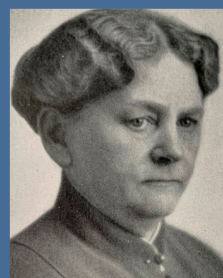
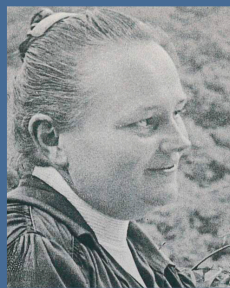


Draiflessen Collection (ed.)

Wives, Heiresses, Businesswomen

Historical case studies of women's
changing roles in family businesses



böhlau



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FOREWORD

In 2016, an exhibition to mark the 175th anniversary of the establishment of the clothing and textile retailer C&A was hosted by the Draiflessen Collection in Mettingen, Germany. One might legitimately expect such an exhibition to focus on the company it was celebrating, the retailer founded in 1841 in Sneek, Netherlands. C&A is run today by the sixth generation of my family, which has managed the business since its inception. And yet the exhibition involved a broader landscape: 'Family Businesses as a Phenomenon'. It sought to retrace how business-owning families have successfully passed their companies down the generations and the challenges they have faced in this endeavour. On the basis of painstaking archival research, the exhibition told the stories of thirteen different family firms and illuminated the pervasive influence of business matters on family life and vice versa.¹

As amply illustrated by the stories featured in the exhibition, it is beyond question that in a broad range of contexts women have been of crucial significance in business-owning families. In most cases, however, they have been considerably less visible publicly than their husbands, brothers, or sons. Finding information about them necessitates a deep dive into the archives. Official histories of family businesses often fail to adequately acknowledge the influence of female family members on the company or their contributions to its success. In many cases, the women in the family are even omitted entirely.² In the words of Stefanie van de Kerkhof, women have received a twofold erasure. After being edged out of business activities, activities they undertook in the medieval and early modern eras in their own right, they were later subjected to imposed obscurity at the hands of academicians, who focused on male owner-managers. (This seems an appropriate moment to remind ourselves that in the modern period, a consistent proportion of between 18 and 29 per cent of Germany's self-employed workforce has been women).³

C&A is a case in point. For a long period of its history, women played no role in its management. Daughters of the family were excluded from inheriting the business, and wives found their radii of activity limited to the domestic sphere.⁴ It was not until the 1990s that daughters gained the right to enter the

inner circle of C&A's partners. Today we can barely imagine that it was once otherwise. The sources available to us are few in number and written by men. Nevertheless, when we begin analysing them more closely, we find signs that the wives and daughters of the C&A family were vital to the company's prosperity despite their exclusion from official positions within it. On one hand, they had a direct influence on the company by providing economic and social capital, but they also had an indirect impact as mothers raising successive generations of C&A managers or as sources of succour and encouragement to their husbands.⁵

The documents held by our family and in our company archives were not sufficient to support an in-depth analysis of the general topic of women in family businesses. The Draiflessen Collection therefore issued a call for papers, inviting researchers to enter into dialogue with us and one another about the hidden or obscured roles that female members of company-owning families took on in the past, as well as their significance in these roles. At an online symposium held in the spring of 2021, eleven papers were presented covering a wide spectrum of approaches to this topic. It is these eleven contributions that we are now delighted to publish in this volume.

My first heartfelt thanks go to the speakers at the symposium, whose papers presented decisive new discoveries within this broad and complex landscape, casting light on it from a range of perspectives. For me it has been a source of great satisfaction that in addition to hosting scholars established in their disciplines, the symposium gave a voice to doctoral researchers whose work is advancing knowledge in this area. We are grateful to them for sharing it with us.

I further wish to specifically thank Kai Bosecker, coordinator of 'Family History' at the Draiflessen Collection, for the energy and commitment he poured into preparing the symposium, and for his own contribution on women's roles in the early years of C&A's history as evidenced in the sources held by our family and the company archives. Together with Erik Meijer, a member of the C&A family of partners who can look back on a long tenure as a senior manager in the company, Bosecker analysed the sources and engaged in conversations with female members of my family. In this task, the two received valuable support and expert counsel from Prof. Dr Manuela Weller, professor at the THM Business School in Giessen, who throughout her career has regularly published on the roles of wives and daughters in family businesses, and from Dr Heidemarie Ertle, head of the municipal archives in the town of St. Ingbert and author of a biography of the industrialist Sophie Henschel.⁶ This

book also owes much to the wisdom and support of Prof. Dr Stefanie van de Kerkhof, professor of history and lecturer and examiner in economics at the University of Mannheim. As well as contributing a chapter to the volume, she co-authored its introduction and reviewed and edited all its chapters.

