

Ride to success



Mrs Burda embodied the West German "Wirtschaftswunder"

"I was emancipated, even as a child. I was born this way." This is the Aenne Burda quote from 1994 with which the new book "Aenne Burda – Kindheit und Jugend in Offenburg" begins. And this attitude in life was the basis for her subsequent success as the mother of today's company Hubert Burda Media. The German TV channel Das Erste showed the first part of the two-part feature film "Aenne Burda – Die Wirtschaftswunderfrau" on 9 December at 8.15 pm. The daughter of a railroader from Offenburg had a clear goal in mind. She was like a train that cannot be stopped but wants to go out into the world. Driven and spurred on by an iron will and a burning ambition. Full steam ahead!

Point of departure: the working class

Class barriers? No thank you! Growing up as a railroader's daughter from Gaswerkstraße in Offenburg, Aenne Burda strove for greater things even when she was a child. At the age of 21, she married the publisher Dr Franz Burda, who was six years older – he was her ticket out of the coal-dusted railroad world. With him she had made her way into high society.

At the start, Franz Burda only owned a small printing company, but, like his wife, he was very ambitious. The purchase of a gravure printing press was his breakthrough. With women he was just as successful as was he as an entrepreneur. Despite his happy family life and

the three sons he had with Aenne, Franz, Frieder and Hubert, the publisher had a second relationship with another woman, his former secretary Elfriede Breuer, with whom he even had a daughter. But that was not all: He financed a fashion magazine – “Elfi Moden” – for his mistress, exactly the kind of magazine his wife wanted to create. When Aenne found out about this, she challenged her competitor and was given the debt-ridden publishing company with 48 members of staff in 1949. This marked the birth of her career. She was already 40 years old. And from this moment onwards, she was no longer merely the “senator’s” wife, but Aenne Burda: independent and visionary. What was special about her was that she consistently made her dreams come true. She was courageous, spontaneous and stood up for her decisions. The price she was willing to pay was ten to twelve hours at the office every day. From then on, she mostly only saw her family for breakfast or on the weekend.

Aenne Burda fulfilled her desire for independence and freedom at a time in which emancipation was still unheard of. “For me, emancipation is, above all, a mindset”, Aenne wrote in one of her columns later on. “To feel equal and equally entitled, that’s what it comes down to.” She appreciated women who roll up their sleeves and work for their independence and self-reliance. Aenne Burda represented a new era, a new social and world order, in which girls and women were only beginning to pursue a career. Later on she said: “I am a typical example of a time when everything changed.”

Next stop: The queen of clothes

Aenne created her own recipe for success: a mix of wearable do-it-yourself fashion, household tips and recipes. “I’m a practical woman through and through and I knew what women need”, said the mother of three later on. At the time, little ready-to-wear clothing was available, and what there was was absurdly expensive. But fabric was available. Back then, all women knew how to sew. While sewing patterns had existed since the 19th Century, Aenne Burda effectively reinvented them, and, conveniently, printed them at the senator’s printing company. First of all, she had the women in Offenburg measured to be able to determine the actual sizes. Burda’s cuts promised a perfect fit. And, over the years, the cuts kept being adapted to the average German woman’s body.

The first issue of the magazine that she called “Burda Moden“ was published in 1950. “Einen Mann hat jetzt die Käte, weil sie nach Burda Moden nähte“ (“Kate has a husband now, because she used Burda Moden to sew“) was the advertising slogan of the early years from 1950 onwards. Aenne had a mission: She wanted to make women more beautiful, more confident. Thanks to her magazine, everyone was able to make and wear fashionable, stylish clothes inspired by Paris fashion shows. Aenne had her finger on the pulse – money for fashion and beauty was tight, and the sewing magazine made the dreams of millions of women come true. She made fashion more democratic across the globe and affordable for everyone. The business woman set the course for the future with a lot of business sense, self-assertion and a rather forceful leadership style. It was she who made the decisions, no one else. “I wanted to achieve what I wanted.” There was no stopping her.

Stopover: The Wirtschaftswunder woman

The publisher from provincial Offenburg, who was not taken seriously at first, fought for her place in the world of international fashion, and a seat at the very front, in the first row, where observed the shows – looking graceful, proud and beautiful. The ambitious business woman also bought competitors' magazines: "Ihre Mode" (1950), "Geo-Moden" (1954), "Praktikus/Susann" (1955), "Beyer-Moden" (1963). In February 1957, the circulation of "Burda Moden" amounted to half a million copies, and in 1965, it exceeded one million copies. As the company needed more space due to increasing success, Aenne Burda had the new Offenburg publishing building built, the now famous "Eiermann" building, named after the architect. The company's own photo studio followed in 1962.

"Burda Moden" boomed. Magazines such as "Burda-International", "Burda-Kochstudio", "Carina", "Anna" and "Verena" followed later on. Special editions on knitting and crocheting, making dolls, school children's fashion, wedding dresses, traditional fashion and Christmas crafting also sold like hot cakes. But Aenne was still hungry for expansion and created a Burda test kitchen: In 1970, the first cooking book, "Burda Kochbuch 1", including 300 collector's recipes, was published – it was sold 1.5 million times. The print run of "Burda Moden" reached two million copies for the first time in 1973. In 1974, the magazine was translated into 18 languages and sold in 112 countries, ranging from Switzerland to South Africa. Aenne conquered the world.

