



Nicole Müller

**PATRICK
HOHMANN**

**THE
ORGANIC
COTTON
PIONEER**

rüffer & rub visionaries



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Translated by Suzanne Kirkbright

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Foreword <i>Anne Rüffer</i>	8
Patrick Hohmann and the White Gold	10

<i>From Seeds to Ready-to-Wear Fashion</i>	20
--	----

Childhood in Alexandria	32
-----------------------------------	----

In the Shadow of the “Pfullingen Underpants”	43
--	----

Elisabeth Hohmann Holdener:

Wife, Ally and Sparring Partner	50
---	----

A Cotton Dealer Goes Bankrupt	61
---	----

Patrick Hohmann and Jürg Peritz:

Two Men Committed to Sustainability	69
---	----

bioRe® India Ltd.	80
---------------------------	----

bioRe® Tanzania Ltd.	99
------------------------------	----

Remei AG, the bioRe® Foundation and bioRe® Labels	114
---	-----

Transparency and re-traceability from the finished garment to the farmer.	124
--	-----

Letting Go of a Life’s Work	131
---------------------------------------	-----

<i>“The Living Hedge” of Meinrad Inglin</i>	140
---	-----

Patrick Hohmann on His Favourite Short Story

(“The Living Hedge”).	141
-------------------------------	-----

“The Living Hedge” by Meinrad Inglin	144
--	-----

<i>Appendix</i>	152
bioRe® Sustainable Cotton	153
bioRe® Sustainable Textiles	154
How can you make a difference as a consumer?	155
Notes	156
Picture Credits	157
Acknowledgement	158
About the author	160

*To my beloved Dida,
in gratitude*

Anne Rüffer, Publisher

2 December 2015, Geneva. An illustrious audience has filled the “Auditorium Ivan Pictet” to celebrate the recent Alternative Nobel Prize Laureates. It is rare for an event’s address – the “Maison de la Paix” – to be so unmistakably well suited to the evening’s theme. Germany’s Federal Minister for the Environment, Barbara Hendriks, and the Director-General of the UN Office at Geneva, Michael Møller, present the opening speeches under the title theme, “On the Frontlines and in the Courtrooms: Forging Human Security.”

The ensuing discussion between the four 2015 prizewinners suddenly features the statement that I find electrifying: “The UN was founded after the Second World War to save forthcoming generations from being hostage to conflict. Since that time there have been more than 170 conflicts – and you never debated the possibility of abolishing wars? Come on, guys, that’s just incredible!” Embarrassed laughter and murmurs of astonished disbelief among the audience, but Dr Gino Strada, who is the founder of the international humanitarian organization “Emergency”, knows only too well what he is talking about. Since the early 1990s he has set up medical clinics in war-torn regions and provided assistance to the civilian victims – 10% are combatants of the various warring parties and 90% are civilians. He finished his statement with the observation: “Feel free to call me a utopian, because everything is a utopia until somebody puts his idea into practice.”

Probably one of the most frequently quoted phrases in recent decades is “I have a dream.” Not only Martin Luther King had a dream, but countless people imagine a fairer world for everyone. Some of these personalities – more than we recognize and by no means enough – turn their dream into reality with dedication, kind-heartedness and wisdom. They are pioneers in their fields; indeed, we may call them utopians – like Gino Strada, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa or Jody Williams. Nevertheless, every outstanding achievement began with an idea, a hope or a vision.

To capture and convey the spark of an idea, hope or vision and so to ignite a flame of personal dedication is the aim of our new book series – “ruffer&rub visionaries”. At the forefront is the authors’ personal interpretation of their chosen theme. Their intriguing words describe how they became aware of the scientific, cultural or social issue and what motivated their mission to explore well-grounded answers and sustainable solutions. Their inspirational texts illustrate what it means to develop and experience first-hand a personal mission. Whether this is about political, social, scientific or spiritual visions – all the authors share the common yearning for a better world and the willingness to devote their energies fully to this.

