

We showed how a well-known animal welfare organization had obtained the heritage of at least two elderly persons under false pretenses. After our first story got published more people came forward, we did a follow-up and reported on another case of blackmailing and fraud by the organization and local politicians. This case was subsequently included in ongoing criminal investigations.

Of cash cows and innocent lambs

Michael Aufhauser, founder of Gut Aiderbichl, presents himself as a good man. He saves animals. Now he's being investigated. Aufhauser allegedly defrauded elderly people of their money

Roger Moore, Gérard Depardieu, Hugh Grant, Uschi Glas, David Hasselhoff, Pamela Anderson, Andreas Gabalier. The list of celebrities who traveled to Salzburg, Austria in the previous years to pet horses and feed goats is long. The target of this publicity-attracting love for animals: the estate Gut Aiderbichl. The sanctuary for animals in need runs 25 locations in Austria, Germany, Switzerland and France and likes to be associated with stars and starlets. It yields a lot of money: Just in 2014 the Aiderbichl Empire recorded a revenue of more than 18 million euros. This included the donations of 56,000 animal sponsors. About 2.2 million euros were additionally acquired from a total of 27 inheritances.

Near Salzburg, surrounded by lush green meadows perches, Gut Aiderbichl stands on a hilltop. As soon as one enters the large area donkeys, ponies and goats cross one's way. Pigs and cows are lying in the shadow within spacious enclosures. It's hot, but some families defy the scorching sun. A blond girl squats in front of a donkey and rips out grass in tufts. Suddenly somebody calls her. She quickly grabs a last handful of grasses, pets the donkey's snout and runs to the waiting group of people. It is quaint at Gut Aiderbichl, no doubt about that.

But behind the curtain of this ideal animal kingdom everything has been quite different in the last nine months. The justice department is investigating serious suspicions of fraud. So serious, that the investigators wiretapped phones for four months, bank accounts were inspected, houses searched and ultimately an Aiderbichl employee was taken into custody.

As NEWS has now learned, a few weeks ago even the two bosses of Aiderbichl were informed by the specialized corruption prosecutors that they personally are being investigated.

The charismatic chairman of the Aiderbichl Foundation, Michael Aufhauser, and his right-hand, Dieter Ehrenguber, along with others, are under suspicion of defrauding a rich elderly man and his sister of millions. Among other charges, large donations have allegedly been used improperly. The Aiderbichl leadership vehemently denies any wrongdoing. It was previously known that the prosecution was investigating an employee of Gut Aiderbichl and his sister. NEWS has now obtained essential parts of the investigation file. A joint investigation with the 'Sueddeutsche Zeitung' sheds light on the dimension of affair for the first time. The investigation concerns more than five million euros connected to an alleged fraud.

Michael Aufhauser was born in 1952 in Bavaria, Germany. His mother worked in the textile industry, his father was a soldier. After having tried acting he moved to Munich to work as a tour guide. With great success, if you believe his dazzling stories. In the early 1980s he made the acquaintance of an industrial heir 37 years his senior. Their wedding followed in 1997. The financial foundation for the first animal sanctuary, the manor Gut Aiderbichl in Salzburg derives from her estate. In May of this year Aufhauser has undergone a cardiac operation. Since then, his longtime confidant Dieter Ehrenguber has been conducting his affairs. The two men have known each other since 1998 and have worked closely together since the beginning of the Aiderbichl success story. Now they're both being investigated.

May 27, 2010. In Maria Schmolln, south-east of the river Inn, Gerd V. signs a contract donating four million euros to the Aiderbichl Foundation. He is 87 years old at that time. He also donates the run-down farm on which he still lives and another property. The prosecution is now assuming that Aufhauser and Ehrengruber have deceived the elderly gentleman 'in conscious and intended cooperation with other accomplices' into signing the contract according to the investigation file. The group made the old man believe that 'the people in charge of the Aiderbichl Foundation Austria' would renovate his farm and turn it into an animal sanctuary in return for his donation. However, several statements in the document suggest that it is highly doubtful whether that had indeed happened.

Another suspicion is that Aufhauser and Ehrengruber have aided in submitting 'an invalid will' at court following the death of the man in November 2011. The entire estate of about 1.3 million euros may have gone wrongfully to the Aiderbichl Foundation. Aufhauser and Ehrengruber are also suspected of 'having chosen a co-accused' to 'repeatedly pretend' toward Gerd V. that she would urgently need some money for construction projects by Gut Aiderbichl. This supposedly led to donations in the amount of at least 800,000 euros. In addition, these funds were 'used improperly'.

