



A legacy for humankind

The Bernard van Leer Foundation: from profits to philanthropy

This booklet has been published to mark the 50th anniversary of the Bernard van Leer Foundation in 1999.

The author, Dr. Pauline Micheels, studied history at the University of Amsterdam. In the 1970s, she worked for the Netherlands State Institute for War Documentation, and subsequently taught at school and university levels. In 1993, she obtained her doctorate for her book *Muziek in de schaduw van het Derde Rijk. De Nederlandse symfonie-orkesten 1933-1945*. (Music in the shadow of the Third Reich. Dutch symphony orchestras 1933-1945). In addition to articles for academic publications, she also writes regularly for newspapers and magazines. At the moment she is working on a biography of the industrialist Bernard van Leer.

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'You mustn't tell me it can't be done.'

Bernard van Leer



A legacy for humankind

*The Bernard van Leer Foundation:
from profits to philanthropy*



Investing in the development of young children

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is a private foundation based in the Netherlands. It operates internationally, concentrating its resources on early childhood development.

The Foundation's income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer (1883-1958), a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist who, in 1919, founded an industrial and consumer packaging company that was to become Royal Packaging Industries Van Leer NV.

During his lifetime Bernard van Leer supported a broad range of humanitarian causes. In 1949 he created a charitable foundation to channel the revenues from his fortune to charitable purposes after his death. Under the leadership of his son Oscar van Leer, who died in 1996, the Foundation focused on enhancing opportunities for children growing up in circumstances of social and economic disadvantage to optimally develop their innate potential.

In seeking to achieve this objective, the Foundation has chosen to concentrate on children from zero to seven years of age. This is because research has demonstrated that interventions in the early years of childhood are most effective in yielding lasting benefits to children and society.

The Foundation accomplishes its objective through two interconnected strategies: an international grant-making programme in selected countries aimed at developing contextually appropriate approaches to early childhood care and development; and the sharing of knowledge and know-how in the domain of early childhood development that primarily draws on the experiences generated by the projects that the Foundation supports, with the aim of informing and influencing policy and practice.



Foreword

Who is Bernard van Leer? Very few people know that he founded the Royal Packaging Industries Van Leer in 1919. But even fewer will know that Bernard van Leer was the originator of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, a charitable foundation which was set up in 1949, and to which he left his fortune on his death in 1958. He did this with the approval of his wife Polly and his sons Wim and Oscar, who had relinquished their rights to their inheritance.

Bernard van Leer owed his wealth to 'hard work and a lot of luck'. He decided to use it for the welfare of 'all those who had contributed to building up the Van Leer concern'. He never clearly defined the aims or the target group. It was his son Oscar who, after his father's death, provided the Foundation with its objectives and its mandate – to help children and young people who are handicapped by the social and/or cultural conditions in which they live, and to give them the opportunity to develop their talents to the best of their abilities.

Some 40 years after the death of Bernard van Leer, the proceeds of his legacy are still being ploughed back into those countries where the Van Leer Group of Companies is active, with the aim of giving disadvantaged young children a better chance to develop their potential. Bernard van Leer provided the financial basis and his son Oscar was responsible for defining the philosophy of the enterprise.

Bernard and Oscar van Leer never boasted about their philanthropic activities. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Foundation, we have decided to give this aspect of 'Van Leer' more publicity than would normally be the case. We are doing this as a mark of respect and gratitude to the Van Leer family.

The Board of the Bernard van Leer Foundation is proud to be able to carry on the legacy of Bernard and Oscar van Leer.

*Ivar Samrén,
Chairman of the Bernard van Leer Foundation.*

*A legacy for
humankind*



Ask passers-by at random if they have ever heard of the Bernard van Leer Foundation and they will probably shake their heads. But this is one of the Netherlands' most prominent private organisations, which gives aid to disadvantaged young children in more than forty different countries, a foundation which was set up in 1949 and which has been operating on an international scale since 1966. And it is this international aspect which distinguishes it from other foundations like Ford, Rockefeller and Carnegie, which mainly use their money to benefit their own country.

The originator of the Foundation was the Dutch industrialist, Bernard van Leer, who was born in 1883 and died in 1958. This entrepreneur built up a worldwide business in steel drums between 1920 and 1940. He was a man with a lot of guts and, as he himself always said, a lot of luck. He was honest and patient, and had a tremendous intuitive feel for business – a captain of industry in the old sense of the word, who loved a challenge. One of his favourite sayings was

'You mustn't tell me it can't be done'. By the late 1920s, he had become a prosperous businessman. He gave a lot of money, a very great deal of money, to charity, and even during his lifetime he was known to be a great philanthropist. He did not care to have this made public. On the contrary, *'It's no bloody concern of theirs'*, he would say forcefully.

Bernard only had a primary school education. He first worked in the steel industry and then became a commercial traveller for the Handelsmaatschappij R.S. Stokvis and Son in Rotterdam. Later he became branch manager in Amsterdam. In 1918, there was a row over a consignment of nails and he gave notice and left to become director of a cardboard-producing factory set up by his eldest brother. After a few takeovers, he set up Van Leer's Vereenigde Fabrieken in November 1919. Initially, the business produced cardboard but later went over to metal packaging. He manufactured all kinds of articles to meet whatever the current demand was, as well as designing a closure for petrol cans which he sold to Shell in



large numbers. But his financial situation remained precarious and he found himself on the brink of bankruptcy on more than one occasion.

Entrepreneur

The tide turned in the mid-1920s when he managed to get an enormous order for asphalt drums from the Bataafse Petroleum Maatschappij (later better known as Shell), and he scored his biggest victory in 1927 when he signed a licensing agreement with the American Flange & Manufacturing Company, manufacturers of the Tri-Sure drum closure. The agreement allowed him to produce and sell this closure in a large number of countries outside North America: it made him a wealthy man.

