

EBRO and STAFSJÖ – innovative and reliable partners to the pulp and paper industry

Interview

Drawing on more than 30 years experience in the development, production and sale of butterfly valves, pneumatic und electric actuators and control systems for industrial applications, the family-owned business EBRO ARMATUREN Gebr. Bröer GmbH has established itself as one of the world's leading valve manufacturers. Thanks to its high quality standards and customer support, EBRO ARMATUREN has long been regarded as a reliable partner to the pulp and paper industry and its suppliers. This leading position was strengthened last year with the creation of the Bröer Group and the purchase of Swedish knife gate valve manufacturer STAFSJÖ Valves AB. STAFSJÖ Valves AB is a well-established company with a successful range of products serving the pulp and paper industry. It has been developing and producing gate valves since 1881 and knife gate valves since 1928. Up to June of last year the company belonged to the Swedish Bejier Alma Group. Dr. Manhart Schlegel, editor-in-chief of the Wochenblatt für Papierfabrikation, took the opportunity to speak to Hans Peter Bröer, founder and managing partner of EBRO ARMATUREN and the new Bröer Group, about the surprisingly rapid and innovative expansion of the company and about the Bröer Group's future plans within the pulp and paper industry.

Hans Peter Bröer, managing partner of the Bröer Group

since 1970 he has led and developed EBRO ARMATUREN, which he founded together with his brother and has now become the Bröer Group.

WfP: Mr. Bröer, looking back what were the most important steps in the development of the Bröer Group?

H.P. Bröer: It was my grandfather Carl Bröer who took the first step towards the Bröer Group when he founded the Ernst Bröer aluminium foundry based in Hagen-Haspe. He called it after his son Ernst, my father. In 1970, with the experience we had gained from the foundry business, we started producing



Hans Peter Bröer – a brief profile

Hans Peter Bröer (68) completed an apprenticeship in metalworking and qualified as a master fitter. His father Ernst died at the beginning of his further studies and Hans Peter had to take over the business, an aluminium foundry, together with the foundry's general manager. He grew up in the metal casting industry and taught himself all the necessary skills. At the time, the company had three foundries – in Hagen, Schwetzingen and subsequently in Liberec in the Czech Republic. These were later sold, and

		BRÖER GROUP		
EBRO ARMATUREN Gebäudetechnik & Service GmbH Hagen		Bröer Holding GmbH Hagen Germany	EBRO ARMATUREN Est. und Co. KG Cham Switzerland	EBRO ARMATUREN INTERNATIONAL Est. und Co. KG Cham, Switzerland
	STAFSJÖ VALVES AB Stavsjö Sweden	EBRO ARMATUREN Gebr. Bröer GmbH Hagen, Germany		
Stafsjö Armaturen GmbH Hagen Germany	Stafsjö Armaturen Gesellschaft m.b.H. Vienna Austria	EBRO Austria Branches: Poland, Czech Republic, Iran, Hungary	EBRO Germany Branches: France, Netherlands, Italy, Australia, Spain, UK, Italy, Thailand, China	EBRO Switzerland branches: USA, Italy, Indonesia, Turkey, UAE

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Stafsjö plant

shut-off valves. With a workforce of 20, my brother and I sold the first butterfly valves in 1972 under the name of EBRO ARMATUREN. The first branches opened between 1981 and 1983 in Switzerland, France, Austria and the Netherlands. My brother Jochen died much too early in 1989. Since then I have been running EBRO ARMATUREN on my own. We set up the first production site outside Germany in 1988 with the aim of making our own pneumatic actuators. Around the same time we started to produce electric actuators at our main factory in Hagen. In 1991, with our market share rising, we set up a production site in Thailand in Asia. Since then there have been many new sales offices and branches. In June 2005 we bought knife-gate valve manufacturer Stafsjö Valves AB to extend our EBRO product range. Both EBRO and Stafsjö are well respected. They now both form part of the Bröer Group and turned over around 100 million euros worldwide in 2005 with a workforce of 650.

WfP: Thanks to your subsidiaries and branches, EBRO is now a genuinely international company. Could you give us a little more detail on how that works out and explain where the valves are used?

H.P. Bröer: Part of our philosophy involves establishing a presence in the markets through subsidiaries and our own production sites. So far we have gradually built up a worldwide sales network with 18 branches and some very successful trading partnerships.