International connection: special ambassador for fashion

"Mr and Mrs Burda embodied, alongside founder figures such as Grundig, Neckermann and Axel Springer, the West German 'Wirtschaftswunder'", wrote the German magazine "Der Spiegel" in retrospect in an article about the "Denver Clan of Offenburg" in 1987.

Aenne Burda built up a large network, overcoming not only cultural, but also political boundaries. The boss of the biggest fashion publisher in the world owed this triumph not least to the persistence of her managers. In 1986, a Soviet government delegation had visited her Offenburg publishing headquarters to gain information about modern printing machines. Gorbachev's envoys were also interested in the bestseller "Burda Moden". The ladies' world of Eastern Europe considered the pattern magazine one of the hottest articles to be bought for absurd prices on the black market.

One year after her husband's death, in 1987, Aenne achieved her biggest entrepreneurial triumph as the "queen of clothes": "Burda Moden" was the first western magazine that was published in the Soviet Union. With a first edition of 100 000 copies. "Do it yourself" as a basic socialist idea...

It was not Russia's top politicians but their wives who gathered in the Pillar Hall of Moscow's House of the Unions on a spring day in 1987. Aenne Burda, who was 77 years old, almost burst with pride when she had the world of Moscow at her feet. "What tremendous enthusiasm, this is something you can't repeat", the fashion publisher said delightedly about

the event, which she describes as the highlight of her life as an entrepreneur in her memoirs. A fashion show for the class enemy – this was a genuine cultural revolution. Glasnost meets goodie bag: “Fashion knows no bounds” was printed on the glossy Burda-blue bags, filled with the first Soviet edition of “Burda Moden” and beauty products for the guests to take home with them.

Fashion-interested Raisa Gorbacheva, the Soviet party leader’s wife, watched the broadcast of the first western fashion show on television at home, observing how German models paraded down the catwalk in cutting-edge western fashion. Alongside clowns from Moscow’s State Circus and dancers from the neighboring Bolshoi Theatre. The celebrated highlight was bridal fashion to the sound of Tchaikovsky’s 1812 Overture. This moved the Russian soul.

At the fashion “summit” the next day, Raisa praised Aenne’s business idea. “All women in our country long for beauty. Mrs Burda, thanks to your practical guides, our women are able to make their beautiful dresses themselves.” And the sewing patterns effectively became a map on which cultural and political boundaries could be overcome.

The Russian ruble was rolling in. In December 1987, Aenne Burda signed a contract for a printing and publishing company using modern offset printers in Moscow. A brave step, despite perestroika and glasnost. But it paid off. One year later, the entrepreneur from the Southern German Baden region secured the exclusive right to acquire advertisements in the whole world. Burda became an “eye of a needle for the Soviet Union”. Via the government’s newspaper “Izvestia”, Western advertisers reached millions of Soviet citizens. And the USSR’s Central Television broadcast the popular TV show “Burda Moden recommends” every two weeks from the central consulting center of Burda Moden Russia. The TV gateway to the west. Today, the “Burda Moden” logo in brass letters still adorns the entrance of the former temple of fashion.

Destination: The future

The German Foreign Minister at the time, Hans-Dietrich Genscher, expressed his appreciation for this achievement in the times of perestroika: “In her own way and with her own means, Aenne Burda pulled the iron curtain to the side a bit.” And he praised the “queen of clothes” as a “special ambassador”: “You’ve achieved more than three ambassadors before you.” No man had achieved what she had managed as a woman, a railroader’s daughter from Offenburg. And from now on, Aenne Burda was welcomed in Russia like “an envoy from a great power”, as the German newspaper “Bild” wrote.

Her good friend, fashion king Karl Lagerfeld, once said about the “queen of clothes”: “What the senator did was all well and good, but without Aenne all of this wouldn’t have existed. She created the fashion empire.”

Aenne Burda was the mother of the publishing company. And she took the Offenburg success out into the wider world. The expansion into Eastern Europe began. In 2008, Burda Eastern Europe published 135 magazines in nine Eastern European countries. “Back

then, Burda had the same status in Russia as Coca-Cola”, said Winfried Blach, then director of Burda Eastern Europe Publishing Group.

In 1994, when “Burda Moden” was even published in China, Aenne’s fashion publishing house was integrated in the family-owned Burda company led by her youngest son Hubert. After 45 business years, her publishing company had a turnover of 172 million DM. At the age of 87, Aenne Burda withdrew completely from business. Her heritage, however, remains.

Under its new name *Burda Style*, “Burda Moden” is still published today, in the age of “fast fashion”, Zara and H&M – in 17 languages and more than 100 countries. Aenne Burda’s contribution to today’s company, Hubert Burda Media, was fundamental and made the previously small Offenburg publishing company known throughout the world. A tailor-made recipe for success.

Part 2 of the TV feature film “Aenne Burda – Die Wirtschaftswunderfrau” and the following documentary about the “real” Aenne Burda was shown on Das Erste on 12 December at 8:15 pm. You can watch both parts of the German film and the making-of in [Das Erste Mediathek](#).

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