Their topics and endeavours may be multifaceted, but their actions are motivated by the deep conviction that it is possible to achieve a better future and a healthy planet for everyone. In this spirit, we believe that each and every one of us can be a part of the solution through our own actions.

Patrick Hohmann and the White Gold

“It cannot be fair for an Indian farmer to subsidize my T-shirt.”

It is a cold and windy day in early summer. In the garden of the Tisch + Bar restaurant in the Swiss town of Riesch-Rotkreuz the waitresses snatch at the menus flying about, while the guests weigh down the napkins with their hands to prevent them from fluttering away. A waiter kneels on the ground to sweep up the broken glass shards from the gravel. Patrick Hohmann wants to pay. He leans over the card reader pushed toward him by the waitress and clasps the device in both hands. “I see nothing on it,” he says and laughs. The first attempt to leave a tip fails. Hohmann lifts his gaze and blinks up at the waitress’s face, dazzled by the light. “I cannot see anything,” he says and continues laughing, enthralled like a child jumping over and again into a puddle. The tall man leans over the display once more to type in a tip with his eyes close up to the small payment screen. “Now it has worked,” he remarks happily and leans back. Not seeing a thing but having another go; venturing forth into uncertain territory, failing and starting again. Concentrating on one’s business, while the whole world rushes off. The microcosm of this scene seems to reveal what defines Patrick Hohmann as an entrepreneur.

Patrick Hohmann is a pioneer of organic cotton. Remei, the company that he founded together with his wife Elisabeth Hohmann Holdener and other friends, is the world’s leading supplier of organic cotton. The certified quality labels bioRe®

Sustainable Cotton and bioRe® Textiles, which are produced from the cotton, fulfil five criteria: production is on fair terms, carbon neutral, ecological and gentle to the skin. Lastly, full transparency applies for the complete production chain. Consumers can use a digital app to check each supplier, so the entire production line is retraceable back to the farmer who sowed, nurtured and harvested the cotton.

Patrick Hohmann regards the business model he has developed as the outcome of simple logic. He is a qualified textile engineer who takes it for granted that we should not recklessly harm nature, which sustains livelihoods for all people, no matter which continent they live on. In his view, reason is at the heart of a sense of community that is in the balance. Discrimination against others and the challenges of globalization, which impose unfair risks on those who experience poverty – such aspects are entirely illogical. “It cannot be fair for an Indian farmer to subsidize my T-shirt,” asserts Hohmann.

Until the 1990s Patrick Hohmann was a yarn and cotton dealer like many others. However, one day Hohmann began a conversation with an Indian cotton farmer: “I wanted to know how much he earns. About one US dollar per kilogram. And how much of this did he invest in chemicals? – 70 cents. A further 70 cents are spent on chemicals because the state subsidizes the use of pesticides by up to 50%. Who is the farmer working for? He has no contact with the dealer or the customer; he produces in a vacuum and yet he still gets into debt.” Hohmann can no longer forget such economic absurdity. How can a product incurring production costs of more than USD 1.40 only bring in one dollar? Besides, how do agricultural workers earn next to nothing, while at the other end of the production chain, i.e. with ready-to-wear clothing, the profits virtually flow in?

One must bear in mind how much cotton matters in our society to appreciate Patrick Hohmann's singular lifetime achievement. Everyday items are a case in point, and you will be amazed how ubiquitous the textile is. We wear T-shirts, blouses and shirts; we pull on jeans and cotton socks. Babies lie on cotton towels clenching hold of their cotton comforters in their tiny fists. Perfect damask tablecloths decorate restaurant tables. We sleep under duvets with cotton covers and we pull curtains – all of them are made from 100 % cotton. Apart from these fabrics, which we instantly notice, cotton is hidden in some surprising things like banknotes or coffee filters. Even the product marketed as 'vegetable oil' is invariably nothing more than cottonseed oil.