Between 1997 and 2005, alongside our subsidiaries, we established branches in Indonesia, Italy, Spain, the UK, Poland, Australia, Iran, the Philippines, China, Hungary, Russia, the United States, Turkey and the Czech Republic. I should add that Stafsjö Valves AB, acting as an independent company within the Bröer Group, set up a further branch in Vienna this January to add to its branch in Germany. Drawing on our joint product portfolio and customer support services, we are now in a position to offer our customers solutions for a vast range of applications, for example in the field of swimming pool and water technology, shipbuilding, pneumatic conveyor systems, building technology, the chemicals industry, power stations, brewing, the automobile industry, special applications for machine and plant engineering and, especially in the last few years, in the pulp and paper industry together with its supply sector.

WfP: What do you think accounts for your above-average growth rates in the paper industry?

H.P. Bröer: EBRO and the Bröer Group are part of a family-run business that lays great importance on customer relations and close partnerships. This is true for all our activities, but it is in the paper industry that this approach has been particularly beneficial. More so than in our other operations, within the paper industry personal contacts are at the heart of business relationships.

Of course, our excellent results in the paper industry are also due in large measure to the high quality of our valves and the support we provide to customers.



EBRO plant

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Thanks to our collaboration with universities, institutes, plant constructors, planning and engineering firms and especially with the paper industry, and of course building on all our previous operational experience, we have been able to develop and adapt our products to meet the increasingly tough specifications and demands involved in paper manufacturing. We have also gained a competitive edge through our first-class support service, which focuses on providing customers with individual solutions. That is essentially down to the great professionalism of our team. However, we cannot rely on flexible production alone to keep our customers happy. We constantly strive to improve delivery performance by optimising our logistical structures.

Thanks to our central and branch warehouses and a financial structure that is specifically geared to meeting these needs, we can now guarantee fast and reliable delivery. What's more, the trend towards next-generation valves that meet modern quality standards is being further strengthened by Stafsjö Valves AB, which has several decades of experience in the paper industry.

WfP: Without wishing to take anything away from Stafsjö's own success story, I find it quite remarkable how fast you have made a name for EBRO within the paper industry. What is your recipe for success?

H.P. Bröer: In order to build up and develop business relationships, we believe in the importance of getting out there and meeting people. For the last few years we have sponsored specialist conferences such as ZELLCHEMING, the Austrian paper industry conference in Graz and PTS symposia. You will also find us at trade fairs such as the SPCI in Stockholm and at the Achema. We support training initiatives, present lectures at universities and organise our own in-house paper forum. To improve contacts with the paper and paper supplies industry, we held our first EBRO paper forum in December 2004 (WfP 7/2005, p. 329). As it was so well received, we intend to hold it every two years together with Stafsjö's extended gate valve expertise in the paper and pulp industry. The 2006 forum will be held on 12.–13.5.2006 in Hagen. The aim of these events is to promote an exchange of experiences, to improve communication and cooperation between users, plant constructors, planning and engineering firms and valve manufacturers, to discuss production problems

and possible solutions, present innovative research and development work and make contacts. The event is intended to help improve productivity at our factories and ensure they are maintained efficiently.

Then of course our image has benefited from being involved in the construction of prestigious new projects such as the Palm PM 6 container board machine in Wörth, the LWC PM 4 LEIPA-Schwedt system, the LWC unit in Perlen (Switzerland) with an expanded DIP facility, the toilet paper factory in Leuna and large-scale conversion and extension projects such as the PM 1 conversion at SCA Aschaffenburg, the exchange of PM 6 for Stora Enso Maxau, another extension project for Sappi-Ehingen, the DIP extension for UPM Steyrermühl (Austria) and at the moment a project to increase capacity for Zellstoff Pöls AG in Austria.

WfP: What were the motives and considerations behind the acquisition of STAFSJÖ?

H.P. Bröer: Since the middle of June 2005 both STAFSJÖ and EBRO have legally formed part of Bröer Holding GmbH, usually simply referred to as the Bröer Group. Nevertheless, they operate as independent companies. Since we founded EBRO Armaturen, our philosophy has always been to develop and expand our product portfolio under our own steam and, as far as possible, to forego external growth. Against the background of globalisation and the increasing international presence of our company, we decided the time was right to bring together STAFSJÖ's expertise in knife-gate valve production and EBRO's know-how in the field of butterfly valves. We also took into consideration the fact that the STAFSJÖ name is well-established in the market since they have been making gate valves for over a hundred years and that they enjoy the same reputation for fast availability, reliability, cost efficiency and family cohesion as EBRO.