In the 1930s, he set up drum factories not just in Western Europe, but also in Africa and the Caribbean, generally close to Shell refineries. In 1938, he thought that he would be able to break the European steel rolling mill cartel and, with a great deal of publicity, he opened his own rolling mill near Hoogovens

steel works. It was during this period that he started his own private circus ‘Kavaljos’, a travelling circus with more than 20 rare and beautiful Lippizaners, Arabians, Frisians and other breeds of horse. He had trained all the horses himself – dressage was his favourite hobby.

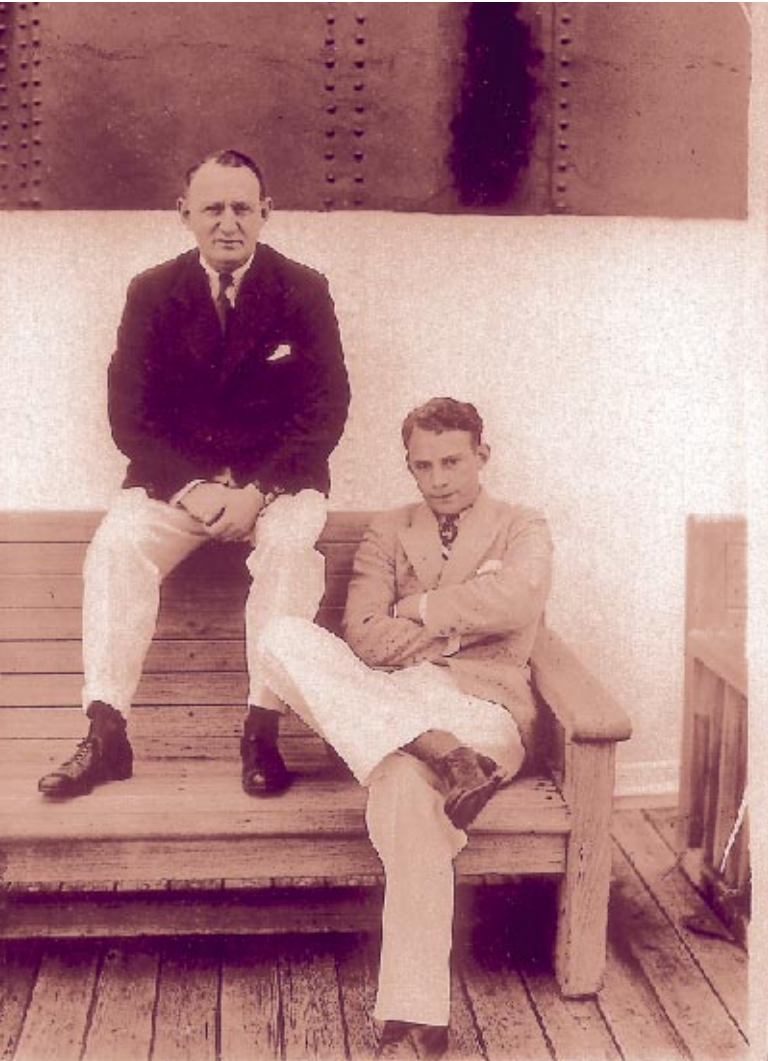
Guardian angel

At the end of the nineteenth century, very few people could have foreseen that Bernard, the youngest brother in the large Van Leer family, would, in later life, become a sort of financial guardian angel to his family. The active little boy, who would far rather play football than do his homework, drove his teachers to despair. Bernard van Leer came from a fairly well-off Jewish business family. His grandfather and uncles were all successful businessmen, and highly respected for their work for other people and for the Jewish community. Only his father, Willem, had little interest in business. He was artistically talented and interested in literature. He was also a passionate adherent of Utopian Socialism and wrote essays on the subject as

well as plays for the theatre. For many years, he was also an active Freemason.

Bernard’s mother Cato was strictly Orthodox and brought her eight children up the same way. Many things were not permitted, while many others were obligatory. But the fact that Judaism as a religious way of life did not achieve a permanent hold on this generation is apparent from the fact that none of the Van Leer children grew up to be practising Jews.

By the mid-1930s, only Bernard (who had married the 18-year-old Polly Rubens in 1912) and his eldest brother still lived in the Netherlands. Nevertheless, there was a close family relationship. Very close, as far as Bernard was concerned. He would have given his right arm for his family, unconditionally. No Van Leer in difficulties ever went away from Bernard’s house empty-handed – if help was needed, then it was needed, whether it was just once or over a period of years, it didn’t matter. And he did not confine his readiness to help to his family. He gave a



great deal to Jewish causes in particular, for example, to German Jews who had escaped from Nazi Germany.

The war years

A year after the Germans invaded the Netherlands in 1940, Bernard sold all his companies in the Netherlands, Belgium and France. German firms took over his factories, the rolling mill was bought by Hoogovens. These sales were not entirely voluntary: from the very start of the occupation, the Germans had had their eyes on his company. Painfully, in a series of often fruitless moves – as a Jewish businessman he had very little room for manoeuvre – Van Leer tried to get the best deal he could. One of his demands was to be allowed to leave Occupied Europe. The Germans had no objection. He left by train for Spain at the end of June 1941, and from there he went on by boat to the United States. Travelling with him were his wife, his younger son Oscar (his elder son Wim had been in England for some years), various relatives and a few of his staff. The violinist, Max

Tak, who had Van Leer's Stradivarius on permanent loan, was also one of the group. Bernard was also allowed to take nineteen of his circus horses, intending to perform with them in America.