Although its chapters mainly explore the role of women in family businesses located in German-speaking regions, we decided to publish this volume in three languages. I am certain it will be of interest to international researchers in this field, as well as to business-owning families outside of Germany, hence our aim to make it available to this wider readership. In this context, I wish to thank Uli Nickel (DE), Dr Katherine Ebisch-Burton (EN) and Thea Wieteler (NL) for their expert translations of the chapters, and Katrin Günther (DE), Cynthia Peck-Kubaczek (EN) and Renette Niekerk (NL) for the sensitive and skilled proofreading and editing that gave the volume its final form. At the end, Bianca Gabbe from the Draiflessen Collection has reviewed the texts in all three languages.

Not least, I am deeply grateful to Svenja Lilly Kempf, formerly at Brill publishing house. After becoming aware of our project, she was a persuasive voice advocating its publication. Upon her departure from Brill, the book passed into the capable hands of Dorothee Wunsch and Julia Roßberg, for whose energy and commitment in getting the project 'over the line' I likewise express my gratitude.

In our day, it has become unremarkable to see women heading family businesses, whether small, moderate or major in size. The changes our societies have seen in recent decades have long had a visible and palpable impact on the top management of businesses in family hands. Yet even prior to these processes of societal evolution, indeed throughout the history of commerce, women have carved out influential spheres of action for themselves in families that ran companies. While often working behind the scenes and on an informal basis, they were no less effective than if they had held formal positions. We therefore present this volume and its chapters as an invitation to its readers to engage with, reflect on, and conduct further research into the frequently underestimated and insufficiently acknowledged roles and activities of women in family businesses. Our hope is that in so doing, we will go some way towards giving these women the attention and recognition they deserve.

Martin Rudolf Brenninkmeijer
President, Draiflessen Collection

INTRODUCTION

Kai Bosecker and Stefanie van de Kerkhof

‘Business matters are men’s matters!’ was the dictum long espoused by the Brenninkmeijer family, owner of the C&A clothing empire. And yet well into the twentieth century, it was a dictum implicitly adhered to also by many other family businesses.¹ Until relatively recently, it exemplified a specific gendered viewpoint asserting that women were at best marginal to the business affairs of family-run companies. Many examples of this perspective can be found both in the reality of business life, as well as in academic research, in disciplines ranging from history to business, economics to the social sciences. From today’s vantage point, there is much in this perspective that merits rethinking and criticism.² Might it be the case that this focus on male business owners and managers is related to the industrial sectors in which these companies have often operated? Or has it been based on regional specificities, or the socio-economic backgrounds of the families involved? In light of the apparent male domination in family-owned enterprises, among the bourgeoisie, what role did women actually play in their capacity, for instance, of raising successors to their families’ firms, as central figures in those successors’ lives, or as stays and supports to the men actively at the helm? Were there any alternatives to these roles open to them? How did these spheres of action develop over time? And what precipitated the transformation that has made women’s succession to and management of family-owned businesses a relatively common career pathway in our day?

The motto that opened this introduction, dating to the mid-twentieth century, along with its legal and business implications, represents the starting point and a sort of template for a variety of case studies exploring the roles of women as daughters, wives, widows, or entrepreneurs within family-owned businesses.³ The emphasis of this volume thus goes beyond the relatively new research field in economics, the social sciences, and cultural studies of female

business owner-managers. It illuminates, more markedly than earlier work in this area, the fact that even women who did not hold formal positions in their families' businesses had significant roles and remits within them. In some cases in larger corporations, but particularly in small- and medium-sized family-run enterprises (SMEs), women enriched their family companies with financial, social, and cultural capital. They represented their families' enterprises at formal and social events, they created, stabilised, and maintained family-based professional networks, and they used their influence to support these enterprises. In detailing these activities, the research presented in this volume seeks to add to our knowledge in this regard.

