



100 Years of TROPAG (1909–2009)

A Hamburg Trading Company in Times of Change



Milestones

1909	Oscar H. Ritter and his brother, together with a partner, found the Ritter & Hankin company in London, trading in India rubber.
1919	Restart in Hamburg as Gebrüder Ritter & Co.
1922	Oscar H. Ritter establishes the Tropische und Ueberseeische Rohprodukten Aktiengesellschaft, or TROPAG for short, with head office at Alsterdamm 7 in Hamburg. He expands trade to include asbestos, ores and minerals.
1935	The company converts to 'Tropag' Asbest und Erzimport Oscar H. Ritter KG.
1938	Launch of export business trading in chemicals and cement.
1948	Resumption of import business following currency reform.
1950	Trade relations with Canada resume. TROPAG sells asbestos for Johns-Manville International Corporation in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.
1964	The Oscar und Vera Ritter Foundation for the promotion of musicians and composers is established.
1967	Death of the company founder Oscar H. Ritter; the Oscar und Vera Ritter Foundation becomes chief partner in TROPAG, which is renamed 'TROPAG' Oscar H. Ritter Nachf. KG in the same year.
1979	TROPAG moves from Ballindamm 6 to Bundesstraße 4.
1987	Establishment of an IT division.
1995	Equity increased by DM 500,000 to DM 1,055,000 (= € 539,413).
1997	TROPAG moves even closer to a service agency with the new Consulting and Business Development divisions.
1997	TROPAG enters the World Wide Web.
1998	ISO certification by Lloyd's Register Quality Assurance.
2003	TROPAG buys the property at Bundesstraße 4.
2007	GMP B2 certification by Lloyd's Register Quality Assurance.
2008	TROPAG has established the basis for fulfilling the REACH registration requirements and pre-registered all relevant products.
2009	TROPAG celebrates its 100th anniversary.

Introduction



Ladies and Gentlemen,

the story of TROPAG starts 100 years ago in London. It was there that in 1909 Oscar H. Ritter, barely 18 years old at the time, together with his brother founded a company trading in India rubber. Ten years later both brothers left for Hamburg, a city that has remained our company's headquarters until this day. It was here that TROPAG evolved from a small firm trading in India rubber to a medium-sized, global commercial and service enterprise specialising in trade with specific raw materials and additionally offering its customers support in the consulting and business development sectors.

Looking back, we can say that our company has in its 100 year history overcome major crises such as the hyperinflation of 1923 and the global recession of the early 1930's, and emerged from it all with renewed vigour and enthusiasm. In the face of current turbulences on the international markets, this is a lesson that gives rise to optimism that, with our dedicated team, we shall be able to master the challenges to come.

The magnificent contribution made by earlier generations in building and developing TROPAG has given us a solid foundation on which to build. Thanks to the foresight of our founder and subsequently of our shareholder, the Oscar and Vera Ritter Foundation, we are today financially independent. The corporate culture that each staff member should take on as much responsibility as possible has always defined our company and is still valid today.

For decades now we have seen ourselves as intermediaries between our suppliers and customers. In this process we are not only dealing with merchandise, but are advisors, organisers and problem solvers. In this we are mindful at all times of the principles of maximum transparency and the traditions of good faith and trust. It is only by being guided by such values that we can prosper as an enterprise in the long run.

It is our hope that you will stay with us in the decades to come and trust you will enjoy our brief journey through the eventful, fascinating history of TROPAG.

Prof. Dr. Andreas Köster
Managing Director

(1909–1945)

Setting Up Business and the First Hurdles TROPAG's Challenging Early Years

TROPAG's first few years were turbulent: in 1909 Oscar Heinrich Ritter and his brother, together with a partner, founded a company in London trading in India rubber. However, the two brothers were forced to leave the United Kingdom as a consequence of the First World War and opened a new trading house in Hamburg in 1919, which later merged with the 'Tropische und Ueberseeische Rohprodukten Aktiengesellschaft' founded in 1922 by Oscar H. Ritter. TROPAG, as the company soon came to be called, enjoyed continuous growth from the mid-1930s onwards.

From Mincing Lane to Alsterdamm

TROPAG's history begins in London, in the metropolis of the world's leading trading and colonial power, the United Kingdom. Here, 18-year-old Oscar Heinrich Ritter and his older brother Max Alexander Ritter founded Ritter & Hankin in 1909 together with a partner. Only two years later, in May 1911, the brothers opened the first company of their own under the name of Ritter & Ritter. The offices were located in Mincing Lane, one of the premier addresses in the heart of London. Oscar H. and Max A. Ritter specialised in trading with India rubber, for which England and the Netherlands practically held a global monopoly at that time. Following the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, the brothers were forced to abandon their trading activities, as were all German merchants in the United Kingdom. Along with many other Germans, they were presumably interned and probably returned to Germany while the war was still raging.

A few months after the end of the First World War, on 1 March 1919, Max A. Ritter founded the company Max A. Ritter

in Hamburg. At this time Oscar H. Ritter was still living in Berlin. But two months later he too moved to Hamburg. Before the First World War, the port of Hamburg had grown to be the third largest in the world after New York and London. At first the Treaty of Versailles constrained the economic life of the Elbe metropolis, which was centred on maritime trading, but gradually trading picked up again. On 24 May 1919 Max A. and Oscar H. Ritter continued their trading activities as importers of India rubber under the company name Gebrüder Ritter & Co.

Following the First World War, the India rubber trade proved a difficult challenge for German importers. The end of German colonialism also meant the loss of the rubber plantations in Cameroon, until then Germany's most important colony economically. The majority of the rubber plantations were now in British hands, meaning that India rubber imports were only possible through British agents. This proved to be a chance for the Ritter brothers, as they had excellent contacts with British merchants dating back to their London days.