Bernard left his affairs in the Netherlands in order. On his departure, he made a large number of donations and set up a Support Fund for his staff. He also decreed that the balance left after the liquidation of Van Leer's Vereenigde Fabrieken should be placed at the disposal of Jewish refugees. In addition he, together with Oscar, donated 150,000 guilders to set up a foundation aimed at subsidising Jewish musicians and cabaret artistes. In November 1941 (the family was already in America) a Jewish orchestra with some 70 players appeared at the Jewish Theatre in Amsterdam. As decreed by the Germans, it had a Jewish repertoire and Jewish soloists and played for a Jewish audience. On 9 July 1942, when the deportations of the Jews began, the Jewish Symphony Orchestra gave its last concert.

A horse for Churchill

Bernard Van Leer was in exile in America for nearly four years. From time to time he gave performances with his horses, but otherwise he was unemployed. His factories outside Occupied Europe were run by his staff from London; the factory in England did particularly good business during the war. He had more time than ever to think about the future. After the war, he returned to Europe as soon as he could. His immediate family had survived, but that was probably the only bright spot. Otherwise, he could see nothing but poverty and disruption. He moved into a hotel in Amsterdam and threw himself into his business affairs. There was a great deal of damage that had to be put right, though he soon found out that, from a financial point of view, the war had not worked to his detriment. He foresaw that Europe would need a long period of reconstruction in which he could play a part from his position in the iron and steel industry.

He was convinced, however, that he should not be the only one to benefit. Between the



summer of 1945 and the summer of 1953, Bernard made approximately two million guilders worth of donations, both from the firm and privately, although it is probable that this sum does not include all his private gifts. And it was not always a matter of money. In 1951, for example, he gave 150 tons of iron to the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. And then there was the offer that he made to Winston Churchill at the end of 1945: *'As one of your millions of admirers I am writing this letter to you to offer a small token in appreciation of your great achievements in bringing peace to the world by Victory over Germany and Japan, and to express my personal thanks for the liberation of my country Holland'*. And he then went on to write: *'I recently read in your own words "Do not give money to your sons. If you have the means, give them a horse". These words prompted me to offer you as a gift Salve, one of my most cherished horses and one of the most famous schoolhorses in the world. I feel I know from the style of your writings just the type of horse you would prize, and I am sure that Salve is such a horse and would bring you pleasure'*. Within the year,

Bernard was lunching with Churchill. He brought the horse to England too, of course, though Churchill did not accept it.

The legacy

In the post-war years, Bernard took on another very specific challenge: this was his legacy. He was getting older and, although his health was good, he decided that the time was ripe to settle his affairs. He had been thinking about this during his time in America where there were great industrialists who put a major part of their fortunes into foundations for various social or cultural aims. That appealed to him. He had spoken about it to Oscar, who had very definite ideas on the subject. Oscar was of the opinion that inheritance had a deadly effect on creativity and that children of wealthy parents should not inherit their money. Therefore, his father's money should not automatically go to the heirs, but should somehow be used to help people or institutions that needed it. And in order to bring this about, he, his mother and his brother should waive their legal rights to the inheritance.

Bernard liked this idea. But putting it into practice was no simple matter. For instance, under Dutch law it was impossible to disinherit your wife and children. However, since 1946 he had been living in a hotel in Lausanne in Switzerland and, under certain conditions, disinheritance was possible under Swiss law. A well-known Swiss lawyer was called in to look into the problem. The result was that,



on 1 September 1946 – a few days after his lunch with Churchill – three *pactes successoraux* were signed. Both his wife and his two sons declared that they were no longer his heirs and that they waived their rights to the Van Leer inheritance in perpetuity. In 1951, Bernard was to make similar agreements with those of his brothers and sisters who were still alive. At the same time, *pactes de donation* were drawn up, so that everyone received a substantial sum of money.

Charitable purposes

In 1948 Bernard gave his lawyers the task of working out what should happen to his inheritance. There were several considerations. On his death, his personal estate was to be made over to one or more foundations. The continuity of his business had to be guaranteed and the income from his fortune had to be used for charitable purposes. At the end of 1948, this fortune consisted of shares and other possessions in five European and seven non-European countries. In total, it was worth several million pounds sterling. Because of the way it was spread out, and

taking the tense international situation into account, it seemed sensible to set up two foundations: one in Switzerland, which would inherit the European estate, and one in the United States for the Western hemisphere.

On 10 November 1949 the Bernard van Leer Stiftung was set up in Lucerne in Switzerland. The beneficiaries were to be ‘benevolent or charitable institutions’. In order to find favour with the local authorities, donations were immediately made to various Swiss charities. But it was still unclear what charities the Stiftung was going to support in the future. At the end of 1948, Oscar wrote to his father *‘I know that it is your own intention to do as much good as possible for the benefit of the largest possible group of people. Such purposes should be supported as from which it can be expected that mankind can profit most. If you realize that this world of ours is in a pretty substantial mess we should wonder what has created this mess...If anything can be blamed for the deplorable situation in this world I would say it was the disproportionate growth of science and technique. What you could and*

should contribute to, is that phase of human endeavour which is directed at living together and making peaceful and profitable use of the results of science and technique'

The construction

After the Stiftung had been set up in Switzerland, a great deal of work was done on Bernard's estate planning. The intention was still to have a second foundation in the Western hemisphere but this turned out to be an extremely complicated and time-consuming task. A conference was held in Zürich in February 1952, where the various legal and fiscal options were discussed for more than a week. What would be the position with death duties in Lucerne after Bernard died? Which of the foundations should be the sole heir? Were the *pactes successoraux* watertight? The basis of the scheme was clear – Bernard set this out in a speech he made: *'To use the results of this work and luck for the well-being of all of them who have helped the building up of the Van Leer Concern, as well if possible to use a big part of the results in assisting where assistance is needed, with complete exclusion of*



the matter of politics, religion, race or country. That summer saw all kinds of matters settled, but it would take another year before the construction was complete. Where Bernard had formerly been the only shareholder in almost all the companies, a Panamanian holding company became the shareholder for the entire concern. The company's shares were held in two New York trusts, which were controlled by Bernard during his lifetime and which received the dividends of the Panamanian company. On Bernard van Leer's death, they had to make over their assets to two American foundations of a purely charitable nature. The advantage of these foundations was their tax-free status, which meant that no capital transfer tax and, even more important, no death duties, had to be paid in America.