RESEARCH TO DATE

Until the last two decades, research on the history of business and businesses took little notice of women's roles in the companies owned by their families. Mainstream scholarship often overlooked the many examples there are of businesswomen and female entrepreneurs, women as part-owners of businesses, or the work done by wives and daughters in family firms.⁴ The renowned German economic historian Hartmut Berghoff, writing in 2004 in his introduction to modern business history, observed that 'it was likely the rule for the [company owner-manager's] wife to work in the business and share in decision-making; however, publications marking company anniversaries omitted mentioning such details or reduced them to marginalia, with the aim of living up to the bourgeois family ideal, at least in official memory, and avoiding any detraction from the male [proprietor-manager]'s achievements. The effect was a systematic silencing or marginalisation of women's entrepreneurship. Business history, which for a long period was a discipline almost exclusively pursued by men, was likewise disinclined to correct this traditional idea.'⁵

As early as the 1980s, US media proclaimed the 'age of the woman entrepreneur'. In Europe, the later years of that decade saw the emergence of publications in the fields of business studies, economics, and the social sciences that explored women in management and as managers. Among their authors were Gertraude Krell, Sonja Nerge and Marina Stahmann, and Mary Yeager.⁶ However, it was not until after the turn of the millennium that this research gained a foothold, driven substantively by bestselling female writers and sen-

ior managers such as Sheryl Sandberg (Facebook, 2013), author of *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead* and the anonymous woman behind *Ganz oben: Aus dem Leben einer weiblichen Führungskraft* (2013), an account of life as a female senior manager in a major German company. A further factor giving impetus to this development in the research landscape was reporting on the issue in business-focused publications such as Germany's *Wirtschaftswoche*, showcasing such personalities as Maria-Elisabeth Schaeffler (Continental AG), Susanne Klatten (Quandt, BMW) and Beate Rotermond-Uhse (Beate Uhse AG). While many of these articles call the conventional gender bias of the business field into question, they tend to feature a highly emotional style and bear witness to the persistence and power of long-held stereotypes. The images and language used here to depict businesswomen are particularly acute cases of 'doing gender', whereby stereotypical roles and gendered structures are formed and mediated.⁷ This is still more the case with regard to other roles and spheres of action in which women engaged in family-owned businesses in Europe that have been omitted from or overlooked in mainstream narratives, including household management in the business-owning upper and middle classes. The Krupp family villa *Auf dem Hügel*, for instance, required the lady of the house to be in charge of a very large household and gardening staff.⁸

Only recently have studies on the business-owning class emphasised not only the men in entrepreneurial families, but also the women alongside them, including examinations of social connections, trusted networks, the importance of strategic marriages, and issues regarding inheritance law.⁹ For many bourgeois families, aspirations to the aristocracy were related to this, aspirations that also sometimes led to rejection, as has been examined by Gerlinde Kraus in her work on noblewomen in Upper Silesian businesses during the early industrial era, or Anke Hufschmidt's work on aristocratic women in the Weser region.¹⁰ Recent studies indicate that in many cases, families combined traditional practices of the nobility, such as male primogeniture, with more modern precepts stemming from capitalist market economy, such as the bourgeois ideal of hard work and high achievement, or associated ideas of how society should be organised. This research has further demonstrated that women clearly contributed to their families' firms not only with their financial means, but also in the form of social and cultural capital, as defined in Pierre Bourdieu's extended concept of capital. Marriage strategies pursued by bourgeoisie families led to benefits from the relatively advanced education generally enjoyed by women

of this social standing, or the prestige of a woman's family of origin and her social status. Indeed, sought-after wives were not only equal in rank to their marriage partners, but on occasion also members of the nobility.¹¹ Changes in the socialisation of women and their expanding educational opportunities at this time precipitated a professionalisation that was harnessed by family-run businesses. This additionally served to advance the emergence of the modern businesswoman, and catalysed a shift in gender stereotypes and roles. This is a topic still needs closer examination.

It was relatively late that the business-related roles of company-owning women came to the attention of researchers in economics and the social sciences. In this context, particular emphasis has been placed on SMEs, which account for over 96 per cent of businesses in Germany.¹² A number of economics studies on present-day SMEs have also included historical analyses of capitalistic development since the nineteenth century. Among notable publications on the history of family businesses are a collection edited by the English business historian Mary B. Rose, a monograph by Carola Groppe, and four award-winning doctoral theses: that of Doreen Arnoldus on family-owned companies in the Netherlands; of Tanja Junggeburth on a German consumer goods business in family hands; the comparative study of sector-leading businesses in Italy by Andrea Colli; and Christina Lubinski's work on the transformation of corporate governance in West German family-run businesses from the 1960s.¹³ Women's roles also comprised one of the topics explored in an edited volume published in the mid-1990s that examined business-owning families in south-western Germany.¹⁴ In the new millennium, two overviews by US economists and economic historians have similarly devoted significant attention to women; other international research has focussed on the women in the de Wendel family, a famous industrialist family from the Lorraine region.¹⁵