The Harvard historian Sven Beckert's comprehensive and enthralling book "Empire of Cotton" pays homage to the history of cotton. Beckert shows how cotton stirred the industrial revolution and bestowed great prosperity on Europe. Until 1760 most Europeans wore garments made from linen and wool, while the upper classes perhaps wore silk. These materials were itchy, heavy to wash and dyeing them was complicated. The world of our ancestors was – apart from the bright churches and beautifully decorated country manors – colourless and there were some strong odours. That changed fundamentally due to the importance of cotton.

Beckert's statistical research shows that globalization, as we know it, was initiated, sustained and made profitable due to cotton. The profound gap that nowadays divides the global North from the global South is basically related to the 19th-century cotton industry. Unlike other commodities, such as rice or tobacco, cotton is processed in two intensive phases: work on the fields and in the factories. Cotton must be ginned (de-seeded) and the lint pressed into bales; its fibres must be spun into yarn. Cotton yarn must be woven into the textile, which is

knitted or crocheted, depending on whether the design is for a jersey fitted sheet or a light summer jumper. Finally, the fabrics must be dyed and finished.

The inventive talent of the technically skilled Europeans and Americans, and their spirit of enlightenment were not the only factors that turned Manchester, Mulhouse (Alsace) or Lowell in Massachusetts into centres of international commerce. The incentive was rather what Beckert calls “war capitalism”: the violent and compulsory acquisition of land and the slavery of people in Asia, Africa and the two Americas. War capitalism first divided the world into an agricultural sector and a production sector. The cotton industry connected extremely remote regions and merged them together with a common destiny. “Cotton provides the key to understanding the modern world, the great inequalities that characterize it, the long history of globalization, and the ever-changing political economy of capitalism,”¹ explains the historian Beckert.

For centuries, Indian smallholders had cultivated cotton for their own purposes. Their cloths, which they wove on the handloom, were intended for their personal use and at best for conveyance to local rulers. After the industrial revolution, i.e. following the advent of the machine age at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Indian markets were swamped with cheap, machine-produced cotton textiles from Europe, mainly from England. This halted the development opportunities for Indian commerce; the farmers were forced to work on the fields. It is no coincidence that Mahatma Gandhi made the hand-spun fabric of the *khadi* a symbol of non-violent resistance against the British. He proudly wore the traditional, hand-woven garment called the dhoti and encouraged his fellow countrymen to wear local fabrics. In doing so, he showed Indians a way of

refusing to consent to their own repression. Ghandi's non-violent resistance was successful: his original design with a spinning wheel forms part of the Indian flag today.

During the 19th and early 20th centuries when workers began to resist the noisy, smoke-filled factories in Europe and to demand higher wages and social welfare benefits, the textile industry slowly returned to Asia and Africa. Today, at regular intervals the textile-producing countries are shocked by scandals that also instil in us a vague sense of powerlessness. On 24 April 2013 the collapse of a garment factory in Bangladesh, crushing and killing 1,135 people, sent a wave of outrage around the world.

At the same time, the reports showed that it was not so easy to find those who were culpable because of the immense power concentrated in the system that often left individuals feeling helpless.

The cotton industry is a global business worth billions; it depends on labour specialization and a high degree of differentiation and it relies on countless regulatory adjustments and parameters that the average person who loves to wear T-shirts is entirely ignorant about. Cotton is usually grown and harvested in regions with weak infrastructure. A reliable supply of electricity is mostly lacking here. The raw cotton is transported and the respective region is deprived of the opportunity to participate in the cotton added value chain. Ginning the raw cotton, spinning the fibres to yarn and weaving are all work phases that occur elsewhere, at a considerable distance from where the sun's rays first touched the cotton. The natural commodity is frequently transported to another country for processing. The cotton industry is a nomadic business that follows the trail of the cheapest price. If Tanzanian cotton is cheaper to spin in Zambia, then it is transported to Zambia, even though Tanzania has spinning mills that could accept the work.