Benefactor V. paid everything. However, one of the crucial questions in the investigation concerns the mental state of the elderly gentleman during the arrangements of various contracts. Aiderbichl CEO Dieter Ehrengruber emphasizes that the four million worth of donation took place before a notary. If the notary had been dubious about the legal capacity the endowment would not have happened. But: 'We have never had a single case in which we doubted someone's legal competence.' Ehrengruber resolutely denies the allegation that Aiderbichl did not abide by the agreements: 'We fulfilled everything that was discussed at the time.'

Nonetheless, the will, which was created two months after the donation contract, is questionable as well. This time a notary wasn't even involved. According to the investigative file, a template for the will – as in other cases too – was provided by the Aiderbichl Foundation. Ehrengruber sent it via email to Günther S. who was managing the old man's farm in Maria Schmolln. Three construction workers acted as witnesses. A testament created in such a way is only valid if the testator signs it in front of the witnesses and confirms that this is indeed his last will. A former housekeeper in

The godfather of Aiderbichl

The media call him 'Michael of Assisi' or the 'animal pope'. Michael Aufhauser has been working on this image for years

There are countless photos of him posing with animals. He carries them, hugs them and squeezes them. Dogs, cats, horses, sheep, cows, goats, pigs but also monkeys and llamas. In other words, there is barely one animal with whom 'Saint Michael of Aiderbichl' as the daily newspaper 'Kurier' once called him didn't step in front of the cameras. Of course, it's only for the good cause. This is also the reason for

his weekly column in the Austrian daily 'Kronen Zeitung' as well as in the Munich newspaper 'Tz'. They carry names like 'Thoughts with heart' and 'Love life. Aiderbichl'.

In 2013 the German commercial broadcaster RTL II produced an animal show with TV presenter Sonja Zietlow at the estate Gut Aiderbichl. In 2014 the Austrian public service broadcaster ORF aired 'Christmas at Gut Aiderbichl' for the sixth time.

The almost two-hour show provides animal lover Aufhauser with a stage in front of an audience of millions. One notices instantly: He is completely in his element. It is not long after the broadcast has begun that he sits down with the TV presenters and explains eagerly how he has rubbed the abscesses of a llama with ointment. Later, he tells them the story of the dog Snoopy. Time and time again he makes dramatic breaks. The words should unfold their proper effect: 'experimental laboratory', 'without a basket, without a toy'. A TV presenter nods sadly. Over the course of the show Aufhauser demonstrates his gamut. He is curious, astonished, touched, excited and happy until he joins the communal signing of 'Silent Night, Holy Night' at the end of the show. A follow-up broadcast is already appointed for 2015.

Michael Aufhauser succeeds, wherever he appears. He describes himself in interviews as 'eloquent' and as one who 'can put himself always very well in someone's shoes'. The multitudes of animal friends from Austria and Germany confirm this. They swarm in great numbers to the three visitable animal sanctuaries of Gut Aiderbichl. As well as to Aufhauser's 60th birthday in 2012. With his own brass band and a beer tent the native German enjoyed being celebrated. The now deceased Karl Moik – a very popular TV presenter of Schlager music – called him a friend

‘from the first hour’, the actor Karl Merkatz congratulated him and hundreds sung him a birthday serenade. All’s well in the world of Michael Aufhauser.

In 2000 the first Aiderbichl-farm was established, today there are 26 estates with over 6,000 animals in total.

Yet the investigators find it ‘striking’ how the animal rights activist Ehrenguber was able to acquire six condos in central Salzburg between 2007 and 2014.

Maria Schmolln made an affidavit that V. was in his bedroom while the witnesses were in front of the house. ‘Since Mr. V. had been administered his many medications like every day’, the housekeeper explained, ‘he used to be very tired and indifferent.’ The next day V. supposedly didn’t know anymore what he had signed the previous day. The investigation file contains a revocation of this last will, addressed to Gut Aiderbichl. It was apparently unheard.

