

Henry Dunker – the concentration of power

“I am as poor as a church mouse”, wrote the 31-year-old Henry Dunker in a letter in 1901, after years of toil with what was to become his main project - Helsingborgs Gummifabrik. In 1960, when he looked back over his life at the age of 90, he was Sweden’s richest man. “He is a man for whom castles in the air and daydreams mean little compared with cold facts,” wrote a journalist before the commemorative celebrations.

By that time, Henry Dunker had personally steered the Helsingborg plant’s fortunes with an iron hand for nearly seven decades, and had equally sternly and forcefully controlled and followed developments at Trelleborgs Gummifabrik since 1905.

With stubborn determination, he had made his mark on Sweden’s industrial history, amid drama of a kind that can only be created by a man who will stop at nothing. His approach was characterized by skill, purposefulness, intrigue, relentless drive, toughness, scheming, charm and ruthlessness. Both respected and hated, he was also called many things - from angel to devil!

ELDEST-BORN OF ALL THE BROTHERS

Henry Dunker liked to quote lines from a well-known Swedish poem: “As eldest-born of all the brothers, he learned to command. He could not submit to anyone, so created his own band of

underlings.” Taking command came to be a guiding principle in his life. This had its beginnings in the family home where he was the eldest of nine siblings - six boys and three girls.

He was born in 1870 in Esbjerg, Denmark, where his father Johan Dunker, German by origin, was a harbor engineer. His mother Henriette was Danish. The family moved to Helsingborg in 1872, when Henry’s father was hired to expand the harbor.

For several years, Johan Dunker had pondered the idea of starting up a Swedish rubber-production plant to make rubber galoshes, which ought to be a profitable business, given the rain and slush typical of Sweden. In 1890, he and a few wealthy Helsingborg businessmen decided to form Helsingborgs Gummifabriks Aktiebolag. Construction of the plant began in 1891.

Johan’s son Henry did not exactly shine in school. The four grades he completed at the boys’ secondary school took him a while, since

he had to repeat three of them. During his final year, he had a brother two years younger than himself as a classmate!

His job as an errand boy in Helsingborg came to an end when his father decided that 16-year-old Henry would be improved by working as a trainee in Hamburg. In 1891, when the rubber-production plant was beginning to take shape, Henry was summoned home. He was not yet 21 when, together with his father, he took on the extremely challenging galoshes project.

A WINNING IDEA IN HELSINGBORG - GALOSHES

The original stroke of genius - rubber shoes for wearing over leather shoes - came from Goodyear in the US. At that time, however, the Russians in St Petersburg were regarded as the most skilled makers of galoshes, and the Russian galoshes were in high demand for their superior quality. But when sufficient wagon-loads of stiff,





Julius Gerkan 1896

yellowed galoshes had been returned to the Helsingborg plant, Henry realized it was high time to acquire some Russian know-how.

Arriving in St Petersburg, he however found the Russians unwilling to divulge their secrets to a certain Henry Dunker. He proceeded to Riga, where there was rumored to be a skilled chemist, Julius Gerkan, who knew the secrets of galosh manufacture. Gerkan was easily persuaded, and came to Helsingborg as the company's technical manager in 1892.

It took about ten difficult years before the two of them got the company on its feet. Henry Dunker and Julius Gerkan toiled virtually round the clock. Henry Dunker himself, as president of the company at the age of 24 in 1894, worked in production on the days when he was not traveling around selling galoshes. It was a tough job, with much socializing in the evenings with distributors and customers. "Sometimes I went straight from the hotel to the production line



Henry Dunker 1893

without any sleep at all," recalled Henry Dunker. "But I was young and strong and lived for my company." In 1893, the young plant manager became a shareholder in the company he already called "his". At that time he owned two shares!

When his father died in 1898, it was Henry who, in addition to his work at the plant, assumed responsibility for the rest of the family. Despite his arduous existence as the head of Helsingborgs Gummifabrik - with a trained bulldog by his side in case he was attacked by the workers - his nose for business, constant quest for favorable deals and need for capital ensured that he tirelessly pursued every opportunity that came along.