Academia has long focussed exclusively on large companies. In the view of the economist Thomas Döbler, this has stemmed from the circumstance that large corporations have 'greater "economies of scale", more effective use of production factors, and more significant degree of divided working processes and automation.' As a result, research has overlooked women in business. The 1980s saw the establishment of more new companies, resulting in a growth in interest in family-owned businesses. Döbler considers this to have been driven primarily by labour market matters and economic policy.¹⁶ The work of associations representing the interests of family-owned SMEs in Ger-

many is also worthy of mention in this context. These organisations, including EQUA and Die Familienunternehmer e.V. (established in 1949 under the name of Arbeitsgemeinschaft Selbständiger Unternehmer, ASU), have supported a number of interdisciplinary studies on this topic. A project that drew considerable attention was an edited volume published by the psychiatrist Fritz B. Simon in collaboration with sociologists and economists focussing on family-owned firms as systems located ‘between emotion and commerce’ (*zwischen Gefühl und Geschäft*). Another significant contribution to this topic is a monograph by Mechthild Isenmann on families as businesses in the late medieval and early modern periods.¹⁷ Of particular interest to these authors are conflicts, something particularly acute in family-owned businesses. This was also a focal point in the exhibition ‘Family Businesses as a Phenomenon’ (Draiflessen Collection, 2016), which examined the dilemma inherent in the German word pairing *Gefühl – Kalkül* (‘feelings’ and ‘calculation’).¹⁸ Historians have come to realize the importance of feelings and emotional connections in modern societies; a number of innovative studies in this area include work on business-owning families.¹⁹

As yet, historical research lacks work that focuses explicitly on wives and daughters in family firms. However, there have been a few studies on female company owner-managers within the disciplines of business and social history. The ground-breaking work by Elke Hlawatschek, Anke Probst, Christiane Eifert, and Susanne Schötz merit particular mention in this context.²⁰ Their considerations of the topic build on earlier biographical narratives about well-known businesswomen, such as by Hans Roesch, publications that are more popular than academic in character.²¹ The new millennium saw the publication of two influential edited volumes on women in business – one focusing on Austria and edited by the historians Irene Bandhauer-Schöffmann and Regine Bendl, the other on the Rhineland-Palatinate region of Germany and edited by Hedwig Brüchert.²² A number of studies exploring this topic with regard to the medieval and early modern eras (by Edith Ennen, Margret Wensky and Gesa Ingendahl) have emphasised social history and microhistory.²³ A number of female historians of science and technology have turned to issues of gender history (Dorothea Schmidt, Karin Hausen) or have published biographies or case studies focussed on business-history (Gabriele Katz, Angelika Schaser, Diana Maria Friz, Tilar J. Mazzeo and Ortrud Wörner-Heil).²⁴ Extensive interest has been devoted by academic researchers to male company owners who

played active roles in their businesses' operation, personalities such as August Thyssen and Alfred Krupp, or to famous managers such as Alfred Herrhausen. However, until now economic and business historians have paid little attention to the role of women as company founders or managers. Indeed, a number of studies published in the last two decades highlight the apparent tendency for female entrepreneurs to stand in the 'shadow of "great men"'.²⁵ This was also contended in earlier economics studies by Werner Sombart, Joseph Schumpeter and Fritz Redlich.²⁶ But there is ample evidence of women having taken active roles in many business sectors; indeed, there is no evidence of them refraining from engagement in company affairs even if the sectors in question were technology, engineering or heavy industry.²⁷ Case studies have demonstrated that female managers developed their own distinct styles of leadership. In industries including mechanical engineering and steel they early adopted new methods and techniques, such as transnational marketing.²⁸ In the period after the end of the Second World War, businesswomen from a wide range of sectors formed business associations in a number of European countries. This started in France in 1945, with the founding of the Paris-based Femmes Chefs d'Entreprise; its West German subsidiary organisation, the Vereinigung von Unternehmerinnen, was established in 1954. These associations 'did not [take] a decidedly feminist stance or even engage with policy matters relating to women', but instead sought to participate in political processes at the European level.²⁹