Objectives

The objectives of the charitable foundations had, at the time, scarcely been defined. Certain aims had been laid down in the statutes but these allowed for a very broad

interpretation. The income and, in certain circumstances, the capital, had to be used for 'religious, charitable, scientific, literary and educational purposes'. Where the American foundations were concerned, these aims were not confined to the United States, as 'the operations of the Foundations may be international in scope'.

The American foundations had limited themselves to awarding a few scholarships through the American Institute of International Education, while the Stiftung in Lucerne had made donations on a rather wider scale, but only in Switzerland. At that time, the foundations only had limited funds available, but that would obviously change after Bernard's death. The charitable field was very wide, and there was an obvious need for research and documentation. Bernard's lawyer in Amsterdam suggested employing an expert who could take an objective approach to this 'in your line', but it was to be years before any further work was done on this.

A solitary life

'Father had a phrase,' said his son Wim, 'if they ask for money, give. But never get involved. He always kept aside, far away'. Nevertheless, it often became too much for him: all those hangers-on who were really only after his money. In 1956 Bernard wrote to someone who had approached him: 'In your letter of July 10th you ask to see me and I will be pleased to receive you, providing it is not your plan to ask for money, no matter how worthy the case may be! During latter years I have become both embarrassed and disgusted by the number of people who ask to see me and just as soon as they are in my neighbourhood they ask for money. The many financial obligations which I have in many countries are such that I cannot even consider any new gifts for some time.'

But he could be persuaded. Especially if he found something congenial. One of his tried and trusted methods was to say, *'See what you can drum up yourselves, then I'll double it'*.

However, Bernard led a solitary life, ever further removed from the greedy outside world. He



was constantly travelling for the company and, therefore, for himself, because he was the company. On 4 January 1958, he suffered a heart attack in his hotel near The Hague. Two days later he died, at the age of seventy-four, in hospital in The Hague. On 9 January a funeral ceremony was held in a hangar at Schiphol airport. Then his body was taken to Israel and buried in Jerusalem.

The day after Bernard died, Oscar announced the news to the board of directors of the company. He then explained about his father's will – the company would be kept together and would continue. His father had spent years with his advisers deciding on what form this could take. The idea was *'to perpetuate Bernard van Leer, both in his capacity as the director and shareholder of the company and as the person who wished to use the fruits of his labour in the service of others'*.

Stomach, spirit or body ?

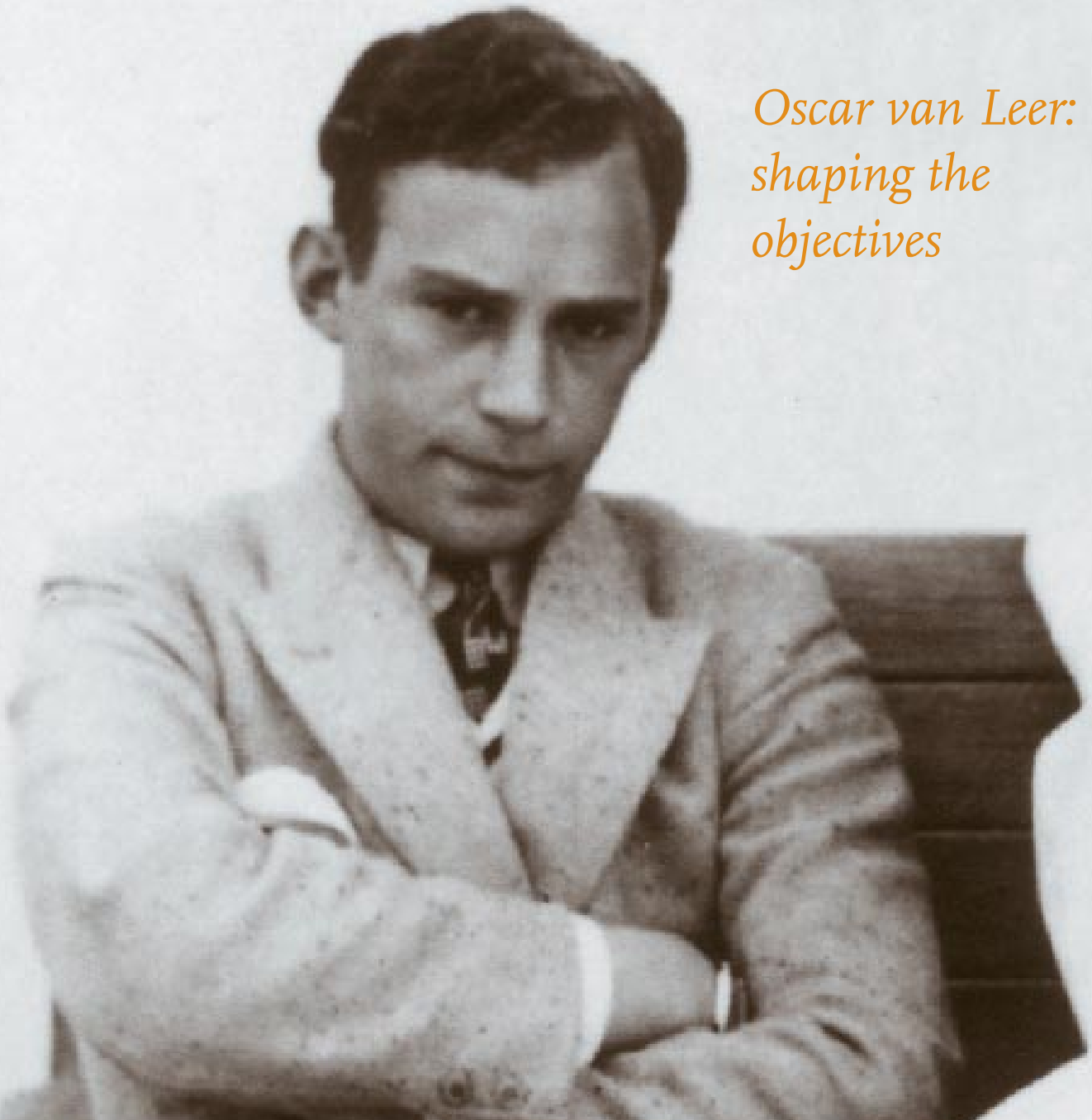
The main problem was that nobody actually knew to which group or category of people Bernard would have wanted his money to