Left:

London in 1909 was the centre of world trade. It was here that the brothers Oscar H. and Max A. Ritter founded their first company, later in Hamburg to become the 'Tropische und Ueberseeische Rohprodukten Aktiengesellschaft' or TROPAG for short.

Right:

Initially TROPAG traded in India rubber. Imported from British colonies, the raw material was first stored in the London docks where it was appraised and purchased by traders.





Above: The Alsterdamm in the mid-1930's. The TROPAG offices were located on the two upper floors of Number 7 (left).

The Birth of a Brand

On 31 October 1922 Oscar H. Ritter entered the Tropische und Ueberseeische Rohprodukten Aktiengesellschaft in the register of companies of the Hanseatic City of Hamburg. The company's former telegram address, TROPAG, rapidly became a trade mark. By establishing this company Oscar H. Ritter had seized the initiative and exploited new markets by trading in other overseas commodities following the collapse of the India rubber market at the end of 1920. The activities of Gebrüder Ritter & Co. were fully merged with TROPAG in the 'inflation year' of 1923. In 1925 Max A. Ritter left the company management.

In the following years, Oscar H. Ritter and his staff expanded TROPAG's product range to include asbestos, ores and minerals, and established trading relations with the Soviet Union, Australia and South Africa. Following the collapse of the New York stock exchange on 25 October 1929, however, business became caught up in the maelstrom of global economic crisis. The uncertain future of the import business forced Oscar H. Ritter to lay off staff. By March 1931, however, he was hiring staff again and trading anew under the name of 'Tropag' Asbest- und Erzimport GmbH. In 1935, the limited company was turned into a limited partnership, the 'Tropag' Asbest- und Erzimport Oscar H. Ritter KG.

Three factors were decisive for the successful come-back in 1931. Besides the international standing of the TROPAG brand came the personal reputation that Oscar H. Ritter enjoyed amongst Hamburg's merchants, and the backing of his staff. In the crisis year 1930 Bernhard Henning and Rudolf Horl remained loyally at Oscar H. Ritter's side despite having been laid off. Rudolf Horl was TROPAG's first apprentice and had been with the company since 1927. Another old companion of Oscar H. Ritter joined the team when the company was reestablished in 1931: Julius Dietherlein had already worked for him and his brother as a correspondence clerk and accountant in London. During the 1930s, Oscar H. Ritter's brother-in-law Johannes

Rathschüler, together with Heinrich Reimers, joined as commercial staff. They remained associated with TROPAG for decades. The relationship of trust was mutual: Oscar H. Ritter issued power of attorney to each employee and thus transferred to them a large degree of responsibility. In addition, Bernhard Henning entered management as a personally liable partner after TROPAG was converted to a limited partnership.

Decisions for the Future

One of the causes of the 1930 crisis was an enormous slump in revenue from asbestos trading. TROPAG had imported asbestos from the Urals in the Soviet Union since the 1920s with great success. When the Soviet Union moved to sell commodities directly to industry in 1928, TROPAG's asbestos importing business collapsed. After 1931, therefore, Rudolf Horl, at the behest of Oscar H. Ritter, established an ores department to act as a second pillar, so that TROPAG now specialised in importing rare ores. An international network developed during the 1930s and 1940s and some of these contacts still exist to this day.

Development of the ores department was initially fraught with difficulty because of the lack of foreign exchange currency. This was a consequence of the global economic crisis, which led to government intervention and foreign exchange controls in 1931. The state took control of issuing foreign currencies and thus greatly restricted the trading potential of companies such as TROPAG, who were dependent on foreign exchange. Oscar H. Ritter approached the Hamburg chamber of commerce again and again because TROPAG could not manage with their approved foreign exchange contingent and hence lost important contracts. One example of this is Oscar H. Ritter's letter to the Hamburg chamber of commerce on 8 June 1932 stating that: the ores 'come from very remote parts of the world such as South America, east Asia, Australia, etc. and must first be extracted in these originating countries and transported to the coast after being ordered. They must then be transported by sea for two to three months.



However,' emphasised Oscar H. Ritter, 'we cannot award contracts, nor are they accepted as such, if foreign exchange is not secured at the same time.'

Trading under National Socialism

The problem of the lack of foreign exchange was no longer an issue after the National Socialists took power on 30 January 1933. The new rulers were interested in easily importing certain commodities. Where other areas of foreign trade were strictly controlled, especially exports, importers of asbestos and ores enjoyed relative freedom. TROPAG was able to continue trading. Imports of raw asbestos even increased for the first time since the dramatic collapse of 1928, because asbestos was one of the commodities urgently required by industry. In a letter to the chamber of commerce dated 23 August 1933, Oscar H. Ritter explains why raw asbestos is indispensable, namely for manufacturing asbestos cloth for 'asbestos aprons and clothing for workers in blast furnace works, for manufacturing asbestos brake bands for every kind of engine and

motor vehicle, for sealing purposes [...] for any kind of steam engine [as well as] for asbestos post bags in aeroplanes'.

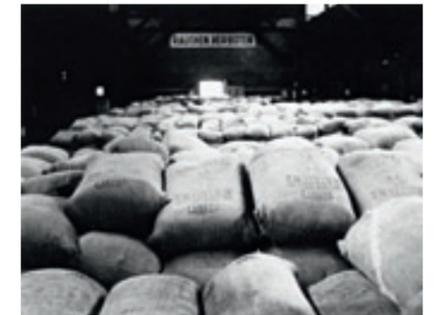
In the 1930s TROPAG had contracts to supply numerous companies. Asbestos imports from the Soviet Union ground to a halt as a result of economic policy developments in that country, but Oscar H. Ritter managed to develop new sources. TROPAG became one of the leading providers of raw asbestos from Canada, for example.