Thus, if we went only by the findings of less recent research in this field, we might conclude that there were quite few female entrepreneurs. But this was not the case. In the modern period in Germany, widows of company owners frequently served long tenures, sometimes decades long, at the helms of major companies. Women also set up SMEs of their own.³⁰ Influential female company owner-managers in Germany who have received as yet little recognition include Sophie Henschel (railway industry and mechanical engineering), Käthe Ahlmann (the Carlshütte iron foundry near Rendsburg), Maria Zanders (paper manufacturing), Aenne Burda (media and publishing), Grete Schickedanz (the mail-order company Quelle), Beate Rotermund-Uhse ('marital aids'), Irene Kärcher (cleaning equipment), Julia Lanz (tractor construction) and Margarete Steiff (stuffed animals).³¹ As the economist Hermann Simon has observed, cases of women holding positions of owner-managers or part-owners are particularly frequent in 'hidden champions', that is, SMEs with low public profiles but in market-leading positions nationally or internationally, usually in

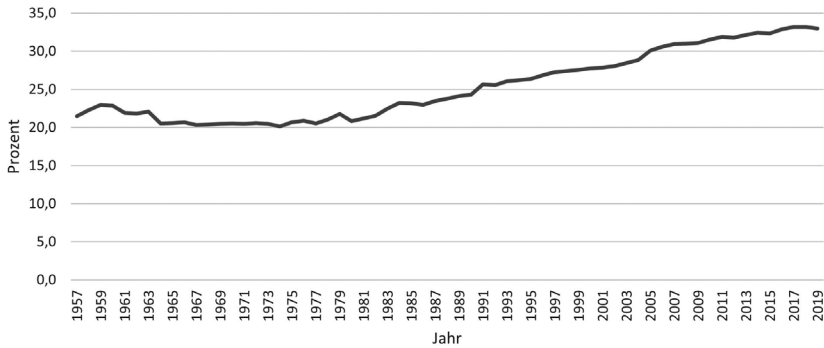


Fig. 1: Percentage of women among the self-employed in Germany.

Source: German Federal Statistical Office (Destatis), 2022, <https://www-genesis.destatis.de/genesis/online?sequenz=tabelleErgebnis&selectionname=12211-9005#abreadcrumb>, last accessed 11 November 2022.

business niche areas.³² Historical case studies on how women have evolved management styles and practices have now begun to appear (v. d. Kerkhof).³³

To date, research in this area has tended to focus closely on the researcher's particular national context. First attempts to forge stronger international connections in this topic have taken the form of panels exploring female entrepreneurship at conferences on economic and social history. Such panels were held at the World Economic History Congress held in Helsinki in 2006 and Boston in 2018, as well as at the European Social Science History Conference hosted in Ghent in 2010. Nevertheless, publications that offer an international or transnational comparative view of women's activities in businesses they own are few and far between. Many women in this position have remained relatively obscure even in their home countries. One notable example is Irene Kärcher, who, over a period of decades, served in the background as an owner-director of the well-known pressure cleaning equipment company, in evident contrast to the ubiquity of her company's products. This 'hidden' character of business-owning women's management activities was common in the early twentieth century, when women in charge of major corporations conducted their work primarily behind the scenes, such as Sophie Henschel, who headed a heavy industry and engineering company. It was not until the early 1980s that real change set in. Prior to this, women heading businesses found themselves all too frequently rendered invisible, blocked from public view behind the company's production sites and the technologies it used.³⁴

Figures issued recently by Germany's Institut für Mittelstandsforschung demonstrate the extent to which women have been self-employed and point to examples of long-term entrepreneurial activities by women. Among the self-employed in Germany, since the end of the nineteenth century a high proportion have been women; until 1990 approximately 18 to 29 per cent of the self-employed were consistently women, with the sole exception being a decline in the period between the late German Empire era until the fall of the Nazi regime.³⁵ In light of these statistics, we might ask whether women running German businesses simply slipped out of public notice, as Béatrice Craig has shown to have been the case internationally,³⁶ or whether quantitative change was concomitantly a qualitative shift. Could a factor at work here be the dominance of banks and corporations in what is termed 'Rhenish capitalism', or the tendency in the academic disciplines of economic and business history to overlook the role of SMEs?³⁷ It is also likely that the paucity of research is due to difficulties in accessing sources or a shortage of related archive material, since SMEs frequently lack the resources for a professionally managed archive.

After the Second World War, the proportion of women among Germany's self-employed was initially relatively stable, with a sharp rise from the end of the 1980s.³⁸ As of 2019, there were 1,305,000 self-employed women in Germany, amounting to 33 per cent of all self-employed persons.³⁹

The emergence of large corporations, with their highly differentiated organisational structures and division of tasks, may have played a role in researchers apparently marginalising female owner-managers.⁴⁰ But the increasingly rigid dualism of gender roles that has unfolded since the nineteenth century may have had more to do with this.⁴¹ Clearer answers to these unresolved issues must remain a matter for further research.⁴² The chapters of this volume offer various potential starting points.

