until 2004, the orphanage is visible from far and wide across Potsdam and, along with other impressive buildings, determines the cityscape of the capital of former principality.

The late baroque staircase situated beneath this domed tower counts in expert circles as one of the most beautiful representatives of its period in the whole of Europe and is open to the public. Exhibitions and cultural events regularly bring the architectural monument to life furthermore a small museum exhibits the eventful history of the orphanage.

Since its inauguration in 1724, the foundation survived periods of militarism, totalitarianism, two world wars, the dissolution of the State of Prussia, and the end of the GDR. Until this very day the foundation is a living example of change as well as constancy and one can only hope that the “Great Orphanage” will continue its incessant work in favour of children and young people that has improved the lives of thousands for almost three centuries.

Photos: Foundation Great Orphanage in Potsdam.



Nicole Baronin von Vietinghoff-Scheel and Elke Krüger Managing Director of Foundation Great Orphanage in Potsdam