ENTHUSIASTIC, SHREWD AND CURIOUS

With enthusiasm, shrewdness and endless curiosity, he busied himself with the most varied

projects that took him from one industry to another. The CV of his business ventures would eclipse most people's endeavors even today. All his efforts were aimed at fulfilling his great plan - to personally take over Helsingborgs Gummifabrik.

And in this he succeeded. In 1910 he acquired a majority interest in the company. Meanwhile, he had already held a majority stake in Trelleborgs Gummifabrik for five years.

After World War I, and when the Russian Revolution had swept everything away in that country, Henry Dunker's company in Helsingborg became Europe's leading producer of galoshes and rubber shoes. The tireless work on merger plans finally bore fruit in 1927 after being nurtured for nearly 30 years. The three major galosh-making plants - in Viskafors, Malmö and Helsingborg - were gathered into one company, Förenade Gummifabrikernas AB. "Galosh King" Dunker reigned unchallenged.

During the 1930s, galoshes increasingly gave way to rubber boots and other products. Production was established outside Sweden in 1932. Tretorn AB, which in 1934 became the parent company in Dunker's Helsingborg-based rubber empire, was flourishing.

The good times continued, despite the fact that raw rubber threatened to be in short supply during World War II. Henry Dunker sparred and maneuvered with "the Galosh", as the rubber-production plant was called in Helsingborg, struggling to cope with inferior rubber mixes,



rationing, synthetic rubber and reclaimed rubber. And the war years passed profitably!

The 1950s and 1960s brought the need for rationalization, new approaches and fresh winds to propel the company into the future. But Henry Dunker stubbornly ran his own race, while the company battled helplessly against devastating competition from low-wage countries. The hand of the patriarch bore down heavily, unrelentingly and suffocatingly on the company in Helsingborg.

He followed the fortunes of his company in minute detail. For decades he had performed his daily round of the plant and the office, missing nothing and with a stern and piercing look in his gray-blue eyes. He was short and thickset, with a pot belly in his latter years, and often wore a

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gray coat with a velvet collar and a cravat sporting a glistening pearl. On his feet he wore specially made shoes. Occasionally he would comment on the progress of operations in a gruff, powerful, sometimes staccato voice.

ALL WERE AFRAID

The administrators - the link between Henry Dunker and the plant - bore the brunt of his comments. They were only there to check on the

workers, he maintained. They were simply a necessary evil and were of little benefit. He could dress anyone down mercilessly and put them in their place in front of the workers. Everyone was afraid of plant manager Dunker. He was a typical manager of his time, in the class society that then prevailed. He maintained a formal aloofness. “He reigned supreme,” commented Justus Tranchell.

With time, the Trelleborg company came to be managed highly independently. The people there were less fearful of him. “He was the type of person who, when he entered a room, seemed to fill it before he had even opened his mouth. He was incredibly pompous, without ever actually saying anything,” relates Jan-Erik Leander.

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but only about concrete things. Results were what mattered. He was extremely alert, had a fantastic memory and made rapid decisions as he leaned back in his

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chair with his cigar. He could also be very likeable and charming when necessary. He enjoyed good food and drink, was always clear-headed and could give impressive speeches.”

But there was always a slightly nervous and edgy atmosphere in the Trelleborg office when Henry Dunker was on his way there, almost as if the king were visiting. The yellow lead pencils that he always used were sharpened, and the building was cleaned and tidied. Everyone was present - Henry Dunker commanded enormous respect.

“His entire approach was to find the right people and screen out those for whom he had no use. That was how overbearing he was - enormous power concentrated in one person. As with all such wielders of power, other people simply yield.”

BEHIND A PROTECTIVE WALL

There was also a private Henry Dunker, separated from the industrialist as if by a wall, who had close friends. At the age of 32, Henry Dunker had married 23-year-old Gerda Sylvan from Helsingborg - a warm, spontaneous and generous woman. She died as early as 1936, and

magnificent home, Villa Hevea in Helsingborg.

