

## The Exclusions of 1935 and the Albert Steffen Foundation

A statement on the rehabilitation initiative as well as on the repeal of the decisions of 1935 at the General Assembly 2018 of the Albert Steffen Foundation had appeared in "Anthroposophy worldwide" 7-8/18 under the title "Rehabilitation – postscript and preview". This will be discussed below.

### Preliminary Remark

Only those who were of the opinion that these exclusions were unjustified in 1935 could have approved the reversal of the resolution by which Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede had been excluded from the Executive Council of the General Anthroposophical Society in 1935 and were separated from their activities as Section Heads of the School of Spiritual Science, as requested by the General Assembly in 2018. Anyone who was or is of the opposite opinion had, of course, to vote against the reversal or at least to abstain. Majorities, even overwhelming ones, do not guarantee that decisions taken in this way are necessarily right or wrong; this applies to the resolution of 1935 as well as to the reversal of this resolution at the General Assembly in 2018.

As a reminder: In 1935, not only Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede were excluded from the Executive Council and from their other activities in their Sections (Part I of the former proposal) by a single vote, but six other individuals<sup>1</sup> specifically mentioned by name (Part II) as well as the Dutch and English National Societies were also excluded from the General Anthroposophical Society (Part III). Parts II and III were already abolished unanimously at the 1948 General Assembly, i.e. also with the approval of the Executive Council members Albert Steffen and Guenther Wachsmuth who were present at the time. The report in the news sheet for members read as follows:

“The General Assembly of Easter 1948 declares the decision by the General Assembly of 14 April 1935 concerning the membership of the General Anthroposophical Society annulled and welcomes everyone who rejoins the Society.”<sup>2</sup>

This formulation did not make clear that the 1935 decision had only been *partially* reversed. This fact was not known until 2017, since in the weekly newspaper for the members No. 51-52/2002 Uwe Werner also reported that all parts of the resolution had been repealed. In this respect, many will have been surprised in February 2017 when it transpired that the part of the decision concerning the exclusion of Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede was still valid.

In 1948 it was recognised that the exclusions "as such" had at least partly been a mistake. This was done by the unanimous acceptance of the motion. The possibility of an unbiased and unprejudiced evaluation of the events of 1935 or even the recognition that injustice might have been done was not yet there.<sup>3</sup> The initiators of the rehabilitation initiative were convinced that the situation was different today, after decades of substantial contributions by several authors concerning a reappraisal.<sup>4</sup>

A contrasting picture emerges from the article by Christine Engels, President of the Albert Steffen Foundation. There, considerable objections and reservations are raised against the reversal of the

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<sup>1</sup> Namely D. N. Dunlop, George Kaufmann, Dr. F. W. Zeylmans, P. J. de Haan, Jürgen von Grone and Dr. E. Kolisko.

<sup>2</sup> Nachrichtenblatt No. 16/1948

<sup>3</sup> The explanatory statement by petitioner Emil Leinhas stated: "*that - no matter what transgressions may have occurred over and over - the exclusion as such was a mistake*". Source: Einige Gesichtspunkte zum Verständnis der Vorgänge in der Anthroposophischen Gesellschaft nach Rudolf Steiners Tod. Emil Leinhas, Selbstverlag. 1963

<sup>4</sup> See bibliography at the end of the brochure: [http://wegman-vreede.com/wp1/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Rehabilitation\\_Wegman-Vreede\\_A5.pdf](http://wegman-vreede.com/wp1/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Rehabilitation_Wegman-Vreede_A5.pdf)

resolution and the rehabilitation efforts in both factual as well as moral respects. Some motives will be discussed below.

### Looking at the statements in detail:

The first paragraph claims that

“Albert Steffen, as the then first chairman (with Guenther Wachsmuth), was the main target of the criticism regarding the exclusions of 1935.”

