



FORTUNE & FORTITUDE

A. LANGE & SÖHNE'S HARD-WON TRIUMPH OVER HISTORY

FOR ANY COMPANY THAT HAS BEEN AROUND FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS—as several in the watch industry have—a mere 20 years in business might not seem remarkable. For A. Lange & Söhne, however, it's a hard-won milestone that is definitely worth celebrating. In fact, in light of some of the challenges this famous German brand has faced, it could justifiably celebrate every day of the year.

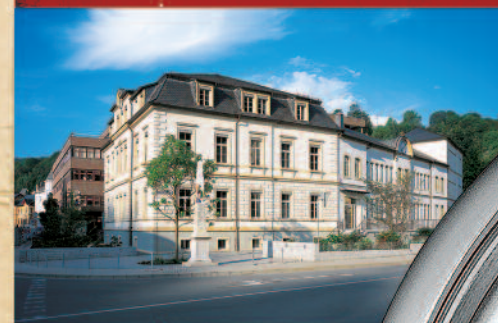
Consider this: on May 8, 1945, in the final hours of World War II, Russian fighter-bombers dropped their payloads on the brand's hometown of Glashütte, Germany, in an attempt to hit a retreating German Panzer division. The bombs destroyed most of the hamlet, including one of the watchmaking facilities of this family business. The company specialized in highly technical marine chronometers and high-end pocket watches with signature German silver three-quarter plates, proprietary Glashütte lever escapements (for optimal time regulation), and high complications such as minute repeaters and perpetual calendars.

Then, in 1946, even though the Lange family had never been affiliated with the Nazi party and had only made watches during the war, its factory and possessions were scheduled to be seized under Denazification Order 124. The decree was revoked one month later, but the worst was yet to come. On April 20, 1948, the new regional authority seized the factory and all its assets, meaning the business that had been founded and operated by the Lange family since 1845 was now in the hands of the East German government.

BY KEITH W. STRANDBERG

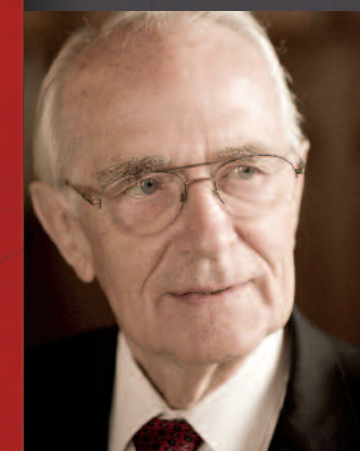
At the time, Walter Lange, the last member of the Lange family to be involved in the business, was working in the company repair shop, but once new management assumed control, he refused to answer to them. For his defiance, he was sentenced to toil in the uranium mines. Instead, he fled East Germany and settled in Pforzheim, another center of German watchmaking. He assumed he'd never see his ancestral company, or Glashütte, again.

Surprisingly, after all this drama and conflict, Lange is thankful to the East German government for not destroying the A. Lange & Söhne name. Following the communist



⊕ *A. Lange & Söhne's manual-winding Richard Lange Tourbillon Pour le Mérite with fusée-and-chain transmission*

"IF THE NEXT 20 YEARS OF LANGE ARE AS GOOD AS THE PAST 20 YEARS, WE WILL BE IN FANTASTIC SHAPE."
—WALTER LANGE





The A. Lange & Söhne Saxonia Dual Time and its automatic Caliber L086.2

**"THE COMPANY HAS DEVELOPED IN AN AMAZING WAY. IT'S LIKE A DREAM."
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takeover, the company was initially called the People's Own Factory (VEB) A. Lange & Söhne, then later, Mechanik Lange & Söhne VEB, and then in 1951, it was merged with several other area institutions to form Glashütter Uhrenbetriebe (GUB). The organization continued to make high-quality mechanical watches until the quartz revolution hit East Germany in the early 1980s. "By then, the family name was no longer used, and, fortunately, it had never been misused, for which I shall remain eternally grateful to the GUB," says Lange, who turned 87 in July. Incredibly, he seems incapable of holding a grudge.

More incredible still has been the rebirth of A. Lange & Söhne. When the Berlin Wall fell in November 1989, Lange saw some hope of reviving his family's watchmaking legacy. He secured financial backing with the help of watch industry veteran Günther Blümlein, then returned to Glashütte, found a core group of watchmakers (who still had boxes of vintage Lange movements and parts) and set about re-establishing the company. On December 7, 1990, 145 years to the day after his great-grandfather Ferdinand Adolph Lange founded the original A. Lange & Söhne, Walter Lange registered the resurrected brand, Lange Uhren GmbH. Not long after, Lange bought back his family's buildings, including the original A. Lange & Söhne headquarters, where the company is once again based.

"I think I was courageous at the time, because we were starting from nothing, and it was a real risk," says Lange. "In any case, I started something new, and Glashütte again became a center of fine watchmaking. The mayor of Glashütte once told me that if we hadn't succeeded, he could have turned off the lights in the town."

"I didn't know at all how it would turn out," he continues. "In 1994, when the first watches were ready, we showed them to 12 retailers, and they started to applaud. At that moment, we knew it could work. If the next 20 years of Lange are as good as the past 20 years, we will be in fantastic shape."

Last December, A. Lange & Söhne threw a grand party to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its rebirth. It was held at the Royal Palace in Dresden and offered guests a chance to look back on the incredible history of the company and toast its bright future.

The event also introduced Lange's new CEO Wilhelm Schmid, 47, who comes to the watch company from BMW Automobiles.

Anthony de Haas is the director of product development for A. Lange & Söhne, and he is impressed with what the company has been able to do. "The company has developed in an amazing way. It's like a dream," he says. "We have developed more than 30 movements, and we have built up the brand. There is still a lot to do and lots of great watches to develop. Our goal is to be one of the big brands, like Patek Philippe, Vacheron Constantin and others, and that will require even more work. To hunt is hard, but when you are at the top, you become the hunted, which is even harder."

Lange, Schmid, de Haas and the rest of the team in Glashütte and around the world are committed to keeping the tradition of Lange alive and well. "The intent has always been to be one of the best watch companies in the



world," de Haas says. "It may sound arrogant, but it's been our target from the beginning. Lange stands for something. People buy Lange watches because they are Lange watches, and we have to take care of this identity and protect it."

Lange remains one of the few watch companies with the capability to make its own parts, including its signature three-quarter plates and bridges (still made of German silver) and its own balance springs—a huge achievement in watchmaking.

Having survived Russian bombs, homeland division, and a communist takeover as well as the trials and tribulations of a modern-day resurrection, this company is surely capable of weathering the more common storms. Thus, it seems, A. Lange & Söhne is back to stay.

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