go. His son Wim drew up a memo a few weeks after his father's death on the structure and the work of the charitable foundation. He proposed that, initially, decisions should be made on a number of fundamental matters: was the charity to operate alone or with others? Had the charity one or more aims? Would it be operating locally, regionally or worldwide? Was it concerned with the stomach, the spirit or the body of humanity? It was not easy to find the right path in this matter. *'Compared with spending money, making money is a comparatively simple business since the conditions of operating are dictated more or less by technical possibilities, established practice and competition. These governors act as infallible governors for any commercial activity. But these governors are totally absent in the field of charity, therefore well thought out and strong directives must be laid down and adhered to.'*

Oscar too, shortly before his father's death, had tackled the question: *'Somehow or other, you have always had a great inclination towards anything that has to do with youth ... There is one area where help is probably urgently*

needed and where a fund can achieve relatively a great deal: the prevention of juvenile delinquency ... To pursue the prevention of juvenile delinquency would seem to meet the test of being wide enough a pursuit to present ample opportunity for our talents and resources, and narrow enough a pursuit to prevent our talents and resources from being spread too thin into ineffectiveness. If the funds now at your command would be devoted to this purpose, you will have made not only your mark, during your lifetime, in the field of industry, but also for ever thereafter a contribution to the much wider realm of human happiness'. Oscar never received an answer to this letter.

*Oscar van Leer:
shaping the
objectives*



To The Hague

When Oscar van Leer returned to Europe from America in 1958, he was forty-three years old. He was intelligent, quick-witted and a gifted pianist. He was interested in every possible scientific subject. In the 1930s he had set up two engineering firms, in the fields of acoustics and optics. Unlike his father, he had enjoyed himself during the war years in America and, in spite of repeated requests from his father to come back to Europe, he refused to leave the United States. He even became an American citizen and studied law. But after his father's death, he took over the company and returned to Europe for good. A businessman himself, he spent his whole life attempting to bridge the gap between the world of industry on the one hand and the world of science on the other.

Following in his father's footsteps was no simple matter. Oscar's style of management and doing business was completely different from that of his father, though they both had the same enormous capacity for hard work.

And when it came to philanthropy and generosity, he was his father's equal: no member of the family who was in need ever went home empty-handed, and he always supported good causes. But he would never lend his name to anything and, just like his father, in the course of time he became allergic to the people who were after his money.

It was now his task to develop both the business and the charitable foundation. Although the Bernard van Leer Stiftung was legally established in Lucerne, The Hague was chosen as the site of an unpretentious office to oversee all the rapidly expanding international activities. At the same time, the name 'Bernard van Leer Foundation' began to be used. Almost all the donations which were made between 1958 and 1965 went to private institutions, many of them for the handicapped.

Disadvantaged children

In 1963, while Oscar was on his way to America, he read an article by the New York developmental psychologist Martin Deutsch.

Deutsch was Professor of Early Childhood Studies at the University of New York and was doing research into the problems of socially and culturally disadvantaged children. The title of the article was ‘The disadvantaged child and the learning process’, and the heart of the matter was that the disadvantages which afflicted these children from birth meant the waste of an enormous amount of talent. And something needed to be done about it. *‘The lower-class child’, according to Deutsch, ‘comes to school with few of the skills necessary to meet school demands’. That meant that ‘his initial failure is almost inevitable, and the school experience becomes negatively rather than positively reinforced’. Research showed that ‘early intervention in language areas, perhaps preceded by an emphasis on perceptual training, can facilitate the transition from home to school’.*

The article came as a revelation to Oscar. Here was somebody working in a field and a subject that appealed to him immensely. Typically for him, he rang Deutsch as soon as his plane landed in New York. ‘What are