The following quotation from the brochure<sup>5</sup> is intended to support this statement:

“It should be noted that no absolute judgement on Albert Steffen and Guenther Wachsmuth is intended and no such judgement must be cast. Their commitment to anthroposophy must also be highly valued. (...) It would be progress in keeping with a spiritual-soul-attitude if we could recognize the work of the opposing forces in someone's actions without losing our love for them as human beings and without misinterpreting their true striving.“

However, this quotation by no means refers exclusively to the exclusions of 1935 or Albert Steffen and Guenther Wachsmuth, and certainly not to their personalities, which, however, only becomes apparent from the context from which the quotation was taken. The following is the entire context in which the passages cited by the Albert Steffen Foundation are underlined:

“In the years following 1935 Marie Steiner (who had taken an active role in the expulsion of her Executive Council colleagues), was herself excluded from participating in the Executive Council and from shaping the Society. The feminine element was thus entirely eliminated from the first Executive Council despite the fact that in his earlier esoteric lessons Rudolf Steiner had placed particular emphasis on the significance of a balance between feminine and masculine aspects within a renewed esotericism.

The expulsion of Ita Wegman from the Executive Council appears especially tragic and consequential against the background of Rudolf Steiner's evening lectures during the December 1923 refounding of the Anthroposophical Society. These lectures reveal the collegial work he had shared with her over thousands of years on behalf of Michael.<sup>6</sup>

When Wilhelm Rath sought out Elisabeth Vreede after the 1935 Annual General Meeting and asked her about the expulsions, she said that what had occurred in Dornach would have an impact on world events as a whole: “The dam that held back Nationalist Socialism is now broken.”<sup>7</sup>

„Of the original Executive Council and the somewhat diverse spiritual streams it represented, only Albert Steffen and Günther Wachsmuth remained. This resulted in an inevitable one-sidedness that remained a determining factor in the development of the General Anthroposophical Society for decades. During this time, the Society sank slowly into the state of paralysis and ineffectiveness that Rudolf Steiner had warned would be a pressing danger if the Christmas Conference impulse were not taken up. “Anthroposophy,” he said, “will certainly not be driven out of the world. I would say, however, that for decades and longer it could sink back into a latent condition. The loss for the development of humanity would be enormous.”<sup>8</sup>

It should be noted that the intention here is not in any way to condemn Albert Steffen and Günther Wachsmuth—nor should such a condemnation follow from this rehabilitation effort. Their engagement on behalf of anthroposophy should be highly valued. For example, we have Guenther Wachsmuth to thank for the building of the second Goetheanum; without him, it would not have been possible. And we have Albert

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<sup>5</sup> An Initiative for the Rehabilitation of Ita Wegman und Elisabeth Vreede. Thomas Heck und Eva Lohmann-Heck, private print 2017, [http://gv-2018.com/wegman-vreede/English\\_A5.pdf](http://gv-2018.com/wegman-vreede/English_A5.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> See GA 233, and Zeylmans: Who was *Ita Wegman*, vol. I, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Heinz Eckhoff, *Schicksal der Menschheit an der Schwelle*, Stuttgart 1998, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> GA 258, p. 171. For instance, there were no Executive Council meetings during four years of the Second World War, and no Class lessons were offered at the Goetheanum from 1943 to 1949 although the work of the School continued in other parts of the world.

Steffen to thank for his splendid writings, his dramas, and his healing paintings. At the same time, we ought not overlook how the development of the Society was shaped by these two Executive Council members. It would represent progress towards a consciousness-soul attitude if we could come to perceive the work of the counterforces in a person's actions while at the same time not losing sight of our love for that person as a human being or misjudging his true striving.<sup>9</sup> We are confronted by “strong oppositional forces, demonic forces” that “attack the anthroposophical movement” and “make use of human beings on the earth,”<sup>10</sup> and without such a consciousness-soul attitude we might otherwise come to view the entire history of the General Anthroposophical Society as a permanent failure resulting from the dereliction of the members—ourselves included. As Rudolf Steiner so frequently said, all “inner opposition”<sup>11</sup> “including within those closest to me”<sup>12</sup> arises out of the influence of the counterforces.“

