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The Doll's House Museum Basel presents

Margarete Steiff

A strong-willed woman. Her journey from the “little elephant” to a worldwide group of companies.

Special exhibition from 18 April to 4 October 2009.

Margarete Steiff (1847–1909), who contracted polio as a small child and suffered severe life-long disablement, overcame many obstacles to find her place in life. When she offered the first home-made stuffed toy animals such as the “Elefäntle” (little elephant) in her felt-clothing business in 1880, she also laid the foundation stone for a global group of companies which has remained successful to the present day.

Fortune does not favour her

In the year 1847, numerous problems are affecting the lives of people in the former Free Imperial City of Giengen an der Brenz. It is during this time, on 24 July 1847, that Appolonia Margarete Steiff is born as the third daughter of master builder Friedrich Steiff and his wife Maria Margarete. For eighteen months, little Margarete's life progresses unremarkably; she is a happy, healthy child. However, shortly after the birth of her brother Fritz at the end of 1849, she develops a high temperature. Her recovery is very slow and, to the horror of her family, she is left with permanent disability: her legs have become virtually immovable and she can barely move her right arm. Neither therapies nor spa treatments or even operations are able to help; the paralysis remains. The diagnosis is poliomyelitis, at that time an almost unresearched disease for which there is no treatment available.

Determination and ambition bring her success

Self-pity is the last thing on little Margarete's mind. On the contrary, in later years she always stresses how she was largely spared from the usual childhood illnesses. She starts school at an early age. She is never absent and is an above-average pupil. And she has the knack of gathering people around her so as not to be alone. Further attempts at a cure during her childhood prove ineffective. Margarete finds it rather difficult to get on with her family. At first, they oppose her wish to train as a seamstress: her father fears a failure, the older sisters embarrassment and trouble. Nevertheless, the younger one gets her way; with great ambition and the support of her sisters she becomes a perfect seamstress over the course of the years. She also learns to play the zither so well that she is even able to give tuition herself.

The Steiff sisters buy a sewing machine between them – the first in Giengen – and open a dressmaker's. Responsibility for sewing ladies' and children's wear falls mainly to the youngest, Margarete. Although she has difficulty operating the sewing machine with her right arm, she does not give up. By now 17 years of age, she has come to terms with her illness. With the moral and financial support of a felt maker with whom she is acquainted, the dressmaker's becomes a felt-clothing business in 1877. The business prospers. Margarete Steiff is able to employ a number of people and invest more money and before long, she is running a small factory. The girl with an apparently hopeless future has become a successful businesswoman.

It all began with the "little elephant"

At the end of 1879 Margarete Steiff comes across a small stuffed elephant in the *Modenwelt* magazine and makes five of them out of felt and wool as pincushions for Christmas. They prove incredibly popular, especially with children, who can hardly bear to part with them. Virtually all toys were made of hard materials in those days, such as wood and porcelain, that did not lend themselves to being cuddled. Shortly after Christmas, she sells seven such toys and begins to make the animals to keep in stock. Four years later, in 1883, her price list contains an entry on the back, pointing to a new development in her business: "Children's toys in felt, safe and unbreakable. Elephants with colourful saddles."

During these years, Margarete's brother Fritz, a master builder in Giengen, is the driving force behind many positive developments and constantly growing production figures. In 1889, Fritz encourages Margarete, by now over 40 years of age, to move out of her parents' home. He builds her first company building: on the ground floor is a shop, above it an apartment designed with the needs of the disabled in mind. In the same year, Margarete gets

to know Johanna Röck. The two women become close friends; Johanna moves in with Margarete and stays with her for almost twenty years, until Margarete's death.

A pioneering spirit with a big heart

The company, too, develops well. Soon Margarete, with Fritz's support, begins to make ride-on and wheeled animals. In addition, her range comes to include monkeys, donkeys, horses, camels, pigs, mice, dogs, cats, hares and giraffes. In order to promote the flourishing mail-order business, the first mail-order catalogues containing illustrations of some of the products are printed. The company becomes ever more wellknown. By 1894 the annual turnover has reached 90,000 marks and in 1897, it has a stand at the Leipzig Trade Fair for the first time. From 1897/1898, the "little elephant" is used as a trademark in response to ever-increasing endeavours by competitors to copy her product. From 1904 onwards, the world-famous "button in the ear" follows as the trademark.

