

## The Founder

Mechthild Veil has Endowed the Stiftung Frauen in Europa (Foundation Women in Europe) with Private Funds / Increasingly, Women Take Action as Patrons

By Meike Kolodziejczyk

For the duration of one week they speak French, the next week German. In constant alternation. Apart from this they have not much in common, at least not professionally, with the exception of sharing a small office. One woman is French and a translator. The other is German, and has a soft spot for France. And for Europe in general, the unification, the enlargement. But, above all else, Mechthild Veil is engaged in social policy and family policy.

This week it is German language week. But the desk of the French translator, the colleague who is not really a colleague, remains unoccupied this afternoon. Mechthild Veil has her Frankfurt office to herself. Her "Büro für Sozialpolitik und Geschlechterforschung in Europa" (Office for Social Policy and Gender Studies in Europe), founded in 1998, is run by the self-employed social scientist as a one-woman-show. The walls are piled high with book shelves containing folders, books and periodicals. Many contain contributions of the now 63-year-old, among these the periodical Feministische Studien (Feminist Studies), which she co-edits.

### A Small Foundation, but Great Added Value

The German word "Geschlechterforschung" (Gender Studies) does not appeal to Mechthild Veil. "I think it's ugly." Nevertheless it is part of the name of her office, because of the affinity to the scholarly ring of the English language term "gender studies", which has a far greater appeal to her. She laughs. With spirit, humour, and sophistication she talks about her work, about receiving invitations both nationally and from abroad, to share her expertise on themes such as social policy, family issues, child care and the pension system. Currently she has no reason to complain about lack of work. "These issues are relevant to everybody. This is why I observe both women and men." Primarily women. Their "presence" in society, in culture, and in the sciences. Presence – this word is used frequently by Mechthild Veil.

"The presence of women in the public sphere" is what she wants to encourage. This goal in mind four years ago she founded the "Stiftung Frauen in Europa" (Foundation Women in Europe) – using the fortune inherited from her parents and grand parents. "Less than half a million", she declares to have invested into the foundation. "This is typical for this kind of small foundation endowed by women." The yield is sufficient for one major annual project, an exhibition, a seminar, a symposium. "Because we are an operative foundation we do not put out calls for tenders," explains Mechthild Veil. "Therefore it is not possible to apply to us for financial support." Jointly with the founding members and board members Birgit Laubach and Mechthild M. Jansen she decides what she wants to tackle, and with whom. Toward more equality and a stronger presence.

"Already as a child," says Mechthild Veil, "I was interested in social differentiation," – except that she did not call it that way at the time. Born in 1944 in Königsberg, today Kaliningrad, her parents escaped with her to Detmold in the Teutoburg Forest in 1945. There she grew up in a so-called "Staatsdomäne für Flüchtlinge und Vertriebene" (state-owned domain for refugees and displaced persons). "There People from all social classes were housed together in very constrained living conditions." The children got along well and played together. Between the adults there was permanent strife and envy. "I could not help observing this and was surprised," states Mechthild Veil and shakes her head.

Later on, in secondary girls' school in Detmold, she again was confronted with class conceit. In spite of all German "Gymnasien" (highest-level German secondary schools in a three-tier system of secondary schooling) having been opened up to children of all social classes, nevertheless

children from the working class were still facing discrimination, and the daughters of parents "who ran the town" were favoured, recalls Mechthild Veil. Her parents were white-collar employees and therefore counted among the social middle-field. Apart from a sense for such disparities, the secondary school awakened her interest in the European neighbour.

"France was chic" she raves. French films, French fashion, French literature. And the singer and existentialist muse Juliette Gréco was topping it all. "She was our star. We girls were all dressed in black, wore make-up and long scarves." After graduation from secondary school she studied French and English Languages in Heidelberg. It was the late 60s, the boom phase of the student protest movement. "I lived directly downtown," Veil remembers and laughs mischievously. "I practically fell out of the house into the rallies." Which did not bother her, on the contrary: she began to become involved in the movement. "The Vietnam War triggered this," she mentions, with her sonorous voice sounding more sombre. She joined the committee, painted slogans on bed sheets, translated French and English flyers. Then, in 1971 after completing her studies, she went to Paris for one year and taught German in a secondary school.

"When you have worked in a country, your attitude is changed," concludes Mechthild Veil. These days she lives together with her husband in Kronberg in the Taunus region. Comparative studies on society and social policy in Germany and France make up a large portion of her scholarly work. "The insight into another country, as well as the perspective from another country on ours: I find this fascinating." When looking through her "French glasses", she maintains a distance to Germany, and can discern alternatives to what she otherwise would deem self-evident.

Her silver framed glasses have been pushed up onto the top of her head, at her temples the side pieces of the spectacles hold back her chin-length hair. It is a colour somewhere between red, brown and dark-blonde. She looks younger than she is. Old-age provision for women is one of her main research topics. And it is the topic of her dissertation, completed in Frankfurt in 1992 at the faculty for Women's Studies which had just been established. "Am modernen Frauenleben vorbei" (Missing the Point of Modern Women's Lives) were title and essence of her doctoral thesis on the pension reform in Germany. For her work she received the Elisabeth-Selbert-Award from the State Government of Hessen. Support was given by the Hans Böckler Foundation, a regular cooperation partner for the social scientist, as has been the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

#### From Activist to Founder

These days she is a founder, or rather, an "Anstifterin" (word play on founder, instigator, and a woman who incites). This is how she labels herself in November 2005 at the symposium "Frauen im erweiterten Europa" (Women in Enlarged Europe). Scholars, artists and contributors from the culture sector speak on the situation of women in the new EU countries, in Poland, the Czech Republic, in Slovakia. It is the inaugural event of Mechthild Veil's "kleine private Bürgerstiftung" (small private civic foundation), as she terms it. She, the 60s' activist, the intellectual, the feminist. Why of all things a foundation? A "Bürgerstiftung"?

"I have inherited, and I have no children," is her initial, straight forward explanation. "Apart from that, I have considered how to continue my work after retirement," the 63 year-old continues. "And this is how I decided on a foundation, also because they are popular these days."

Because foundations are booming. A seemingly outdated phenomenon, left-over from medieval times, is having a renaissance in the post-modern age. Mechthild Veil attributes this trend to a number of factors: "For one, the spectrum of themes has broadened. Foundations are no longer thought of as help for the poor and weak. There are more and more cultural or scholarly foundations." On the other hand, the "development of civil society" has brought this on. The 60's generation, the peace, women's and environmental movements, citizen's initiatives, volunteer work or foundations – all these are expressions of a willingness to get involved socially, politically or culturally. In addition, her generation grew up without suffering, they did not live through the war, instead they had a solid material basis to build upon. A generation of heirs. And heiresses.

That, of all people, it should be women who turn into patrons according to Mechthild Veil is mainly

owed to the emancipation movement. And, is due to the slackening of the "Taboo Women and Money". In earlier times heiresses invested their wealth into securing their family's livelihood, or into the business of their parents, or their husband. "Women's self-conception has changed. Today women want to create something on their own." As is the case with Mechthild Veil, who, beyond that small slice of self-interest, is mainly eager to engage and make a difference in society.

A difference also was made in her office, when the French translator moved her desk into the room measuring hardly 20 square meters, for reasons of cost efficiency. With a nice side effect: If time is left in spite of the work load, the two women speak about their countries and languages. One week in German, the next week in French.