

The history of Laco or The Erich Lacher Watch Company

I have seen eBay listings for Laco watches for some time and thought a little more background on this brand would help appreciating these watches offered for sale.

The Beginning

The company Lacher & Co. – the name Laco deriving from the first syllables - was founded by Frieda Lacher and Ludwig Hummel in Pforzheim in the middle of the 1920s. At the time, Pforzheim's many watch manufacturers used to fit their casings almost exclusively with Swiss mechanisms, either delivered complete, or as individual parts – a considerable saving in customs duties – which could then be finished and re-assembled by the factories themselves.

Frieda Lacher and Ludwig Hummel's young business made a successful start, yet after a few years the founders were to go their separate ways. Hummel continued to manage the greater part of the original company, the Laco watch-making factory, while Frieda Lacher branched off into the production of precision parts for wristwatches, such as wheels and pinions. Later, under the direction of her son Erich Lacher, Frieda's branch was to start producing complete watches again. Erich Lacher entered the firm in 1936, which was then renamed the "Erich Lacher Uhrenfabrik".

However, it was Laco-Durowe which developed to become a world-class brand and Pforzheim's main watch producer through the sister company "Lacher & Co.", run by Hummel. Hummel, born July 26th 1889 in Engelsbrand (nr. Pforzheim), wanted to do more than simply fit Swiss mechanisms into casings. Hummel, along with several other Pforzheim watchmakers, strove to become independent of the Swiss manufacturers, with the aim of producing his own line of watches. The fact that the wristwatch was comparatively slow to take off in Germany, and that many of Pforzheim's assembly plants continued to need the rough movements from Switzerland, made Hummel's plans somewhat harder to realise.

So it was that in 1933 he founded a mechanism-producing company (Durowe -Deutsche Uhren-Rohwerke) which, from the outset, was to supply not only his own Laco plant but other watchmakers as well. The production range was soon to include a wide assortment of high quality wristwatch mechanisms. On offer were two round mechanisms - 8 ¾ (cal. 318) and 10 ½ (cal. 410) lines respectively, and three non-round mechanisms – 5 ¼ (cal. 50), 7 ¾ x 11 (cal. 275) and 10 ½ lines - distinguished by an additional "F" for Formwerk. All of the models were pallet anchor mechanisms with clutch winds – by no means the general rule at that time. Cylinder anchor and pin pallet fork mechanisms were still favoured, with full pallet fork mechanisms tending to feature ratchet winds, whose quality and design were considered less sophisticated.

The company continued to grow steadily until the outbreak of the Second World War, with the number of mechanisms produced per month increasing from to 20,000 to 30,000. Even during the war, Laco continued to manufacture watches and mechanisms, in particular the aviators' watches. In both models ticked a first-class Durowe 22 line pallet bridge movement, adjusted with chronometer accuracy.

A company of international standing

The war ended catastrophically for almost all the Pforzheim manufacturers, including Laco. During a devastating air-raid by the Allies, all the factories were destroyed and more than 80% of the town itself was reduced to rubble. However, the work of rebuilding was to begin soon after the end of the war, and Laco and its sister firm were back in business again by 1949. Helped by the Marshall Plan, Ludwig Hummel built an impressively large 5-storey edifice to house Laco-Durowe, which was later further extended, so that by the middle of the 1950s 1,400 people were working there. Production of rough movements rose to 80,000 a month, giving some idea of the company's dramatic growth over this period.

The years up until 1959 may be regarded as Lacher's "golden age". Laco enjoyed a strong market position with the manual wind and - starting in 1952 - with the automatic models, while Durowe supplied various watchmakers with an ever-increasing number of reliable and high-quality movements.

Unique to Pforzheim

Seen through the eyes of collectors and enthusiasts of German precision engineering, this period offers a wealth of particularly interesting models.