When Richard Steiff, Fritz's second-oldest son, joins the company, the toy factory begins to become a family business. Even in their early years, Margarete, who would have liked to have children of her own, is very close to her brother's six sons and three daughters. Their relationship is characterised by sensitivity and humour. Over time, all six sons join the business. The close family ties help to sustain Margarete in the years that follow. Margarete always presides over a warm-hearted atmosphere; to her employees, she is both a boss and a friend. Her employees' social benefits are also exemplary for the time: employees receive meal vouchers for the local restaurants.

By 1902, consideration has to be given to a new factory once again. Richard Steiff, Margarete Steiff's nephew, has an individual building in mind: a cost-saving building in steel and glass. The first glass building is erected in spring 1903. It soon gains the local nickname "virgin aquarium", alluding to the fact that the workforce in this brightly lit building mainly consists of young, single women. The factory building is designed from the outset to be accessible to disabled people and it has an access ramp for the head of the company in her wheelchair. It is followed in a few years by a second glass building. These two glass buildings are way ahead of their time. They are still in use to this day by the Steiff company and enjoy historic monument protection.

The "virgin aquarium" is not the only thing to create a stir; there is also the sight of Margarete Steiff taking a spin on the motorbike with her nephews Otto and Paul Steiff. Margarete Steiff has always loved speed and now, at the age of 56, she enjoys the feel of the wind on her face more than ever.

In 1903, Richard Steiff attends the Leipzig Trade Fair with the bear he has personally developed. Buyers are less than impressed by this first bear with a swivelling head and

moveable limbs, fur made of mohair plush and shoe button eyes; they also find it too expensive. Even Margarete Steiff was highly sceptical about this new bear, yet Richard Steiff was able to talk her into starting a trial with the unusual animal. It is reported that at the very last moment, an American appeared on the exhibition stand and purchased the entire bear collection. These 3,000 items are never seen again. The following model, the slimmer "Bear 35 PB", becomes a bestseller. At the St Louis World's Fair, Margarete and Richard receive gold medals and the company wins the Grand Prix. In America, the "Teddy bear" begins its triumphant progress. In the "bear year" of 1907, 400 full-time employees together with 1,800 homeworkers make a total of 974,000 bears.

All the time, Margarete Steiff insists on flawless quality; she often sews new samples herself. Yet she is becoming visibly more weary. Often she simply sits at the window of her apartment and watches the activities in the company. On 9 May 1909, she dies at the age of just under 62.

The best is just good enough for our children!

With these world-famous words, Margarete Steiff summed up her qualities as a successful businesswoman. The special exhibition in the Doll's House Museum Basel offers an insight into the life history of this remarkable personality. The focal point of the exhibition is a reproduction of Margarete Steiff's workshop, which would be incomplete without the leading character herself: a remarkably realistic, life-size reproduction of Margarete Steiff in Plasticine has been made for the exhibition. With pictures and audio texts (featuring the Swabian accent typical for Margarete Steiff) the Doll's House Museum guides you through the various phases in the life of this creative, disciplined woman who was untiringly dedicated to her work. The original felt animals, documents, catalogues, etc., bear witness to an enormous creative power. And of course, the "little elephant" with which it all began is assured of a place. A copy of the original "little elephant" pattern is even available to take away for those who would like to sew one for themselves. Visitors with enough time to spare, may also find themselves moved by the film "Margarete Steiff" acclaimed as the "TV event of the year" with Heike Makatsch in the leading role, on show in a corner of the museum. The exhibition also features various items of Margarete Steiff's personal possessions, such as her wheelchair and diary, the zither, the sewing machine, handwritten letters and much more besides, courtesy of Steiff GmbH, Giengen an der Brenz. A special attraction for children is a giant teddy bear who appears in the museum at certain times and with whom, if they are lucky, they will be able to have their photograph taken.

Opening hours

Museum, Shop and Café: daily from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Admission

CHF 7 / CHF 5

Children up to 16 years of age are admitted free of charge and only in the company of adults.

No additional charge for the special exhibition.

The entire building is wheelchair accessible.

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