Numerous persons were interrogated by the investigators. One of the construction workers has meanwhile admitted that V. wasn’t present when the witnesses signed the will. Aiderbichl manager Ehrenguber explains that Gerd V. had dictated his testament to a lawyer several weeks before it was actually signed. The lawyer usually represents the Aiderbichl Foundation. Independently, Ehrenguber stresses: ‘In our view the will is valid and was executed in the interests of Mr. V.’ Regarding the concrete process around the signature he explains, ‘I hope it came about as it was said back then.’ Ehrenguber says, he didn’t receive the revocation attached in the investigation file.

The rich Gerd V. was a goldmine for the people from Aiderbichl. And it was all the more pleasing for Aufhauser and Co., that he had a sister as well: Ursula V. from Stuttgart, born 1922. The prosecution suspects that Aufhauser and Ehrenguber abetted Gerd’s confidant Karin K. to mislead the elderly lady into dissolving a bank deposit and transferring about 500,000 euros to the Aiderbichl Foundation in February 2011. Ursula V. is believed to have been deceived into thinking that her brother Gerd was actually running the Aiderbichl Foundation. It should be noted that Ursula V. had been diagnosed with ‘suspected incipient dementia’ back in 2008. In November 2011, nine months after the dissolution of her depot, the university hospital in Salzburg determined that it was indeed dementia and recommended the application for a guardianship regarding medical matters.

Nevertheless, Ursula V. had made some important decisions in financial affairs a few months prior to that. It is believed that the wording for the closing of her bank deposit as well as for her last will had been provided by Gut Aiderbichl. Karin K. who was managing Gerd V’s funds at that time was present in Stuttgart too. She testified that Michael Aufhauser had sent her there, in a Mercedes owned by Aiderbichl, together with a driver. The instructions for the liquidation were sent to her by email from Aiderbichl manager Ehrenguber.

After the death of Ursula V. in early 2012, Aiderbichl staff traveled to Stuttgart to settle the estate. According to a memo ‘DE’ was also there. ‘DE’ probably stands for Dieter Ehrenguber. In the apartment of the deceased, the staff didn’t just find a key to a safe in a vase, but also gold cutlery: ‘The latter was taken by DE to be deposited in the storage room of Gut Aiderbichl’, says the memo.

Ehrengruber rejects the prosecution's suspicions: No depot had been dissolved in favor of the Aiderbichl Foundation. The organization had received roughly 270,000 euros only after the death of Ursula V. as part of her estate. He also denies that Karin K. had been in Stuttgart on behalf of Aiderbichl, 'only with our name'. Regarding the possible dementia or the deception of Ursula V. Ehrengruber recalls a meeting which had taken place in March 2011: 'I did not get the impression that she couldn't differentiate between Gut Aiderbichl and her brother.'

According to Ehrengruber Gut Aiderbichl doesn't provide any templates to potential donors: 'We only provide forms on request.' Those must then be copied by hand. Ehrengruber also emphasizes that Gut Aiderbichl never advises anyone in financial matters. However, a letter obtained by NEWS shows that Ehrengruber had indeed advised Gerd V. to 'completely sell off' one of his portfolios. Its value? About 1.8 million euros. Ehrengruber sees no problem with that: It was only one opinion of many.

According to Ehrengruber, Michael Aufhauser (the founder of Gut Aiderbichl) has not yet recovered from his heart surgery to be interrogated. Ehrengruber has submitted a written statement to the prosecution a few days ago. According to him, it proves that the donation of 800,000 euros was appropriately used. Regardless, the prosecution issued a search warrant in June: Ten police officers approached Aiderbichl estate manager Günther S. and took him into custody. He has now issued a partial confession – regarding the misuse of a six-figure amount of Gerd V.'s money without his consent. Günther S. denies all other allegations. The presumption of innocence applies to him and all persons concerned who deny all allegations.

In any case, the question arises how far an animal welfare organization like Gut Aiderbichl is allowed to go when conducting financial transactions with the elderly. Is an assistance like providing templates for wills morally acceptable? Wouldn't one have to make sure that donors are advised by independent experts?

That an inheritance in favor of animal welfare is not always linked to a life led with the same dedication shows the inventory list of the apartment of Ursula V.: two Persian lamb coats, one Persian lamb hat, one Persian lamb muff, one mink jacket, one mink muff, one mink hat, eight pieces of mink and three fur scarves are listed. The lady's wardrobe apparently contained almost as many animals as Gut Aiderbichl.