In order to secure asbestos imports, Oscar H. Ritter even managed to obtain one of the coveted travel permits for Canada in 1938 from the 'Überwachungsstelle für Kautschuk und Asbest' (India Rubber and Asbestos Monitoring Agency) in Berlin. Because the National Socialists wanted to forcibly move the focus of foreign trade from overseas to Europe, it became increasingly difficult to travel to America during the Third Reich.

Bolstered by import successes, Oscar H. Ritter expanded TROPAG's business activities and entered the export business with chemicals and cement. Revenue grew and Oscar H. Ritter looked for security to equip the company

Left:

In the 1930's TROPAG grew to become one of the leading importers of asbestos. Traders assessed the quality of merchandise by testing the structure of the asbestos fibre by hand.



Above:

TROPAG was one of the first German companies to import raw asbestos from Canada. It was mainly women who did the weighing and packing.

Below:

In Hamburg the imported asbestos was sorted in a warehouse in the harbour where traders could appraise and purchase the merchandise.

for times of crisis and to make it more independent of creditors. He decided to buy properties, which later formed the foundation for the Merkur-Wohnungsgesellschaft mbH, established in the 1950s and still in existence today.

The War Years

The start of the Second World War in September 1939 led to the conscription of many members of staff. Oscar H. Ritter's indispensability applications were rejected. Because TROPAG imported important commodities for the armaments industry such as raw asbestos from Canada or manganese ores from the Far East, it continued to operate throughout the war. Due to reoccurring problems in milling the ores, Oscar H. Ritter considered integrating an ore and mineral milling plant in the company, as suggested by Rudolf Horl in 1941. Rudolf Horl was convinced that owning a milling plant would advance the ore business when the war was over, especially, he argued in a letter to Oscar H. Ritter on 25 August 1941, 'in terms of involving the authorities in the imports'. Although Rudolf Horl was a soldier at the time, he continued to read the relevant trade press. This is how his attention was drawn to a mill for sale in Thuringia, which he urged his employer to buy in a number of letters. But all efforts by Oscar H. Ritter to obtain permission for working leave for Rudolf Horl from the army regional command failed. Because of the already precarious personnel situation, Oscar H. Ritter had nobody who could perform the sales negotiations. The project had to be abandoned.



In 1943 TROPAG opened a branch office in Vienna. With the course of the war cutting Germany off from its overseas markets, Oscar H. Ritter turned his attention to trade with south-east Europe. Transit business with Italy, Greece and Hungary became increasingly important.

The Second World War began to make itself increasingly felt for Oscar H. Ritter and his staff, especially in every-day life. Hamburg had been the target of allied bombing raids since May 1940. In the summer of 1943 British and American bombs devastated large sections of the city. Oscar H. Ritter's private apartment was among those destroyed. He and his wife moved to Travemünde, where they owned a villa. Although inner Hamburg was largely destroyed in the war, the house at Alsterdamm 7, where the TROPAG offices were located, remained undamaged. When an incendiary bomb fell on the house, members of Oscar H. Ritter's staff, who were allotted to air raid duties and slept on field beds in the offices, managed to extinguish the fire and save the premises.

Left:

The buildings on the Alsterdamm, where the TROPAG offices were located, were also hit by bombs during the Allied air raids on Hamburg. However, the damage was minor compared to the devastations caused in other districts of the city.

The Company Founder Oscar H. Ritter (1891–1967, photo from 1936)



Oscar Heinrich Ritter came from Cleves in the lower Rhine Valley, which he left at the age of 18 to found a trading company in London with his older brother Max Alexander Ritter. This marked the beginning of an extraordinary career, which made Oscar H. Ritter an early protagonist of the first wave of globalisation occurring at the turn of the nineteenth century. As the brothers were

forced to leave Great Britain as a result of the First World War, Oscar H. Ritter first travelled to Berlin, then to Hamburg. Here he ran an India rubber importing company with his brother from 1919, which merged in 1923 with the Tropische und Ueberseeische Rohprodukten Aktiengesellschaft, or TROPAG for short, founded by him the year before. Part of the capital required to found the company came from Oscar H. Ritter's wife, Vera Rosa Rathschüler, born in Ried in Austria, to whom Oscar H. Ritter had been married since 1921. Oscar H. Ritter successfully led TROPAG through the economic crises of the Weimar Republic. When the National Socialists came to power in January 1933, Oscar H. Ritter joined the NSDAP, as did many Germans, but left the party again in 1943 – an unusual step in the middle of the war. From May 1945 until the beginning of 1946, Oscar H. Ritter was the provisional mayor of Travemünde, where he and his wife had lived since their Hamburg apartment had been destroyed. After this, Oscar H. Ritter concentrated on reconstructing TROPAG, which continued to grow through the years of the German 'economic miracle'. In order to secure the company's future, Oscar H. Ritter and his wife founded the Oscar and Vera Ritter Foundation which, as the sole heir, became TROPAG's chief partner following their deaths.

(1945–1967)

On Course for Growth. Commodities Trading During the ‘Economic Miracle’

Scarce commodities and a lack of foreign exchange made a come-back after the Second World War difficult. But Oscar H. Ritter's many contacts helped TROPAG to bridge the hardship of the first post-war years. Trading picked up again during the reconstruction period and a phase of steady growth began. TROPAG initially concentrated on the asbestos business, but did not neglect the ores department. The company concentrated increasingly on specialities, which later would prove a strategically important decision.