On the one hand it becomes clear that the quotations were not "applied" to Albert Steffen and Guenther Wachsmuth, but meant the entire membership - ourselves included. If we had only wanted to apply this reference to Albert Steffen and Guenther Wachsmuth, we would have formulated it clearly as well, e.g. in this way: we would at the very least have had to say "... in the deeds of *these* people ..." or "... *of these two* people ..." Thus this presumed reference to Albert Steffen and Guenther Wachsmuth is not there, which also becomes clear from the main quotation to which we have referred:

“...he [the walker of the Chymic Wedding] is to look deeper into the motives of human will and action than ordinary consciousness would do. The performer of the "Chymic Wedding" wants to say that this ordinary consciousness only gets to know the surface of will and action, and that due to this consciousness people also become aware of only the surface of will and action. The deeper spiritual impulses which pour into this will and action out of the transcendental world and which shape human social coexistence remain unknown to this consciousness. The human being can live in the belief that he is acting for a certain reason, but in reality this reason is only a mask for a reason that remains unconscious. If people regulate their social coexistence according to the ordinary consciousness, forces intervene in this coexistence that are not in the spirit of development which is beneficial for mankind....”<sup>13</sup>

One gets the impression that by taking the quotes out of context it is implied, among other things, that the initiators of the rehabilitation initiative did something they in fact did not intend to do, and which does not follow conclusively from the original quotes either.

It is a fact however, that A. Steffen not only endorsed the exclusions of 1935, but only remained in his position as first chairman of the Executive Council on the condition that the General Assembly would approve the exclusions.<sup>14</sup> If these exclusions were indeed an injustice, A. Steffen was involved in making this happen.

The article by C. Engels elaborates on this further:

“In his article in *Anthroposophy Worldwide* 1-2/2018, Justus Wittich pointed out that it had been fully confirmed by now that Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede were «without fault», implying that he agreed with the view that the exclusions had occurred as a result of objective mistake by those in charge of the Society.”

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<sup>9</sup> “The human being can live in the belief that he is acting for a certain reason, but in reality this reason is only a mask for a reason that remains unconscious.” (Rudolf Steiner, GA 35, p. 349f.)

<sup>10</sup> GA 260a, 1987, p. 235.

<sup>11</sup> Noted several times in GA 258, and especially in GA 259.

<sup>12</sup> Zeylmans, *Who was Ita Wegman*, vol. III, p. 435.

<sup>13</sup> GA 35, p. 349

<sup>14</sup> Nachrichtenblatt No. 19 / 12 May 1935

In fact, Justus Wittich expresses the following:

“Later, the Anthroposophical Society in Switzerland devoted several years to accumulating material on the individual members of the original Executive Council; various biographies appeared over time, and in the minds of the third generation of anthroposophists, the formerly excluded Executive Council members Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede lived on as unblemished participants in the foundation and further development of the Society.”

and elsewhere:

“Although these formerly excluded Executive Council members have arrived in the twenty-first century unblemished in the minds of most members today, they have never been officially rehabilitated. ... During the annual general meeting of 14 March, for which 1,820 members came together in the still unfinished second Goetheanum, a group of members, supported by the remaining members of the Executive Council, moved that Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede be excluded from the Executive Council and divested of all duties, including their section leaderships.”

The abbreviated version does not reflect what Justus Wittich really wrote. It is unclear where the conclusion comes from that J. Wittich wrote of an "*objective mistake by those in charge of the Society*". If this should refer to the phrase "*supported by the remaining members of the Executive Council*", there can be no doubt about the accuracy of this statement.

The extent to which the repeal of the resolutions at the 2018 General Assembly came too early for the Albert Steffen Foundation is not to be assessed here. The Albert Steffen Foundation:

“The topic [the events of 1935] is so broad and complex that much time is needed to acquire any kind of expertise.”