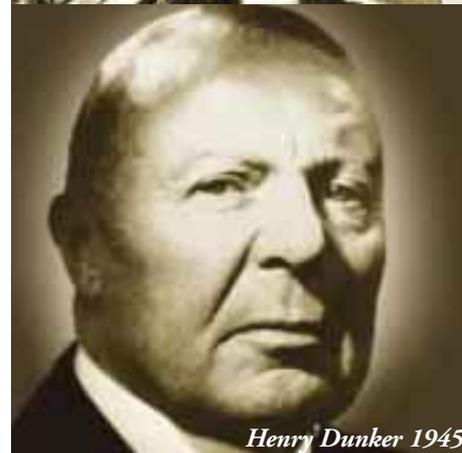
There were also servants behind the wall of loneliness. Together with Henry Dunker, they lived according to a fixed routine in a form of unity. They were genuinely fond of him and felt that he also cared for them. In May 1962, Sweden's then wealthiest man died at the age of 92.

THE LEGACY TO POSTERITY

He left behind a fortune of approximately SEK 60 M. After inheritance tax, some SEK 35 M was transferred to a number of funds and foundations that Henry Dunker had created in his will. They included the Henry and Gerda Dunker Bequest Fund Number 2 and the Henry and Gerda Dunker Foundation, together known as “the Dunker Funds”. These funds still control a majority of the voting rights in Trelleborg AB, in keeping with the wish clearly expressed by Henry Dunker in his will.

*Anna Tranchell, Åke Belfrage,
Justus Tranchell and Henry Dunker
on a boat outing in summer 1936.*

there was much that disappeared with her. There were no children. Social life came to an end and there were no more lively parties in the couple's





Second from left: Royal meeting - “Rubber King” Henry Dunker welcomes King Gustaf VI Adolf on a visit to Trelleborg in summer 1958.

An important duty of the Boards of Directors of the Dunker Funds is to safeguard the funds’ assets. Among other causes, the returns from the funds pay for the running of the Dunker Hospital in Helsingborg, which is housed in Villa Hevea. Some of the remaining return goes to the City of Helsingborg.

“Henry Dunker’s wish was for the money to be used for an independent purpose beneficial to the citizens of Helsingborg,” notes Rolf Kjellman. “The Dunker Funds have no further influence over how the City interprets this and uses the money. They have nothing to do with the use to which it is put. Many people in Helsingborg believe we exert an influence, but in fact we are in the peculiar situation that our

only duty is to create growth in the funds and distribute the returns in accordance with the testator’s wishes.”

The will also assigns beneficial rights to Henry Dunker’s and his wife’s siblings, nieces and nephews and their children (three generations altogether), which means that part of the yield goes to relatives. However, the rights are restricted to these three generations, after which this portion too goes to the City of Helsingborg. Someone has calculated that if Trelleborg AB continues to thrive, Helsingborg should be able to halve its municipal tax by the middle of this century! Helsingborg City Theater, Helsingborg Concert Hall, the Museum of Culture in Fredriksdal, a new stand at the Olympia football stadium and the major Dunker Cultural Center project were all paid for entirely or partly with money from the Dunker Funds.

It may seem strange that not a drop of this rain of gold is used to the benefit of the inhabitants of Trelleborg. After all, it is Trelleborg AB that generates the major portion of the Dunker Funds’ income. But Henry Dunker was a local patriot to his fingertips, and perhaps he also assumed that Johan Kock would fulfill the corresponding role of benefactor in Trelleborg. This he tried to do, but he lacked Dunker’s financial capacity and muscle. Large portions of the Kock Foundations’ capital were used to cover losses in financially troubled Kock companies, and most of what still remains goes to medical research.

Dunker also underlined the local link to Helsingborg in his will, decreeing that at least three members of the Dunker Foundation’s Board of Directors must reside in or near Helsingborg.

Here too, Henry Dunker’s local patriotism came to the fore.