The Hardship of the Post-war Years

At the end of the Second World War, the Free and Hanseatic City of Hamburg was within the British occupied zone. In the first post-war years the daily routine of the citizens of Hamburg was fraught with great hardships, as in the rest of Germany. Foodstuffs were rationed and almost half of all living space had been completely destroyed. The port, industrial installations and bridges had also suffered considerable damage. The extremely cold winters only exacerbated the situation. The scarcity of coal led to constant power cuts, so that numerous companies had to stay closed. Bernhard Henning, Julius Dietterlein and Johannes Rathschüler held the fort in Ballindamm 7 ‘in front of a smoking, round iron stove and wearing gloves’, as they later remembered.

Oscar H. Ritter initially remained in Travemünde. In May 1945, he was appointed to the post of provisional mayor of Travemünde by the British military commander. One of his most important tasks was to accommodate the many refugees and displaced persons entering the town. He was reunited with Rudolf Horl, who had returned from prisoner-of-war camp and became head of the Travemünde housing office in 1946. After Oscar H. Ritter had left the office of mayor in January 1946, he attempted to obtain permission from the British military occupying force to reopen TROPAG. However, his denazification process had to be completed first. Oscar H. Ritter was initially regarded as a token supporter due to his membership in the NSDAP, but was eventually exonerated. He was therefore given permission to carry on business as requested.

Successful Come-back

The import business restarted after the currency reform of 1948. Foreign exchange had to be applied for at JEIA, the allied Joint Export-Import Agency in Frankfurt am Main. TROPAG managed to acquire \$50,000 at an early stage for an asbestos deal with Australia. This was a decisive move towards a fresh start. TROPAG re-established trading relationships with



Canada in 1950. Contacts with Canada took on a whole new dimension after Oscar H. Ritter's chance meeting with the Canadian Manville during a flight. The two got talking and it ensued that Manville was the owner of the world's largest asbestos mine. Very soon TROPAG was selling asbestos in Germany, Austria and Switzerland for the Johns-Manville company. By 1952 TROPAG was once again one of the leading asbestos importers in Germany.

On Course for Growth

In view of the positive economic developments, Oscar H. Ritter made plans to open an office in New York in 1953. By having a stake in a company in the USA, TROPAG would be in a position to buy asbestos and minerals more cheaply than previously possible. In addition, Oscar H. Ritter was convinced that this move would considerably improve the quality of the imported commodities. The Hamburg chamber of commerce approved since having an office in the USA meant foreign exchange savings. Another argument in favour was that the new company would sell German industrial products, primarily chemicals, on the American market. But the plan failed and subsequently TROPAG concentrated on trading from Hamburg.

Just as during the 1930s, the ore department developed into TROPAG's second mainstay during the 1950s, alongside the asbestos business. Rudolf Horl managed to continue his pre-war successes. With the growth of the automobile industry, metals and powder alloys in particular became sought-after import products. TROPAG continuously expanded

Left:
Hamburg's historical landmarks – the ‘Michel’ and large ships continued to define Hamburg's image through the years of Germany's economic miracle.

Above:
Staff members before and after the war (from left to right): Johannes Rathschüler, Rudolf Horl, Heinrich Reimers, Julius Dietterlein, Bernhard Henning in 1947.



Left:
Quality control of the 'miracle fibre' as asbestos was once called because of its resilience, resistance to heat and acidity and its good insulating properties.

Right:
The 'Jeffrey Mine' in the 1960's. The Canadian asbestos mine belonged to Johns-Manville, TROPAG's key supplier of asbestos for decades.



their product range. Although the asbestos trade was successful during the 1950s and 1960s, Oscar H. Ritter was interested in niche markets from an early stage. This included importing ground cork from Spain, an important raw material for manufacturing linoleum, for example, and high-quality timber from Singapore and Indonesia. TROPAG won numerous new customers and suppliers, including the timber suppliers Peninsular Merchants from Singapore.

TROPAG's upwards course continued following the company's move from Ballindamm 7 to Ballindamm 6 at the end of the 1950s. The damage to TROPAG caused by the flooding catastrophe of 1962, which flooded one sixth of the area of Hamburg, was limited because the offices had been on the upper floors of the building.

'Interzone Trade'

While cargo handling in the port of Hamburg enjoyed enormous growth thanks to rising trade with western Europe re-gaining pre-war levels by 1955, the amount of goods handled between Hamburg and countries behind the

'Iron Curtain' was reduced to one fifth of the pre-war level as a direct consequence of the Cold War. Despite these developments, TROPAG still managed to do business with the German Democratic Republic (GDR), where large quantities of asbestos were supplied. The import of synthetic rubber from the GDR, called 'Buna' after its main constituents butadiene and sodium (Na), also played an important role in 'interzone trading'. Contacts with the Buna factory in Schkopau, one of the five largest industrial combines in the GDR, still existed. These business relationships had existed before the war, when the first Buna factory had been built to manufacture synthetic rubber on an industrial scale. In contrast to the pre-war years, however, TROPAG could no longer deal directly with their business partners because every deal had to go through the East Berlin Ministry for Foreign and Inter-German Trade. This market regulation impaired dynamic developments in inter-German trade.

Oscar H. Ritter and his Staff

Whether trading overseas, domestically or with the other German state: TROPAG staff

was committed, reliable and fast. One of Oscar H. Ritter's maxims was that every letter should have a reply by the same evening. The great dedication of TROPAG merchants in every deal they made helped build a trust base with customers and suppliers, and led to the establishment of long-term relationships.