This is certainly true and a lot has already been achieved, for example Emanuel Zeylmans van Emmichoven spent twelve years working on his documentary, which became available 25 years ago.

It goes on:

“Additionally, we feel, we are sorry to say, that the way rehabilitation is sought seems rather dubious to us. Rehabilitation without going through the processes thoroughly, and with the mere indication that the material supporting the rehabilitation was to be found (almost exclusively) in books written by Ita Wegman's close co-workers, is rather an unpleasant matter and appeals to emotions rather than judgement.”

Emanuel Zeylmans of Emmichoven, Lily Kolisko and Peter Selg, for example, are supposed to have been close co-workers of Ita Wegman? A somewhat "unpleasant matter" is rather this contribution by the Albert Steffen Foundation, because the argumentation makes no reference to anything, not even any underlying literature. What was expected? That we publish everything once again that has already been published? Our brochure contains numerous footnotes with references and the most important publications are listed in the bibliography.<sup>4</sup> This made it possible to form an independent opinion for those who had not yet formed one, including members of the Albert Steffen Foundation. Instead, assumptions and allegations are made. Isn't it just this style of the article by the foundation that addresses "*the emotions, not the judgement*" of the reader?

More from the wording:

“... and because every quote by Steffen that would free him from any accusations would almost certainly be answered by another quote that would prove the opposite, we decided not to contribute in any way to the public anthroposophical debate on this matter. While we feel that this is inadequate, we prefer this inadequacy to having to stand behind self-produced statements later that may turn out to be neither sound nor tenable.“

Does this not imply that Albert Steffen is being accused of something? And are all the Zeylmans, Kirchner-Bockholts, Meyers, Selgs, Wittichs and Hecks opponents of Albert Steffen? After all, the current status of the revision process does not by far consist of quotations, but rather of the review and evaluation of documents and reports. Is the Albert Steffen Foundation really of the opinion that - outside of itself - there is no unbiased willingness to understand this matter and that instead one is only waiting to immediately answer "exculpatory quotations" with "incriminating quotations"?

The article continues:

“This year's vote was based on the assumption that «wrong had been done». The «winners» at the time were blamed for this injustice, while those excluded were presented as innocent victims. The reasons for the exclusions were not discussed, which meant that the almost 1700 members voting in favour (votes against and abstentions added up to 129) were alleged to have been wrong or misguided.”

Were the exclusions determined rightly or wrongly in 1935? Wouldn't that be the relevant question? Instead, it is alleged that this injustice was attributed to the then "*winning side*". The allegation that the reasons for the exclusions have not been discussed at all does not correspond to the facts. As already mentioned, our brochure<sup>4</sup> is full of references to reasons that have been common knowledge for decades and Peter Selg has also written and spoken about them on multiple occasions. In March 2018, at our suggestion, there was an open discussion evening at the branch at the Goetheanum. The reference to the result of the 1935 vote is one-sided, or were the many who had been involved in the reappraisal for the past decades all subject to misguidance and errors? Or did they all have the exclusive aim to slander Albert Steffen and to convict the innocent? And also the majority at this year's General Assembly as well as more than 1,500 supporters of the initiative and the motion? In contrast to 1935, in 2018 the subject was topical several months before the General Assembly and, as already mentioned, *everybody* was able to form their own opinion. In 1935, the "Denkschrift (memorandum)"<sup>15</sup>, which according to *the authors' own opinion* was both *biased* and *polemic*<sup>16</sup>, had appeared just 3 weeks<sup>17</sup> before the General Assembly. Other than that, the members could inform themselves from a tendentious and faulty precursor of the "Memorandum" by Hermann Poppelbaum. The news sheet for the members was also unsuitable at that time to obtain their own basis for judgement. The situation today is quite different (the situation of the members, not that of the official publication organs!): anyone who wants to be able to form a judgement can do so. It is regrettable that for decades the Albert Steffen Foundation has contributed very little to this new situation and to the process of reappraisal. In view of the fact that those who have endeavoured to process the data have often *not* been granted access to the Steffen Archive, it is quite astonishing that after decades their results are now being questioned in this way in general terms and without going into specific points.