THE PROBLEM OF SOURCES

For a range of reasons, female entrepreneurs – like the wives, widows and daughters of their male counterparts – are in many cases less visible than men in historical sources held in company archives or in private and public archives. Several chapters in this volume note this circumstance, while simultaneously

pointing to paths that historical research might take towards overcoming such difficulties. Especially in the more recent past and today, the media, both quality and tabloid, have proven prolific and influential in creating and communicating the image of women in business. This is also the case for business magazines and specialist journals, such as, in Germany, *Manager-Magazin*, *Handelsblatt* and *Wirtschaftswoche* (formerly *Der Volkswirt*). The media constitute a key source for research on how women, and specifically businesswomen, are currently regarded in the business world. Also public appearances, interviews, and direct conversations with businesswomen can provide needed information.⁴³

Other sources that can supplement conventional archival matter held by businesses and families and help form a picture of female business owners and entrepreneurs include accounts of businesswomen's lives and activities, whether in their own words or through the eyes of others. However, the availability of ego-documents by women involved in family-run businesses is usually very limited. Future research might prioritise the collecting of such data, which might enable researchers to escape the biases of currently available documents of this type. When analysing older sources, researchers should proceed with an awareness that interviewees in such contexts have often used or taken recourse in societally predominant or approved gender stereotypes. The data therein should be evaluated accordingly.⁴⁴ It may prove difficult to distinguish between an individual woman's image of herself, how others perceive her, or the general societal view of women.⁴⁵ In many cases, the chapters in this volume make use of new sources or undertake material research that has been overlooked until now. In so doing, they illuminate, in some instances across long periods of time, the roles and remits of female entrepreneurs, daughters, wives and widows in family-run businesses.

ABOUT THIS VOLUME'S CHAPTERS

Of the contributions to this volume, the chapter by **Mechthild Isenmann** takes us back furthest in time, to the late Middle Ages. Its analysis of families active in trade at that time demonstrates that this was a period in which women possessed sound knowledge and skills in matters of commerce. Women had public profiles, co-conducted their husbands' business affairs, and were visible as businesswomen. As earlier research in this regard has also indicated, it was

not until the arrival of the modern era that women faded into the background. Women were displaced from their former roles by the advancing bourgeois ideal that assigned hearth and home to women and the public world of business to men. This notion grew in prominence during the nineteenth century and remained dominant well into the twentieth. **Hans Peterse**, in his chapter on female members of nineteenth- and twentieth-century textile business-owning families in the Dutch Twente region, points to the primacy of the ‘separate spheres’ model in the Netherlands as well as elsewhere. However, he also illuminates the substantial overlap of interaction between these distinct worlds, demonstrating how the wives of textile company owners exerted significant influence as networkers in their social circles. For example, they held *kransjes* – regular unofficial gatherings of young people from textile industrialists’ families – in the expectation that connections thus forged would aid their husbands’ business endeavours. As noted at the beginning of this introduction, the Brenninkmeijer family, the owners of the C&A clothing retailer, long made the distinction between the male and female worlds a codified part of company philosophy. And yet the formal prohibition of women taking on management roles or succeeding to C&A partnership positions by no means meant that female family members were not important to the company’s development. The chapter by **Kai Bosecker** explores this major clothing enterprise using company histories as his sources. He casts light on women’s roles in the early decades of the company by presenting the specific context of the Brenninkmeijer family’s transnational background and its roots in itinerant commerce.

Looking at family businesses in general, we note that deviations from the prevailing bourgeois ideal were frequent, particularly in smaller and medium-sized companies. Many of the chapters in this volume confirm Berghoff’s finding that the hands-on, decision-making company owner’s wife was a relatively common figure.⁴⁶ Josefine Urlichs, presented in a case study by **Sina Bohnen**, was one such woman. Her father, owner of a large delicatessen in the city of Dortmund, initially discounted her as the successor to the helm of the family firm. The company reins were initially taken over by his son-in-law, her husband, although Josefine shared energetically in his work. It was not until her widowhood at a young age that she came to head the business in her own right. This is successfully illustrated by Bohnen with in-depth recourse to available sources. A well-known instance of a woman taking charge of a major company is Margarethe Krupp, the subject of the chapter by **Mirjam Lober**.