The purchasers of cotton products act globally. But the suppliers depend on local conditions. It is perfectly plausible for a government in country A to raise the minimum price for cotton with the aim of generating supplementary revenue for local farmers. However, if the global purchasers can procure the same type of cotton more cheaply in country B, then the farmers in country A not only make no supplementary income, but rather they earn nothing at all. The system is fragile and complicated. The fact that the cotton price is fixed in US dollars also exposes the farmers to significant risks. The yield and quality can be good, but if the American dollar is devalued, then the farmers earn less money in real terms in their local currency. The systemic risks are compounded by dependency on the weather, a factor that becomes progressively more acute during climate change.

“The consumer wears cotton, or buys carrots and has no idea what this actually involves,” remarks Patrick Hohmann. If you want more informed insights, you are swiftly confronted with some disconcerting facts. About 200 million people earn their livelihood directly or indirectly from cotton, from planting the cotton or from downstream work processes. The big players in the cultivation of cotton are India, China and the US. Brazil, Pakistan and Turkey rank fifth, sixth and seventh. Of the annual 80-million tonne cotton harvest only a vanishingly small amount is organic cotton, that is, an estimated 1%. Today, the conventional way of farming cotton is a disaster for humans and the environment. Thirty years ago, the Aral Sea, which belongs to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, was the size of Bavaria. What once was a lake has now practically dried out, and all that remains is a toxic, dusty salt desert, a consequence of the pesticides used in cotton farming in Uzbekistan. Soviet engineers developed an elaborate irrigation system to divert water from the 30-metre deep lake, because it takes between 10,000 and

20,000 litres of water to produce one kilogram of cotton. In areas lacking in natural rainfall, the result is immense environmental damage, which causes the world's climate to worsen and affect us all. Water is not the only problem. The harm done to the 'green lung' is also among the consequences of industrial-scale cotton farming. In Brazil, every year thousands of hectares of rainforest are cut and cleared in order to plant cotton.

One of the bitter ironies of the cotton industry is that environmental sins go hand in hand with growing poverty for the people who cultivate the cotton. For instance, China, the world's biggest cotton producer, must permanently buy up and hoard gargantuan quantities of cotton so that state intervention measures protect its domestic producers. The cotton is removed from the market to create an artificial shortage and maintain price stability. US subsidy policies also distort the market. Up till 2014 American cotton farmers received more in subsidies than their revenue from sales of the commodity. When Brazil started legal proceedings against the US for these trade violations, the United States had to pay a fine of USD 300 million and cancel the subsidies to its farmers in Texas, Georgia, Arkansas, Mississippi and California. However, nothing has really changed. The cotton farmers continue to receive state support with deficit guarantees, or compensation payments opaquely masquerading as support for hurricane victims, and with massively discounted insurance premiums for crop failure. Yet, it is not as though American cotton farmers are especially well off. Many of them only make ends meet with a second income, an additional job somewhere in the city. They are also victims of a market that no longer forms genuine pricing. Many of them would prefer to pull out of cotton, but they have accrued debts from a pool of machinery that can only be used to harvest cotton. An automated machine for the cotton harvest easily costs

USD 750,000 – at the same time, monocultures offer little flexibility. Besides, cotton farmers have employees on the payroll, people for whom they feel responsible. Moreover, always relying on the drip-feed of tax payer subsidies must be depressing as well as creating a product that makes no real profit.