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<sup>15</sup> The "Denkschrift über Angelegenheiten der Anthroposophischen Gesellschaft in den Jahren 1925-1935" is actually a polemic of about 154 pages. It argues for the exclusion of Ita Wegman and Elisabeth Vreede from the Executive Council as well as the exclusion of prominent members of the Dutch and English National Societies. This "Denkschrift" [memorandum] was officially distributed by the General Anthroposophical Society until 1949. It has never been retracted.

<sup>16</sup> Page 7 of the "Denkschrift" [Memorandum].

<sup>17</sup> The mention of "February 1935" in the Denkschrift [memorandum] does not correspond to the actual publication date.

If, however, the Albert Steffen Foundation is of the opinion that the exclusions of 1935 were justified, it would be good to express this clearly instead of accusing those who have come to different conclusions of being unfair and even dubious. It would, of course, be even better if the views were substantiated objectively and factually and if the basis for the judgements was made available for research and analysis without restriction.

More from the contribution by the Albert Steffen Foundation:

“It was certainly an omission on our part not to have published earlier what now appears at a late stage, particularly as it speaks of our present incompetence regarding the matter in question.”

Here the own "incompetence regarding the matter in question" is admitted.

But how is it to be understood if they nevertheless believe they can judge others who have worked their way through the publications and documents in the accessible archives? Have they really not followed up the sources and notes given?

And further:

“There were moments when we feared that the rehabilitation endeavours might result in Albert Steffen and Guenther Wachsmuth having to be rehabilitated, too.”

Are there any decisions of the General Anthroposophical Society which have compromised Albert Steffen or Guenther Wachsmuth in their work or in their social context and which could be annulled in the sense of a contribution to rehabilitation? (There is of course at least one decision of the General Assembly directed against Marie Steiner<sup>18</sup>, but that is another matter.) Nor does there seem to be an appropriate concept of the nature and purpose of rehabilitation, for "by placing the accent on the 'public reputation', not on the being of those affected, it undoubtedly becomes clear that the Society is primarily affected by or the intended object of a rehabilitation procedure - the Society back then as well as now."<sup>19</sup>

## Conclusion

Christine Engels' contribution does not bring any insights into the matter, only the situation of the Albert Steffen Foundation becomes clear - on the one hand the self-acknowledged incompetence in this matter and on the other hand that it will probably take years until potentially existing materials on the Society's history from the time in question are published. The intentions and actions of others in this matter are nevertheless being judged factually and morally.

Dornach, 22. September 2018, Thomas Heck

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<sup>18</sup> "At the beginning of 1947, in view of the difficult situation, the Bern branch proposed to the forthcoming General Assembly that Albert Steffen and Guenther Wachsmuth alone should be entrusted with the leadership of the Society. The General Assembly approved this proposal in the spring of 1948. Steffen then resumed his work and saw his position strengthened by this decision to such an extent that he could refuse to continue working with Marie Steiner on the Executive Council. In 1948, as Marie Steiner put it, he granted the members of the Section for the Arts of Speech and Music she led a "carte blanche" to "defect" to his Section for the Fine Arts. Source: <https://www.anthroweb.info/geschichte/geschichte-ag/verhaertete-frontenkuenftige-versoehnung.html>"

<sup>19</sup> Rudolf Steiner: „Briefe und Meditationen für Ita Wegman. Zur Rehabilitierung Ita Wegmans.“ Band I. Hrsg. Peter Selg, Verlag des Ita Wegman Instituts 2018. From the foreword by Peter Selg.