Admittedly, Margarethe Krupp was not the head of the Krupp steel empire's board of directors; after her husband's death, she served as a trustee for her daughter until the latter's majority. But she acted visibly as a regent, acknowledged by the German Kaiser himself as the highest decision-making authority at the main supplier of arms to the imperial military. The chapter by **Daniela Gastell** provides emphatic proof that widows were often much more than just interim solutions until a male successor could take over the management of family businesses. She details the cases of two women publishers. One, Helene Vieweg-Brockhaus, herself from a publishing family, became a key influence in and driver of management matters at her husband's publishing business after his death. The other, Else Dürr, whose late husband had not wanted her to play an active role in the leadership of his publishing house, fought tenaciously and ultimately with success for the right to take over the business as his widow. Dürr's husband had originally desired that she engage in charitable work, an activity typical for women of her class. Devotion to beneficent causes often went beyond altruism, however: aligning good deeds with the interests of the family business was also a motivation. This is the focus of **Swen Steinberg's** study of the women in the Niethammer paper-producing family, whose factory, in the village of Kriebstein, between Leipzig, Chemnitz and Dresden, was the largest in Germany at the turn of the last century. Inspired by Christian values, the company used *ex gratia* employee welfare support to strengthen ties of loyalty and to link workers and their families to the business. The charitable foundation set up for this purpose bore the name of Käthe Niethammer, the owner's wife, and its management was in her hands. Accordingly, the wives of the family poured their energies into the factory kindergarten, each acting in turn as 'mother to the workers', engaging directly with employees' families and thus fulfilling an important function for the business. A similarly indirect involvement in the family business is evident in the case of Gabriele Henkel, whose husband, Konrad Henkel, had a long tenure as the head of the eponymous Düsseldorf-based consumer goods giant. Known primarily for her art collecting and patronage of the arts, Gabriele Henkel developed a broad public profile. As **Katrin Schreiter** and **Clara Piacenza** demonstrate beyond a doubt, her networks had a positive impact on her husband's company.

Complementing these more biographical chapters, the contributions by Ulrike Laufer and Stefanie van de Kerkhof chart women's roles and spheres of activity as these evolved over time in specific businesses. **Ulrike Laufer's**

multi-generational account of women in the Hirschland banking family, owners of the Simon Hirschland bank in Essen, illuminates their diverse activities, conducted mainly behind the scenes, over a period of three centuries. As mothers raising their families, charitable benefactors, and as networkers, they endowed the family and therefore the bank with stability until its forced expropriation at the hands of the Nazi regime. The women of the family-owned corporation Vereinigte Seidenwebereien AG (Verseidag) and its predecessor companies – the subject of the chapter by **Stefanie van de Kerkhof** – likewise contributed social and cultural capital to the business. Some of these women made names for themselves with their civic and political activities, including local and national politics. Their sphere of influence also extended beyond this arena, taking them into the heart of the corporation's management and supervisory boards as entrepreneurs and partners. Stefanie van de Kerkhof's chapter retraces the journey of the women of the Verseidag company, which by no means progressed consistently in a linear fashion, but frequently followed the vagaries of historical shifts. **Agnes Arndt** contributes a chapter that takes a distinctly different approach to the roles and spheres of action of women in family businesses, namely, the management of emotions in business-owning families and how this contributes to the success of a family firm. The ego-documents she analyses bear witness to a history of changes in how family businesses have handled emotions, as well as how women were able to strategically harness emotions to support their active roles in their families' companies.

From Elisabeth Fugger-Gfattermann (c. 1364–1436) to Gabriele Henkel (1931–2017) and Margret Plöntges (b. 1940), the case studies comprising this volume cover a timespan of over five hundred years. The women we encounter belonged to families active in a broad range of industries, including publishing and the book trade, textiles, food retail, international trade, as well as the chemical, paper and steel industries. Similarly diverse are the positions, roles, and radii of action the women held or carved out for themselves in their businesses and families, whether simultaneously or consecutively. They acted as advisors and networkers, engaged in social work and the raising of children, contributed capital, both in the monetary sense and in the extended meanings proposed by Bourdieu, represented their companies to the outside world, served as authorised officers, and owned and headed their own businesses. In all these roles, they advanced their families' success and prosperity.