Oscar H. Ritter's relationship with his staff was strongly influenced by Catholic social teachings and his actions were guided in particular by the principle of subsidiarity and helping people to help themselves, based on promoting the personal responsibility of the individual as part of a team-oriented community. Oscar H. Ritter not only transferred the greatest possible degree of responsibility to his staff in their respective fields, where necessary he also vouched for them, as in the case of Edeltraud Hain, who, in 1949, was the first woman he employed following the Second World War. Among other things, Oscar H. Ritter provided her with a rent deposit because it was very difficult for women living alone to find accommodation after the war.

It stands out that even as early as the 1950s, more women than men worked for TROPAG, not only as secretaries, but also as responsible merchants with power of attorney. Oscar H. Ritter's attitude to his staff was open

and modern. For example, he quickly introduced the five-day-week. The custom of awarding staff a half-day off on their birthday, a custom still in place today, can also be traced back to Oscar H. Ritter. He arranged for staff to be paid 'birthday money' to allow them to invite colleagues to have birthday cake at a time when butter and sugar were still rarities. His commitment characterised the company climate: TROPAG staff were endowed with a strong sense of solidarity and regarded the company as a 'second family'.

Below:

The TROPAG team in the new premises at Ballindamm 6 in the late 1950's. Senior staff members Rudolf Horl, Heinrich Reimers, Julius Dietterlein, Bernhard Henning and Edeltraud Hain are seated in the front row (from left to right). Standing in the back row are Michael Walter (left) and Jürgen Wittekind (centre).



Edeltraud Hain (born 1924, photo from 1954)



Edeltraud Hain was born in Berlin. During the Second World War she made her way to Travemünde, where she worked for the aviation ministry. At the end of the war she found a job there as a secretary in the housing office. Her superior was Rudolf Horl, who recommended her to Oscar H. Ritter when he was looking for a secretary for TROPAG. Edeltraud Hain was hired on 1 January 1949, the first woman after the Second World War. Until then, the company had been entirely a male domain. Edeltraud Hain was inquisitive, asked questions and thus with time gained the insider knowledge a trader needs. At a time when it was still very unusual for women to work in foreign trade, Oscar H. Ritter made her a merchant and sent her to international seller and supplier conferences. Edeltraud Hain held her own in this man's world and was given power of attorney in 1959. When Rudolf Horl moved into the company management following Oscar H. Ritter's death in 1967, Edeltraud Hain took over management of the ores department from him. She remained the only woman at international conferences into the 1970s. In 1989 Edeltraud Hain retired but remains closely associated with TROPAG to this day.

(1967–1989)

Continuity and Change. Following the Death of Oscar H. Ritter

Oscar H. Ritter provided for TROPAG's future by transferring company ownership to the Oscar and Vera Ritter Foundation, which he had established earlier. Following his death in 1967, the foundation provided TROPAG with the necessary financial security to master the Federal Republic's first economic crisis. With hard work, management and staff retained old customers and gained new ones. Where in the 1970s the focus had been on consolidation and the development of new markets, the 1980s were marked by rapid changes in the trading world.

The End of an Era

Starting in the early 1960s, customers and suppliers increasingly asked who they would be dealing with in future, if not with Oscar H. Ritter. Because they placed great value in planning security by long-term repeat trading, they were worried about the advanced age of the company owner. Following a business meeting with representatives of the Canadian asbestos supplier Johns-Manville in 1963, Jürgen Wittekind reported that it was important for the business partners to know 'how TROPAG will continue to operate if anything were to happen to OHR [Oscar H. Ritter], because nobody wants to make decisions that may no longer be applicable as result of foreseeable risks'. Many business relationships involved Oscar H. Ritter personally and were handled by him. The majority of customers consequently identified the company with him. Oscar H. Ritter, as Jürgen Wittekind added in his minutes of the meeting, had once replied to the question of the future by saying that he was still a young man. But the Canadians were of the opinion that such a reply represented 'no basis' for decisions concerning future cooperation.

Jürgen Wittekind had been with the company since 1951. Beside Bernhard Henning, Rudolf Horl and Edeltraud Hain, he was one of the members of staff to whom Oscar H. Ritter intended to entrust TROPAG's fortunes following his departure. When his wife died in 1964, Oscar H. Ritter made the Oscar and Vera Ritter Foundation, established only a short time earlier, TROPAG's chief partner. At the same time, he restructured the areas of responsibility: following his death, Bernhard Henning and Rudolf Horl were to become Managing Directors, Jürgen Wittekind would take over the asbestos department and Edel-

traud Hain the ores department. Oscar H. Ritter did not inform his business partners about how he visualised the future after he had left, so TROPAG's situation remained uncertain in the eyes of customers and suppliers. The company was increasingly fighting against supply bottlenecks and competitive pressure grew. It was even in danger of losing the distributorship for Johns-Manville. Following the death of Oscar H. Ritter in 1967 the two Managing Directors, Bernhard Henning and Rudolf Horl, thus entered into a difficult inheritance – at the very time when the first economic crisis put an end to the turbulent years of growth during the economic miracle.

'The Future of TROPAG is Assured Indefinitely!'

With these words, Jürgen Wittekind tried to boost customer and supplier confidence in TROPAG's future viability during the transition phase. His success was due to the enormous commitment of staff and far-sighted management decisions. TROPAG exclusively secured the Johns-Manville asbestos distribution business in the German-speaking world. However, asbestos trading was gradually losing importance. This decline was compensated by expanding the trade in other industrial resources.