Firstly, the "Laco-Sport" which introduced the "Duromat" - 11 ½ lines (552 cal.), the first automatic movement to be produced by Durowe as of 1952. This movement, with its 18,000 semioscillations and two-directional rotor, based on the 422 cal. manual wind, made Durowe one of the first German manufacturers of automatics.

Neither to be forgotten is the 1957 Laco-Chronometer. A unique movement was developed especially – the manual wind 630 (13 lines) – with which Laco aimed to repeat the success of the aviator watches. Exactly how many Laco-Chronometers were produced is not known, but the number is unlikely to have been great.

Later Durowe brought out the slimmest German automatic ever (1963-4). The "Planomat" – 11 ½ lines, 600 cal. – checked in at a mere 4.6 mm, while the model featuring a date function (610 cal.) measured 4.75 mm.

Laco goes global

By this time, Laco-Durowe had already been owned for some years by the U.S. Time Corporation, better known as "Timex". As a result of a slump in sales, Ludwig Hummel sold the company to the American watchmaking giant on 01.02.59, Timex being particularly interested in Laco-Durowe's advanced research into the possibilities of electrical and electronic timepieces. With the emphasis heavily on this aspect of the business, the "Laco-electric" was to appear in 1961 - Germany's first reliably functioning electric watch. An attempt by a Mr Epperlein of Ersingen to introduce the first electric watch onto the market in 1958 had been largely unsuccessful, owing to design flaws. So here too, it was Lacher that was to set the technical pace.

The company did not remain long in American ownership. On 01.09.1965, the Swiss firm Ebauches S.A. took over Durowe – however, Lacher & Co. and the brand name Laco were not swallowed up. The Swiss, who from now on wanted Durowe to produce only mechanical movements for ladies' and gents' wristwatches, acquired easy access to the markets of the then E.E.C. - today's European Union - through the German company. Durowe remained a dominant producer – in 1974, a total of 550,000 movements were manufactured.

However, the Japanese quartz revolution was to mean that even the once mighty Laco-Durowe concern soon sank into oblivion.

Laco reborn

Fortunately, during the 1980s someone at Erich Lacher Uhrenfabrik – which all these years had continued to exist and produce as Laco's "little sister" – still remembered the two companies' joint beginnings, and the prestige of the Laco name. Consequently, on September 8th 1988 the managing partner Horst Günther acquired the rights to the Laco name and logo, which enabled the company to start producing a modern range of high-quality Laco watches. Even today, some of these watches are still mechanical – but they now tick with a Swiss "heart", just as in the early years of the Lacher business. The fortunes of the firm lie in the hands of Andreas Günther, the sixth management generation.

To celebrate the watchmaking company's 75th anniversary, Lacher is re-issuing 75 of its legendary '40s pilots' watches – 80% of the parts used having been replicated from the original model. All the other components, in particular the pinions and the wheel plate for the indirectly driven central second hand, were manufactured in limited quantities. The 75 limited edition watches sold for 7.500,- DM a piece.

Recalling its long years of manufacturing experience, Lacher has also developed an anniversary range of five scaled-down wristwatches. The collection has been produced in accordance with the original designs, but boasts the latest workings for a modern twist.

-3-hand quartz watch with date function Movement RONDA 515

-Quartz chronograph watch Movement ISA 8161.201

-Automatic watch with date function Movement ETA 2824.2

-Manual wind with miniature second Movement Unitas 6498

-Automatic chronograph watch Movement Valjoux 7750

As the anniversary edition of the Laco pilot watches was such a great success the company Lacher decided to launch at the beginning of the year 2003 a new pilot watch series of even higher quality. These five new models are available exclusively with refined mechanical movements (Côte de Genève and blue screws) which can be seen through the exhibition back. All those models are equipped with stainless steel cases and a domed sapphire crystal. A deluxe presentation box including a spare leather strap underlines the high quality of this new series of pilot watches. Furthermore it comprises two models with a case diameter of 36 mm which makes them also available for ladies.

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