WOMEN IN ACTIVE ROLES IN BUSINESSES OF THE FOURTEENTH TO SIXTEENTH CENTURIES

Mechthild Isenmann



INTRODUCTION

In how many towns do they [women] carry out duties that only men discharge in our locality? In France and in Germany and in many parts of the North, women are the heads of their households, they manage the money, keep the books on their wares, and even fine ladies go to the public marketplaces to attend to family affairs; they enjoy freedom and exercise their free will, given them by Him who gives all good gifts, without deference or restrictions, nor indeed the calumnies and punishments to which they are accustomed in our city.¹

These are the words, written in 1652, of the Venetian Benedictine nun Arcangela Tarabotti (1604–1652), who published numerous works cementing her reputation as a critical commentator on the state of affairs in her home city of Venice – a reputation that compelled her to write under a pseudonym. The lines I cite above are part of her indictment of the condition of Venetian women through a presentation of positive examples of women’s activity in countries north of the Alps, where, in her view, it was customary for women to engage in business and trade. The wide-ranging freedoms she perceived as

accompanying this activity contrasted with how the situation for the women of Venice had deteriorated from their possibilities in the past. In a similar vein, the humanist Konrad Celtis (1459–1508), of Nuremberg, lauded the city's female citizens of his time, commenting that alongside their duties in the family and the raising of their children, they possessed active knowledge 'of trade, accounting [and] music'.²

This chapter will take Celtis' brief observation and flesh it out in the light of a number of examples. Before doing so, I will remark that the changes deplored by Arcangela Tarabotti in the context of Venice also affected more northerly regions, including the German cities of Nuremberg and Augsburg, a fact I will return to at this chapter's close. How did this happen? In an attempt to answer this question, I will explore the changes in the circumstances of women within families and businesses over the course of the medieval and early modern periods. I will present case studies ranging from thirteenth-century Italy, major economic regions such as the area of the Hanseatic League in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, to Upper Germany, in particular Augsburg and Nuremberg, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

AN EXCURSION INTO HISTORY

From the thirteenth century onward, processes of urbanisation in Western Europe, population growth, and increasing demand for goods, raw materials and capital in this 'era of commercialisation'³ drove a quantitative and qualitative expansion in trade that continued in the centuries that followed and into the sixteenth century.⁴ Concomitant to this was a geographical enlargement of the spatial extent of trade conducted, exploration of new trading routes, and forging of trade relationships with new partners. At its outset, this emerging trade took place among individual merchants at a mostly regional level. As time went on, it increasingly extended beyond regional boundaries and, as a consequence, engendered rising numbers of trading companies consisting of multiple individuals. Some of these companies were 'occasional' in nature, that is, they formed on the occasion of a deal to be done; others were permanent associations, with families behind them. In a development commencing in the second half of the fifteenth century, businesspeople based in central offices located in trading cities with excellent links to the wider world increasingly

began to organise an early form of globalised trade, whose sphere extended from the Mediterranean across the Atlantic to world regions outside Europe. Towns and cities centred on trade were ideal for these activities. Payment of a fee, with amounts varying from place to place, entitled people of both sexes to civic rights within that town or city, giving them personal and business-related protection as well as extensive freedoms in relation to their interaction with the town lords. Civic rights also entailed various obligations, including the payment of taxes, involvement in the municipality's political life, and military service in defence of the town or city. In terms of how these pertained to women, while political participation was not an option for them, they were required to pay taxes and they could discharge their military defence duties by making a payment or nominating a representative.⁵ The rights conferred upon women by this citizen status included the capacity to enter into valid contracts as legal subjects in their own right, to call upon the law in matters relating to their assets, request the assistance of the town or city council in business affairs, act as executors to wills and as legal guardians to their children, and, most crucially for our context, engage in trade and commerce.⁶ They exercised these rights under the protection of and with the explicit consent of municipalities, one example being the Imperial City of Nuremberg, which in 1464 issued a privilege addressed expressly to both male and female citizens (*Bürger und Bürgerinnen*), setting out their rights and duties as partners in a company to the end of protecting them from unjustified liability claims.⁷ Provisions such as these enabled wealthy women with citizen status to take part, above all, in lucrative long-distance trade by investing in commercial companies for profit and loss via association agreements. One of the oldest extant contracts of this type dates from the twelfth century and details the involvement of a female citizen of Genoa in such a company.

The sources of urban women's incomes from the thirteenth century onward covered a wide range, from commercial and trading activities on their own account, to wage labour – generally rather poorly paid. The work of wives in their husbands' businesses was a fundamental aspect of economic life in the Middle Ages. Medieval widows could take over their deceased husbands' businesses, and in many instances they expanded them. A company contract originating from Genoa dating to 1206, in which one Juleta Crispini handed over fabric to the value of 317 Genoese pounds to a gentleman by the name of Obertus Lungus for him to sell, bears witness to the early occurrence of