The new Managing Directors, Bernhard Henning and Rudolf Horl, aimed for both continuity and change. They were guided by Oscar H. Ritter's business maxim of constantly expanding the product range. They additionally emphasised this by renaming the company: to avoid restricting the wide range of resources offered by TROPAG to those mentioned in the name of the company, 'Asbestos and Ore Imports' was removed. The company now trades under the name of TROPAG Oscar H. Ritter Nachf. GmbH.

Left:
Tradition and innovation.
Hamburg in the 1980's.

Changing Markets

As part of the expansion of the product range that took place in the 1970's, TROPAG added new areas of focus. Besides the glass industry, for which manganese dioxide and replacement chrome were imported, the company primarily traded in raw materials for the paper and textiles industries. At the time, Hamburg was a central European trading centre for business with Japan, from where TROPAG imported polyvinyl alcohol and fluorocarbon resins, which were important additives for the textile and paper industries. Another focal industry of the 1970s was the carpet industry, numbering approximately 100 customers.

The company thus reacted promptly to the decline in asbestos trading and proved that it could quickly recognise structural changes in trading and exploit new markets. Thus, in the 1980s, TROPAG began to import raw materials for producing animal feeds and for the ceramics industry. In addition, new standards in services and logistics were set by the early establishment of a company-owned IT division.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the range of customers and suppliers changed in line with the growing range of products. The company

recruited new suppliers in Kazakhstan and Belgium, in addition to Japan and the USA. Numerous foreign factories and internationally operating concerns have been represented by TROPAG in the Federal Republic of Germany and other European countries since then.

A Change of Generations

The changes of the 1970s went hand-in-hand with a change in generations. Jürgen Wittekind and Rudolf Horl were appointed Managing Directors when Bernhard Henning left at the end of 1970, after 50 years with the company. In 1977 Rudolf Horl retired, after also celebrating his 50th anniversary with the company. He was the last of the generation that had built up the company in the 1920s in Hamburg, together with Oscar H. Ritter. With this generation change in mind, Michael Walter had been made Deputy Managing Director in 1976 and appointed Managing Director after Rudolf Horl's retirement on 1 January 1979. He too had been at TROPAG for many years, having begun his career as the company's second apprentice in 1958.

The generation change also brought a change in location: in 1979 TROPAG moved

from Ballindamm 6 to the house at Bundesstraße 4, also centrally located, where the company's offices are situated to this day. The building at Bundesstraße 4 had been bought in 1974 by the Oscar and Vera Ritter Foundation and converted for TROPAG's use in 1978. Today, the office building at Bundesstraße 4 belongs to TROPAG Oscar H. Ritter Nachf. GmbH.

Jürgen Wittekind and Michael Walter guided the company's fortunes through the 1980s. Their successful mutual cooperation demonstrated that Oscar H. Ritter's decision to entrust company management to long-serving and particularly deserving staff was the correct one. Jürgen Wittekind retired in 1991. He moved to TROPAG's advisory board, remaining at the company's side in both word and deed, as his predecessors had. He remained on the board of directors of the Oscar and Vera Ritter Foundation, where he was active as the chairperson until 2006.

Success Factors

Adherence to TROPAG's guiding principles remains one of the company's success factors to this day. The maxim of not following

a pure growth strategy goes back to Oscar H. Ritter's days. 'It was about building deep rather than high', as the long-serving Managing Director Michael Walter emphasises. This attitude led to very close customer and supplier contacts, which often did and still do last for decades.

The basis of this loyalty was and remains the trust that TROPAG built up as an intermediary between customers and suppliers. Staffs not only look after their customers, they keep the interests of suppliers in mind. The company relies on transparency and openness, and understands its own activities primarily as a service. TROPAG was approved to ISO 9001:2000 and GMP. What these quality management systems prescribe today, are something the TROPAG staff have been practising for decades as a matter of course.

TROPAG has in the past and will continue to attach great importance to the principle of good faith and trust. The Managing Directors underline this approach to business with their membership in the 'Assembly of Honourable Merchants in Hamburg', which advocates that every deal concluded must be reconcilable with the demands of commercial trust. In addition, TROPAG supports the activities of 'Pro Honore e.V.' in their fight against corruption and other forms of economic crime. In line with this principle, the Managing Directors of TROPAG have for decades been lay judges, in bodies such as the county court and the social security tribunal, and the Hamburg regional industrial tribunal.

Left:

In 1979 TROPAG moved to its current premises in the Bundesstrasse 4.

Oscar and Vera Ritter Foundation



The Oscar and Vera Ritter Foundation, or the Ritter Foundation for short, was established in 1964 by the Ritter's, but did not take up its remit until after Oscar H. Ritter's death in 1967. The original idea for establishing a foundation goes back to the early 1950s. The Ritters wanted to ensure that their cultural and social commitments would continue after their deaths and that TROPAG's future would be secured. The foundation was therefore appointed as TROPAG's shareholder. The purpose of the foundation is the personal and institutional promotion of training and funding talented musicians and composers. This function can be traced back to Vera Ritter, who was a musician and who also published her own compositions in her Vera-Verlag publishing house.

The foundation's statutes provide for a three-person board, one of whom is the Managing Director of TROPAG. In addition, the board includes a musicologist and a third, co-opted person. Following the will of the founder, more than 7.5 million euros in funds and around 1,700 scholarships have been awarded so far. More than 340 concerts by young musicians have been held during the funding period. Moreover, the Ritter Prize, worth 15,000 euros, has been annually awarded to composers or artists for especially outstanding performance since 2001.