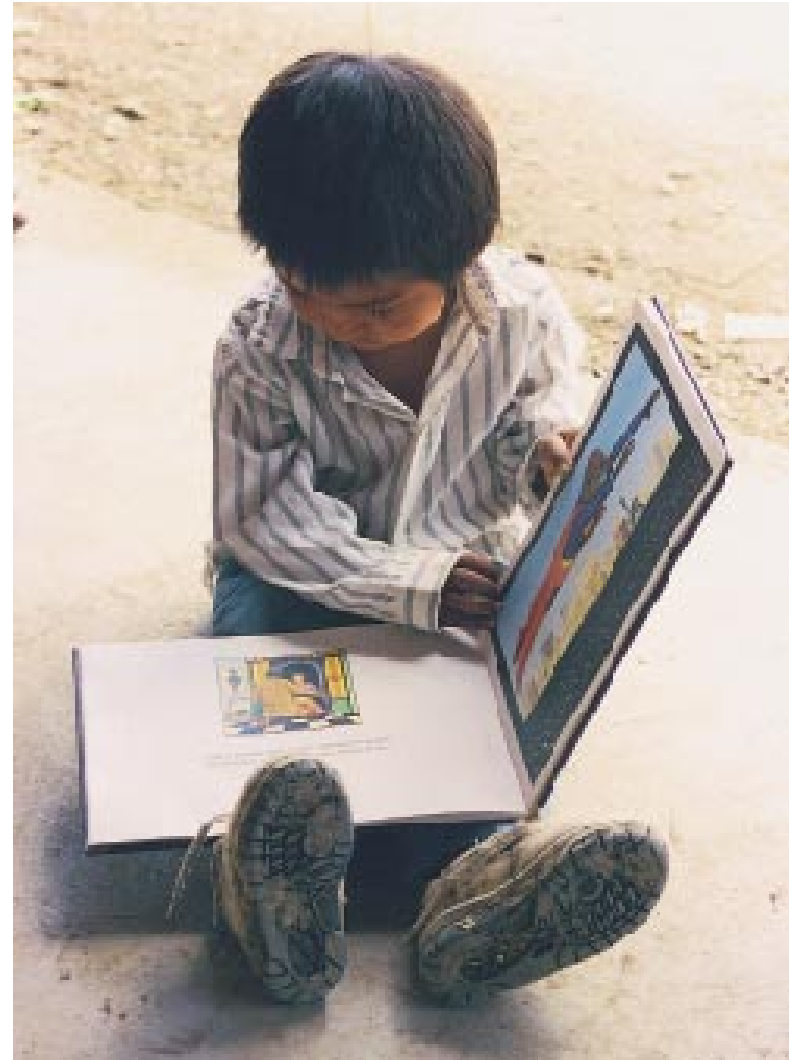
you doing for lunch?’ he asked. ‘Nothing? I’ll be with you straight away!’ The dialogue between the two was very productive. Oscar had found the right road.

A year later it was decided that the Foundation should concentrate on the educational problems of ‘environmentally disadvantaged children and youth’. It was laid down that its main aim was ‘to enable children and youth through schoolgoing age, who are impeded by the social and cultural inadequacy of their background or environment, to achieve the greatest possible realisation of their innate, intellectual potential.’ In order to achieve this, it would be necessary to support the development of educational and didactic methods and systems.

The appointment of Henry Saltzman as Executive Director of the Bernard van Leer Foundation was the next logical step. Saltzman was then working with the Ford Foundation in New York; he not only knew Deutsch, but was also active in the same field and had published articles on the

problem of dropouts in the US school system. During the three years that he worked in The Hague, he maintained regular contact with Deutsch.

The new direction taken by the Foundation had as its main focus children living in countries where there were Van Leer companies. The company was taking money from these countries through its industrial activities and that money had to be ploughed back in one way or another. And it had to go to the most valuable resource – in other words, the young. This could best be done by means of educational projects which would increase the opportunities for these children to play an active part in their countries in the future.



*Developing the
activities*



The first project: Jamaica

The first major project aimed at stimulating the development of young children was at the same time a test case for the Foundation. This was the ‘Project for Early Childhood Education (PECE)’, which was initiated in Jamaica in 1966. Funds were made available to the University of the West Indies to improve Basic Schools – nursery schools set up and run by the community – of which there were over 1000 at that time.

It was a conscious policy decision – to make use of education to reduce and, if possible, prevent the consequences of neglect. The project in Jamaica had far-reaching effects and was to form the cornerstone of the work of the Foundation: it was to be a model for countless other projects in many countries. However, it became clear that education alone was not the solution to the problem of disadvantage in developing countries. The emphasis shifted more towards projects focusing on health, hygiene, diet and upbringing, as well as education. Parents and, ultimately, the community as a whole, were

involved in these projects. The realisation grew that co-operation between school, family and community was of crucial importance. Gradually, the Foundation began to aim at an integrated approach, based on the situation of the people concerned rather than on scientific theories.

The problems turned out to be more complex and unmanageable than had been assumed in the early years. For example, who or what determined whether a child was disadvantaged or not? And where were these children? In which countries and in which areas of these countries? What was the best way of preventing or removing their disadvantages? With the aid of schools, parents, the community, or a combination of all these? And who were the best people to carry out the projects: universities, national governments or local authorities, the communities themselves, or private organisations? These issues demanded a great deal of flexibility, time and energy on the part of the still young and inexperienced Foundation, but its efforts did not go unrewarded.

Henry Salzman was succeeded in 1968 by Willem Welling, then director of Higher Education for UNESCO in Paris. He saw the post as a welcome challenge, though he had some trouble adjusting to the unfamiliar culture of the drum-makers who were the financial mainstay of the Foundation. During his twenty years as director, he continued to build on the foundations laid down in the 1960s. When he was appointed, the programme consisted of seventeen projects, by the mid-1980s there were more than 100. One of the most important things that he learned through the years was that *'the only way that young children will be brought to the fore on the social agenda is if the communities themselves, particularly parents, take the matter in hand'*.