Presently, no exact statistics are available about how much of the total volume of farmed cotton is transgenic crop. The share is calculated as 64–81%, depending on the source.² Every year, an estimated 51 million tonnes to 65 million tonnes of raw cotton are genetically modified. In other words, the genetic material of the cotton plant has been manipulated with a protein that kills or should kill the classic cotton pests. Unless you have made a conscious choice to purchase clothes made from organic cotton, as you read these lines, you will be wearing a garment made from GM cotton. In practice, during the first three or four years, the yield of genetically modified hybrid plants is actually higher and there is a reduction in the use of pesticides. However, after this interval the pests develop resistance and this means using stronger pesticides in even bigger doses, even more genetic modification, even more aggressive pesticides and so forth. GM seeds are also patented. Last but not least, the seeds that are produced from a genetically modified plant can only germinate to a limited extent. The idea behind this is that every year the farmer must purchase new seed and so money flows into the coffers of the giant corporations. Swissaid estimates that now three agricultural companies own about two-thirds of all cotton seeds. This is not only a dangerous curtailment of biodiversity, but also an existential threat for farmers.

“The sewers and seamstresses are underpaid,” comments Patrick Hohmann, “but farming is even lower paid.” Smallholders in poor countries have no savings. Therefore, they buy bulk quantities of seeds and pesticides. Of course, they hope

that selling the harvest will earn enough money to cover the costs. If something happens – a pest infestation, adverse weather, a water shortage – the debt trap slams shut. Every year Indian daily newspapers like the “Times of India” or “The Hindu” publish reports about a group of farmers’ suicides in rural areas. Although the tone of the articles is quite sympathetic, they rarely shed light on the actual circumstances.

A lone individual can circulate abundant and paltry facts at the same time. When Patrick Hohmann stands on a station platform somewhere, he is just one passer-by among the countless commuters. He is a tall, broad-shouldered, friendly-looking man in an anorak and chinos, with a rucksack slung over one shoulder. He has dedicated half of his professional life to improving the lot of farmers and producing cotton in a way that is kind and not harmful to nature. Nevertheless, the business model he has developed in conjunction with his partners over many years leads to repeated challenges and adjustments. The production processes of bioRe® Sustainable Cotton & Textiles are exposed to the enormous pressure forces and dominance of an industry which puts profitable returns first. Resisting the allure of profit maximization calls for human empathy, courage and a great deal of ingenuity of the kind that helped David win victory against Goliath.

Patrick Hohmann has accepted responsibility and put this commitment into practice in the cotton industry. This is undoubtedly impressive, but it is just one small element of what makes him such an inspirational presence. Hohmann is a business artist. If you trace his lifetime achievement, the most amazing attributes are chiefly the mix of sober analysis, creativity and skilful mathematics, bone-dry technical knowledge and an urge to experiment. He is an accountant and philosopher rolled into one. The unequivocal acceptance of difficulties

has made him a successful entrepreneur. “Nowhere is it written that life should be easy. Life is always being a little lucky and a little unlucky,” according to Patrick Hohmann’s insight as an entrepreneur. He knows that his achievement is always fragile and mutable. What inspires this pioneer is a positive attitude of dealing with agile, fast-moving scenarios and an ability to react in a measured way. He is creative and finely attuned to the needs of humans, animals and nature.

Patrick Hohmann and his team refuse to be disheartened. They contrast a largely faceless system with trust in the humane individual. It is clear that powerful people will not save us. Pioneers like Patrick Hohmann or films like “Tomorrow” and “Fair Traders” highlight how change begins on a small scale, as a ‘grassroots’ movement, which can motivate and inspire others. Innovation almost always springs up at society’s margins. It evolves gradually, often out of sight, spurred on by individuals, who are dissatisfied with the status quo and want to pursue new approaches. “You may say he’s a dreamer,” one could describe Patrick Hohmann as a variation of John Lennon’s song. “But he’s not the only one.” It takes good fortune as well as other people who are willing to take responsibility, so innovative ideas can gravitate from society’s margins to its epicentre. Before you know it, you will shake your head in recollection of what you willingly accepted as ‘normal’ till recently.

“A system resolution only happens when the system has become redundant,” Patrick Hohmann once stated. This was one of those sayings that he casually threw into the conversation, and you only appreciate its importance much later. It is worthwhile reflecting on this phrase for a while longer.