Right:

In 1985 the company's longstanding Managing Director Rudolf Horl (first row, third from right) celebrated his 75th birthday with staff members of TROPAG. Seated on his left is Edeltraud Hain, on his right Jürgen Wittekind, next to him Michael Walter.



(1989–2009)

Building on Tradition. TROPAG as a Service Agency

Europe's advancing economic integration and accelerating globalisation allowed trade through Hamburg to grow rapidly in the years after 1989 – with positive consequences for TROPAG. The radical changes in trading went hand-in-hand with the modernisation of internal procedures, with Intranet, Internet and email joining the telephone and the letter as means of communication. The traditional trading house developed into a modern service agency. The new Consulting and Business Development divisions proved a driving force in TROPAG's transition to a service provider.

Opening up New Markets

Following the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of 1989, Hamburg expanded into an important trade centre in the now much larger European market, and TROPAG was quick to exploit the opportunities offered by these changes. In the next few years, the company opened up new markets in Eastern Europe and Japan and intensified its trading activities within the growing European Community, which had made trading easier with the introduction of the Euro in 2002, and its eastward expansion since 2004. Import business from the US was also further developed and the product range greatly expanded. Today TROPAG also trades in pressure switches, metal contacts and springs for the electrical and automotive supply industries, and in high-quality metal alloys. Thanks to its varied product range, TROPAG is currently active in 18 different branches of industry.

New Forms of Communication

New communication media have brought about a fundamental change in trading in the last twenty years. Previously telephonists

and shorthand typists were responsible for communications via telephone and letters, but now traders write their own emails and search for information on the World Wide Web. TROPAG entered the Internet Age as early as 1997, when Michael Walter recruited Andreas Köster to the company. Andreas Köster, who was only 34 years old, had already been assisting the company for several years as a graduate tax consultant and auditor. He modernised the IT division and introduced both the Internet and Intranet. In order to maintain their exacting security standards, TROPAG spares no expense when it comes to IT security. Modern forms of communication accelerated trading, which today takes place over extremely short periods of time all over the world despite the time differences. Prompt deliveries rely on a firm grasp of logistics, and this is one of TROPAG's strong points. Despite computerisation, TROPAG continues to place great value on their customer and market proximity. 'A computer', Andreas Köster emphasises, 'cannot replace personal contact.' Travelling to see customers and suppliers will therefore continue to be a key component of corporate philosophy in the future.

Left:
The port of Hamburg is Germany's largest seaport and one of the world's most important transshipment hubs. View from St. Katharine's Church over the 'Speicherstadt' to the harbour.





The Trader as Service Provider

The triumph of the Internet placed new demands on traders. The 'classical trader' was somebody who had something exclusive that the customer needed - knowledge, contacts or goods. The traders negotiated prices and services at international seller and supplier conferences, but these conferences no longer exist. Prices and services can be accessed by anybody on the Internet, which means that it is almost impossible to protect sources and hold on to any advantage gained through knowledge.

Today TROPAG's staff increasingly work as modern service providers. Business partners no longer select the company just for its competitive prices, but also because it provides the highest level of proficiency in logistics, market expertise, liability, security and reliability. Liability issues are becoming increasingly important because there is no mutual legal assistance agreement with some countries in the Asian region where several suppliers are located. Because TROPAG also assumes liability and funding risks, it provides its customers and suppliers with additional security, and this is one of the reasons why companies do business with TROPAG. As a distributor and importer, the company is not merely reduced to the role of dealing with customs, but is also a reliable partner in terms of the current REACH directive. Since spring 2009, TROPAG has been one of the first companies to meet the special standards required to be an Authorised Economic Operator (AEO). It also monitors compliance with specifications and supports suppliers in opening up new markets.

The transformation of TROPAG to a service provider reflects the changes in Hamburg as an industrial centre over the past twenty years. A fundamental structural reorganisation began at the end of the 1980s, with shipyard closures and rationalisation measures in the port operation leading to a steady reduction in the number of people working in the traditional port sector. Services, on the other hand, grew. Today it is not only its port that makes Hamburg the

'Gateway to the World', but also the importers and exporters based here, and internationally oriented service providers such as TROPAG.

Michael Walter and Andreas Köster, who has been TROPAG's sole Managing Director since 2006, utilised these developments and expanded the service sector as a whole. As well as in the trading, logistics and services divisions, TROPAG's consulting services for small and medium sized enterprises and for foundations are now seeing high rates of growth. The focus of the consulting activities is on the business-management consulting sector and the conception, establishment and management of foundations.

TROPAG as an Intermediary

The tradition of maintaining long-term business relationships continues to be extremely important to TROPAG. Keeping up these contacts calls for considerable personal input, especially in times of globalisation and the customers' consolidation processes this often entails. In a climate of mergers and increasingly frequent changes in business partners, personal contacts play a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of old business relationships or developing new ones. In keeping with the spirit of the company founder, TROPAG focuses on the role of the trader as intermediary, bringing together customers and suppliers. This can only be achieved with a high degree of transparency – and that is something that TROPAG has practiced for decades.

Today TROPAG is industry's point of contact when special metal alloys or high-quality chemical products are required. The procurement of special raw materials and primary and intermediate chemical products that meet the requirements of the processor represents a great challenge for the company's purchasing department. TROPAG is an intermediary and advisor between both supplier and producer and between users. The company's clear customer and market proximity is also expressed by its ongoing collaboration in the development of new products, with customer requirements in mind.

Left:

Since 1919 the history of TROPAG has been very closely intertwined with that of the city of Hamburg as a major port and centre of commerce.

