

Future Today

HOW DYNAMITE BECAME NOBEL

When the young Swedish chemist received his latest patent No: 1345/1867" in May 1867, he was well aware of its explosive significance and consequences. Nevertheless, his thoughts were with his younger brother Emil, who had lost his life three years earlier together with four workers in an explosion by conducting one of his countless failed experiments. This accident was also the reason why his experiments were banned from his Nordic homeland and forced him to continue his research and experiments in Germany.

As the son of an mining engineer and armament supplier to the Russian army, he knew the importance of an explosive that would combine the advantages and disadvantages of the more or less safe but low explosive black powder and the newly discovered highly explosive but almost uncontrollable nitroglycerine. So it was no coincidence that his find led to new uses for his newly discovered Dynamite not only in the civilian sector but also for military purposes.

The economic success of his patent for Dynamite was gigantic and made the Swedish maverick one of the richest people of his time. By 1888, he owned no less than 96 Dynamite factories around the world forcing him to travel constantly. It was in the spring of that very year, during a stay in France, when he learned of the death of his older brother Ludvig and he fell into great sadness.

Then, shortly thereafter still crestfallen by the sad news of his brother's death, he opened

the newspaper and could not believe his eyes when he read the headline "Alfred Nobel, the merchant of death has died" – apparently, the editors had confused his brother with him. He became more curious and continued to read to find out what would be in his obituary if he had died instead of his brother?

Alfred was horrified by what he read: He, the inventor of Dynamite, was described as a man who would have acquired his wealth by finding a way to kill the most people within the shortest time possible. He couldn't take his eyes off the newspaper. Again and again, he read the article. Was that what the whole world thought of him? Alfred was deeply agitated. The article would not let him go. Day and night, the words went through his mind.

The tragedy of this story was that Alfred thought he was a peace-loving person and his invention made a significant contribution to economic development. The world needed explosives in mining, road, railway and tunnel construction, there was practically no alternative. (And the personal price he and his family paid for this was high.)

In his dejection, Alfred turned to an old friend, Bertha von Suttner. Bertha was an early peace activist and Alfred was indeed very fond of her from the day they first met and admired her personal commitment and determination. Nevertheless, he was extremely skeptical that her way of influencing public opinion through protest actions, articles and speeches could ever be successful in order to prevent wars.

The frequent correspondence and Bertha's persistence had impressed Alfred for some time, and with the false and confusing report of "his" death in 1888, a change of heart set in. The impact of this change of heart was to radically change the world once again and continues to shape Alfred's legacy to this day.

When Alfred died on December 10, 1896 – eight years after his brother, his estate amounted to the incredibly high sum for that time of 33.2 million Swedish krona. According to his will, 97% of his entire fortune was transferred to the newly established Alfred Nobel Foundation which should annually award the best achievements in the fields of chemistry, physics, medicine, literature and peacekeeping - a reference to Bertha von Suttner, who was the first woman to receive this award in 1905 - with a highly endowed prize. (The Alfred Nobel Memorial Prize in Economics was established many decades later in 1968 by the National Bank of Sweden and is therefore not an original Nobel Prize.)



Without the name confusion of a French journalist, the Nobel Prizes would probably not exist and the name Alfred Nobel would have been forgotten long ago.

But thanks to a simple confusion and the legacy of a very generous individual, the name Nobel stands for the highest dignity and recognition the academic world has to offer – and not for Dynamite.

While one does not necessarily have to be as radical as Alfred Nobel, who left nearly his entire assets to his foundation, foundations or Trusts are often the best way to preserve and protect legacies in the long term. Nobel's example shows that it does not necessarily have to be a charitable purpose in order to make a positive contribution to society.

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