Inextricably intertwined

In 1971, the structure which Bernard van Leer had arranged with regard to his legacy was radically changed. The Panamanian holding company and the American foundations were dissolved and the entire share capital was transferred to the newly

established Van Leer Group Foundation in the Netherlands. This Van Leer Group Foundation, run by a board of nine members, became the administrator of Bernard van Leer's legacy. At the same time, the Stichting Bernard Van Leer Foundation was legally established in The Hague as a charitable organisation according to Dutch law. The Bernard van Leer Stiftung in Lucerne continued to exist as a small Swiss charitable foundation, only supporting charities in the Canton of Lucerne.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation (BvLF) was under the supervision of a Board of Trustees with the same nine members who formed the board of the Van Leer Group Foundation. The income of the BvLF derived from the Van Leer Group Foundation, and the amount received depended on the income that the Van Leer Group Foundation earned from dividends on the shares of the Van Leer company. The new structure meant that Oscar van Leer's different roles became inextricably intertwined. He was managing director of the company – Royal Packaging



Meeting of the Bernard van Leer Foundation Board of Trustees, 1978. From left to right: W.H. Welling (Executive Director), P.N. Ylvisaker, J.Y. Eichenberger, A.H. Th.M. van Trier, A. van Danzig, Oscar van Leer (Chairman), Sir Hugh Springer, J.A. Ritmeester van de Kamp, J. Kreiken, T. Lloyd Robinson, P.J. Idenburg (Secretary) (photo: Max Koot Studio)

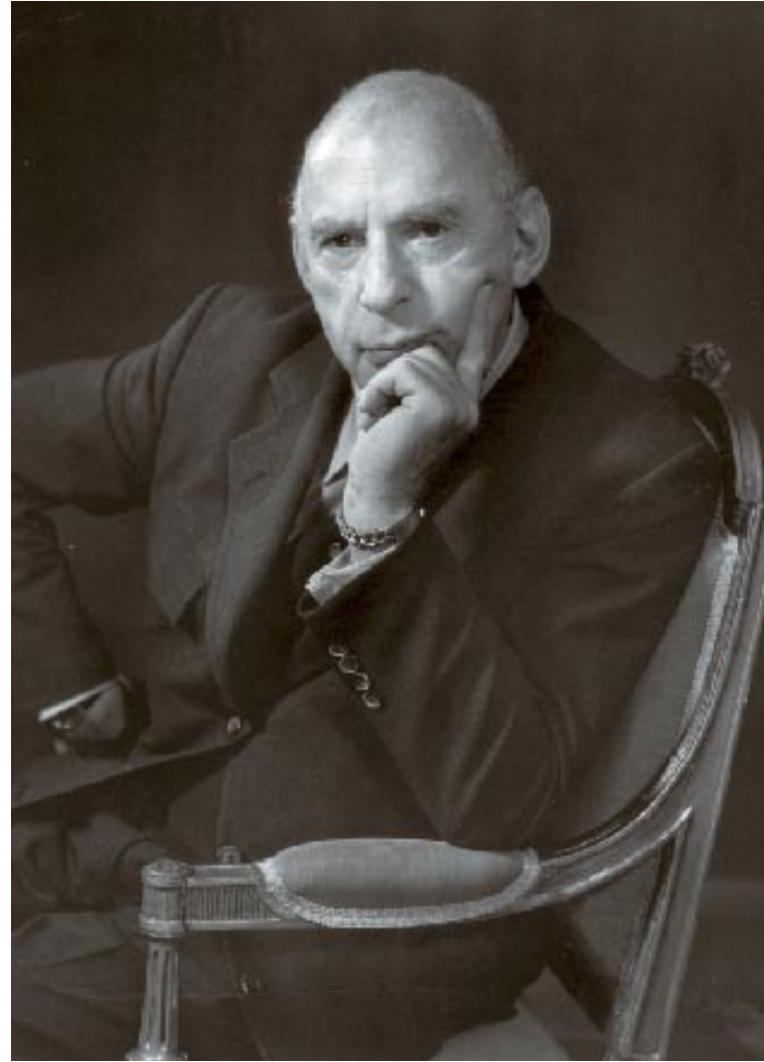
Industries Van Leer – and was also chairman of the board of the BvLF as well as chairman of the board of the Van Leer Group Foundation. When he reached retirement age in 1979, he resigned from the company but stayed on as a member of its board of governors. He continued to be a member of the boards of both foundations.