Michael Walter (*1939)



Michael Walter began his apprenticeship to become a wholesale and foreign trader at TROPAG in 1958. He was only the second apprentice, following Rudolf Horl, in the almost 50-year history of the company. Straight after his apprenticeship, Michael Walter did his military service, finishing in

the autumn of 1962. Following a year on the commercial staff, he went to London and Paris to work and learn the languages and afterwards to Melbourne for three years to gain overseas experience in shipping, import and sales. Back in Germany, he worked in the export and distribution of plastics for almost four years. In 1970 a new generation was emerging at TROPAG and Michael Walter returned to Hamburg. In 1976 he was promoted to Deputy Managing Director, and in 1979, together with Jürgen Wittekind (Finances and Personnel), became Managing Director for Import, Sales and Marketing. Michael Walter was the sole Managing Director from 1990 onwards. Like those before him and his successor too, Michael Walter was guided by the principles of the traditional Hamburg Honourable Merchant and carried out voluntary work. He has now been a judge at Hamburg's social security tribunal for more than 25 years. Michael Walter retired in 2006, but through his role as Chairman of the Board of Directors for the Oscar and Vera Ritter Foundation, TROPAG's shareholder, he remains associated with the company.

TROPAG in its Anniversary Year 2009

TROPAG is now a modern, service-oriented trading company. The earlier, product-oriented departments have been disbanded and hierarchies are flat. The company is divided into Buying and Selling, Consulting, Business Development, Services, IT and Quality Management, Personnel and Accounting. This organisation contributes to TROPAG's success. Thanks to its very robust financial situation, it is regularly given an excellent assessment in the "investorgrade" category by leading banks and loan insurers. In addition, the German Central Bank has confirmed for many years that TROPAG is eligible for rediscount with the central bank.

The company's future is guaranteed by the Ritter Foundation. It reinvests a large proportion of the profits and accumulates reserves, which means that no loans need to be taken out. This is a comfortable situation to be in, especially in times of crisis. A further advantage is the varied product range - with a total of 18 different branches of industry,

the economic risks of trading are much better distributed. Moreover, TROPAG specialises in importing exclusive raw materials, so there is always a demand regardless of the state of the economy.

And there is another reason for TROPAG's healthy economic situation: a conscious decision was made to remain a medium-sized enterprise. The last twenty years in the company's 100-year history demonstrate how it is possible to stand firm and shape the future by offering quality, service and the right mix of continuity and change, despite rapid structural changes in the industry. This is proven time and again by outstanding customer and supplier evaluations.

Future Challenges

Every crisis is also an opportunity – as TROPAG's chequered history shows – and Managing Director Andreas Köster is looking confidently to the future despite the current financial crisis. A review of the past 100 years justifies an optimistic outlook. The business will con-

tinue to develop its company-based services, its customer-oriented consulting and its services for internationally-focused commercial enterprises. The Product Management, Consulting and Business Development divisions will therefore be expanded. Andreas Köster is also convinced that TROPAG will be able to utilise additional opportunities in the field of new technologies, but he is also keeping a close eye on the trade in special raw materials and aims to intensify this niche business. By bundling various products from different suppliers into product baskets aimed at individual industries, the old-established Hamburg trading company will continue to unite customers and suppliers in the future, to their mutual advantage.

**Right:**

TROPAG staff in the centenary year (from left to right, from bottom to top):

Sabine Schwier, Barbara Kiesel, Gabriele Buschmann, Monika Verstege, Gesche Eckhoff, Prof. Dr. Andreas Köster (first row)

Nicole Rudolph, Claudia Teske, Kristina Martins, Hannelore Pegidis, Andreas Reidock, Anja Dromnitzki, Stefanie Hogrefe, Michael Walter, Meike Kahns (second row)

Petra Lübbers, Peter Mählmann, Michael Voß, Jan-Christoph Schoeler (third row)

Aram Mikschas, Alexander Huber (fourth row).

Left:

Reliable – fast – safe. TROPAG optimizes the logistics; customers appreciate precise delivery commitments.

TROPAG and its Staff

TROPAG has been a family company from the start, with people at its centre. For the current Managing Director, Andreas Köster, there is no doubt that the company 'reached its 100th birthday because it always had a good team'. The staff participate in the company's success, regardless of whether they work at the reception desk, in the accounting department, in customer service or as a product manager. Performance alone counts, and teamwork makes for good performance.

All members of staff work independently in their fields, continuing a tradition that was first introduced by the company founder, Oscar H. Ritter. But in contrast to the era of Oscar H. Ritter, TROPAG today has a much more complex organisation, meaning that higher demands are placed on individual staff members. To maintain its high standard of services, TROPAG asks a lot of its staff and promotes training and professional development more intensely than ever.

What has barely changed in the past 100 years is the great stability of the work force. Currently the average period of time spent with the company is around nine to ten years. For those in top positions, however, this could even be a quarter of a century or more, as in the case of Michael Walter, who has been with TROPAG for more than 40 years, or Michael Voß, the authorised signatory and manager of the Business Development division, who joined the company more than 25 years ago. The number of employees with an average age of around 40 has remained constant at 20 to 25 over the past two decades, with female staff, in contrast to the early years, clearly in the majority with a total of two thirds.

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Text, Illustrations and Editing

Dr. des. Thekla Keuck
Dr. Thomas Prüfer
Geschichtsbüro Reder, Roeseling & Prüfer, Köln
www.geschichtsbuero.de

Design

Jefferson & Högerle
Studio für Gestaltung, Köln
www.jefferson-hoegerle.com

Translation

Alan Johnson, Nordstemmen
Wendy Marth, Bonn

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Bernd Rölle
Medienproduktion, Köln
www.berndroelle.de

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