WfP: Why does STAFSJÖ not trade under the EBRO ARMATUREN name?

H.P. Bröer: Both names are well-established with years of tradition behind them and more or less the same values. Let us not forget that Stafsjö is one of the oldest companies in Sweden and that some of its employees belong to the sixth generation of Stavsjö people who work for and feel a part of Stafsjö Valves AB. In my view we cannot simply wipe out a company's past. Stafsjö has played an important part in industrial history, and just as our own employees at EBRO stand behind their identity and products, the people in Sweden feel the same way in relation to their identity and products.



The Bröer family in the production facility at the main site

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Our strategy involves maintaining these identities, including the company names, and we see it as our job and indeed our duty to channel the considerable technical skills of both firms on behalf of our customers.

WfP: Butterfly and knife-gate valve components are therefore at the heart of the Bröer Group. How would you sum up the first year of your partnership with STAFSJÖ?

H.P. Bröer: We believe that our partnership will lead to a strengthening of both companies in terms of know-how through a positive transfer of image and technology. Above all our collaboration is gaining force and impetus among our customers in the paper industry. Before the merger, EBRO was responsible for providing advisory and other services for the pulp and paper industry in Germany. Thanks to Stafsjö and the relocation of its German branch to Hagen, the proportion of paper specialists in the pulp and paper industry within the Group has increased not only in Germany but worldwide. This ensures that we can provide even greater support to our customers, and our expanded valve production range puts us in a better position to open up new markets.

Of course we also need to manage the rapid 10% growth in staff numbers and turnover. Our different national cultures, which have an impact on our respective business cultures, are key issues for us at the moment. The process of cultural integration can be quite lengthy, and we should not underestimate the time involved. That is why we are trying to bring together the cultures of both companies by making greater efforts at communication.

WfP: What plans do you have for improving customer orientation and competitiveness?

H.P. Bröer: Our EBRO Pulp & Paper division was transferred to Stafsjö Armaturen GmbH last year so that we can offer our customers a total package covering everything from Stafsjö knife gate valves and EBRO butterfly valves to ball sector valves. On top of this, we organise training courses and paper seminars in Hagen led by recognised experts from universities and the business community – as well as customised paper seminars in Gernsbach for our own technicians and sales advisers with a focus on valve application technology for the pulp and paper industry. This allows us to respond more quickly to any problems our customers may have. The overall aim or, to put it another way, the strategy of both EBRO and STAFSJÖ for the next few years is to focus on growth and profitability by offering innovative products that respond to market demand, to join forces in terms of research and development and to work even more closely with our other partners.

WfP: How exactly do you intend to put this strategy into action?

H.P. Bröer: Both parties stand to benefit from collaboration with regard to development and know-how. We intend to promote this form of mutual enrichment more vigorously. At the same time we aim to intensify our work with research bodies, users and plant constructors.



Hans Peter Bröer with his daughter Lydia

To give you an example, with the help of EBRO and STAFSJÖ, the technical university in Dresden is currently designing and creating a flexible testing station for the development and optimisation of valves for the paper industry under realistic conditions. We also hope to obtain useful information on the operating behaviour and service life of our valves under different production conditions following their installation at the Voith Paper Technology Centre (PTC) in Heidenheim, which is regarded as the most modern plant in the world for development in every aspect of paper production.

WfP: Which project were you personally most involved in and particularly proud of?

H.P. Bröer: A ground-breaking project undertaken by EBRO was the production of the PM 4 in Schwedt, which involved applying the latest technology from fibre preparation through to roll packaging in order to produce high quality LWC paper entirely from recycled material. EBRO supplied over 5,000 valves for use in every part of this world-famous plant. Given its size, enormous speed and on-line operation, any production failure would involve substantial costs.

The equipment's performance has since proven that the choice of our valves on account of their quality and operational reliability was the right one and that Leipa's confidence in us is well-founded.

More recently, however, I'd like to mention our Stendal pulp factory project, which involved both EBRO and STAFSJÖ products.

WfP: What are your hopes for the future of your company?

H.P. Bröer: I'd like to see a continued economic upswing in Germany and hope that, despite the trend towards globalisation, the shape of the family company can be maintained for many years to come under the leadership of my daughter Lydia. I also hope that we shall continue to feel bound to uphold our strategic principles, which are geared towards ensuring the utmost customer satisfaction.

WfP: Mr. Bröer, many thanks for the interview. I wish you and the Bröer Group every success within the pulp and paper industry. *(Dr. Manhart Schlegel)*