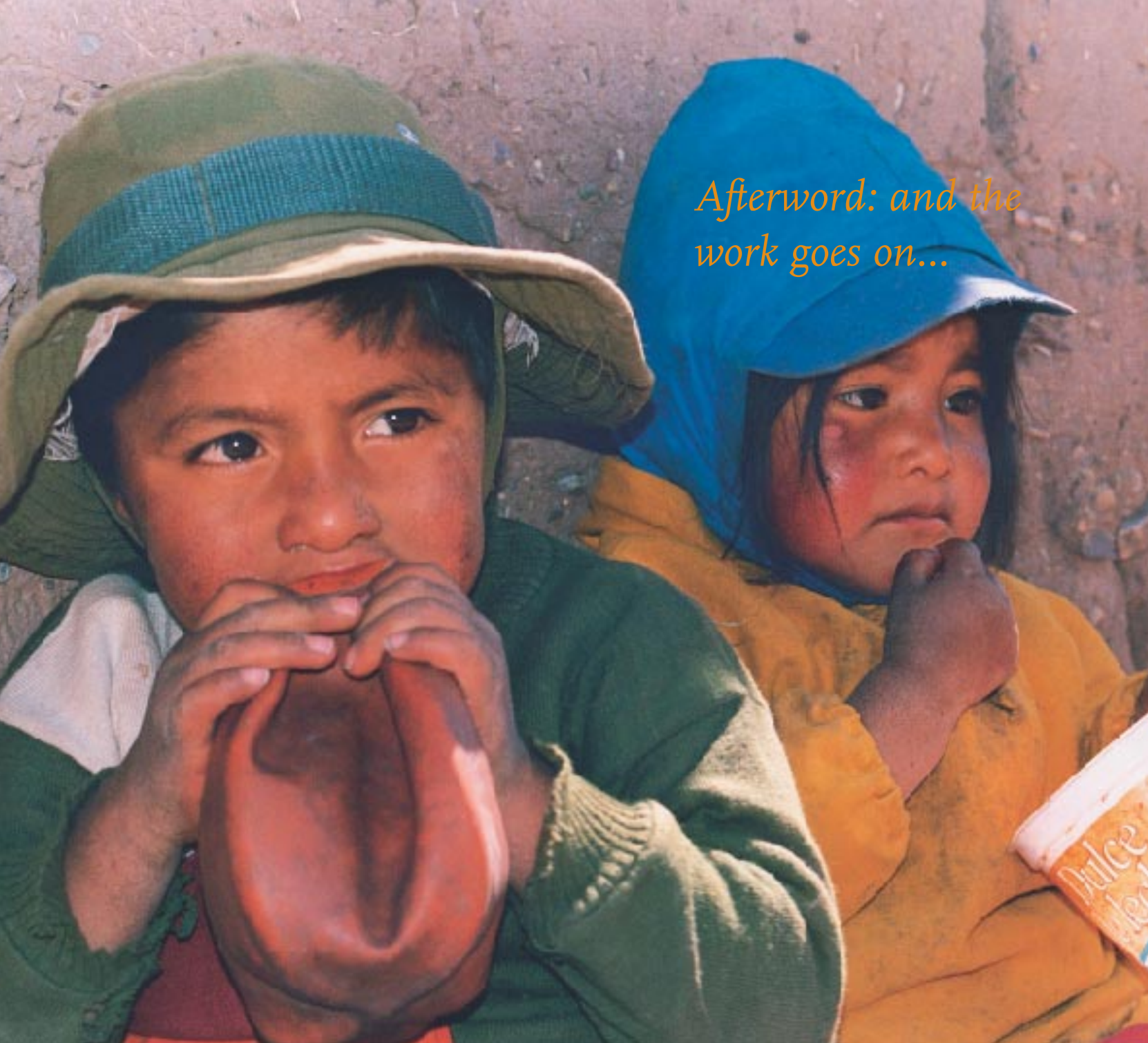
Straws in the wind

In 1986, Oscar van Leer gave up all his duties. He left in the knowledge that he had added immeasurable value to his father's legacy, and that the prospects for the future were excellent. Willem Welling wrote a long letter to Oscar on the occasion of his retirement. In it, he looked back at the 1960s, but focused mainly on the state of affairs in 1986. *'On the one hand,'* he wrote, *'straws in the wind have come together to make very strong bricks. And there the Foundation can claim success in all humility to have made a very real contribution. On the other hand, the problems of the world have become more complex, even dangerous. Our line of bricks looks very thin indeed. But it is strong and will*

stand. There, I think, is the lasting memorial of your years with the Foundation.'

And he went on to say, *'I know that at times you have been impatient with the rate of growth of our wall. But may I repeat the essence of the argument which has characterised so much of our "creative tension" of the years. In building this Foundation, all of us have been engaged in a delicate process of institutional experimentation which has produced a body which is unique in the world. You were the man with the idea; together we made it a reality ... Its consequences in the benefits to children worldwide is recognised. The Bernard van Leer Foundation is more and more at the centre of a world movement, still informal and not organised as it should be, but identifiably a world movement in early childhood education in which all ages and stages of human growth can find themselves. And the work goes on'.*





Afterword: and the work goes on...

Although Oscar van Leer's formal involvement ended in 1986, he continued to take a great interest in the work of the Foundation until his death ten years later. One of Oscar's special qualities was the great value he placed on the role of parents in the development of children. In recognition of everything he had done for the Foundation, the Oscar van Leer Award was instituted in 1994, on the occasion of his eightieth birthday. This is a prize that recognises excellence in projects which have found ways of involving parents and community in the development of young children.

When I took over from Willem Welling as director of the Foundation in 1989, I entered an organisation that had a clear and relevant mandate and a great deal of experience relating to the holistic development of young children within the context of the family and the local community. It was a foundation with an excellent reputation.

One of the things which has most impressed me is the emphasis that the organisation has always put on effectiveness, for example, by focusing on support for children aged zero to seven years. Research has shown that investing in the development of young children will reap the greatest rewards – for the children themselves and for society as a whole. By concentrating on young children, the Foundation is able to build up a fund of specialist knowledge and experience which it can learn from and then pass on. In this way, the Foundation does not just support projects, it also passes on the knowledge and experience acquired from these projects. Effectiveness is also an important factor in the support for the projects – this means taking the long-term view, focusing on sustainable development, encouraging project partners to develop their own expertise, and providing professional support for the development process.

We will continue to build on the foundations that have been laid down in the course of the years, and the Foundation will also change as the world around it changes. Children are increasingly confronted with the disintegration of family relationships caused by migration, AIDS or armed conflicts. Many children are also confronted with violence, prejudice and discrimination.

But there are new opportunities, too. Since the world conference on 'Education for All' was held in Thailand in 1990, national governments and multilateral organisations have tended to place the development of young children considerably higher on their agendas. Where the Foundation was once one of the few organisations which focused on this issue, now it is possible to join forces with other organisations and give more children the kind of developmental impulse which is geared to their specific situation, and which will therefore be the most effective. It has been one of my priorities to promote this kind of working partnership.

Whatever the changes may be in the world in which children are growing up, we shall continue in the future to follow the vision of Bernard and Oscar van Leer and the mandate that they gave to their foundation. Because the work still goes on ...

*Rien van Gendt,
Executive Director, Bernard van Leer Foundation*



Bernard van Leer  *Foundation*