

IN CONVERSATION

# The family comes first

A thank you to the third generation:  
a visit to the Wellendorff family  
in Pforzheim.

By Hans-Jürgen Jakobs

From an economic perspective, family businesses are considered Germany's jewels. What is it like for a well-known representative of this guild who became an international jewellery phenomenon?

These thoughts spring to mind when climbing the stairs at the Pforzheim gymnastics field and passing the slender, black panther sculpture to enter Wellendorff's building. A showcase displays antique Etruscan jewellery – light and flowing like fabric, these pieces are seen as exemplary models within the company. The treasure trove adjacent draws attention to epochal events in the history of the company founded in 1893; and of course to the 'rope' – a necklace woven from many gold threads that became a brand icon. Above this museum-like showroom is the manufactory, where 100 employees ensure the quality of approximately 40 pieces of jewellery that leave the company every day.

What you see here is a miracle resulting from the economic miracle of post-war Germany: the golden rise of an entrepreneurial family in its third generation. This was represented by Hanspeter Wellendorff and his wife Eva, then expanded and fine-tuned by their sons Christoph and Georg. Wellendorff is one of the world's oldest jewellery manufactories of international standing, owned by its founding family. How can this success be explained? What is the legacy?



A positive outlook on a successful future: Christoph, Eva, Hanspeter, Claudia and Georg Wellendorff (from left to right).





In a conversation at the company headquarters, the ‘foreign minister’ and sales manager Christoph Wellendorff explains what he has learned from his parents: “If you do something out of love, it will be good. Love is the most powerful force in the universe.” With great determination, his father pushed his ideas, built up the Wellendorff brand and developed the most valuable rope in the world. “For him, the ambition to reach the top, to make the impossible possible, the passion to achieve something that others had failed at, was paramount.” The warmth that conveyed this message, however, came more from the matriarch. She looked after her customers with joy and love.

Georg Wellendorff, who is responsible for production and manufacturing, mentions the motto that is upheld within the family company: “The family comes first.” His parents are a wonderful example of how it is possible to keep a family together, despite “conflicting forces and opinions”. They have almost perfected it. And this “tenacity and steadfastness”, this adherence to entrepreneurial strategies, is admirable. Ultimately, nothing is more successful than success, but it has to be earned. Hanspeter Wellendorff, the

## “There is always room for improvement.”

*Georg Wellendorff*

senior, recounts very vividly what it was like when he returned to Pforzheim from the USA in 1960 at the age of 26 to work for his father Alexander. He had an epiphany following a presentation in Bad Dürkheim: “we have to do things differently in the future.” Jewellery manufacturers would line up in front of a purchasing group of jewellers, haggling and settling on prices per gram of gold – even when precious stones were included. Back in Pforzheim, Wellendorff staunchly decided that they would no longer line up with all the other nameless manufacturers and would instead become a brand – with the

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Wellendorff senior was able to craft jewellery with precision down to a hundredth of a millimetre. The brand vision was accompanied by cutting-edge technology. “We always took it in good spirit”, he says. “But thank God, the depths were never so deep that we could not overcome them.” The independent spirit that traces back to his grandfather, the company founder Ernst Alexander Wellendorff, who once supplied customised jewellery to the high nobility staying in Baden-Baden, helped: “I had the privilege of being born into a family whose ancestors had already built up a lot of foundations, such as real estate. This was my raft on the river; it also made waves.”

The raft was also going against the current. The competition was fierce. Wellendorff prevailed with innovations such as the Wellendorff rope, put forward by Eva Wellendorff, who drew inspiration from her memory of the silken tie-backs on her grandmother’s velvet curtains she had loved to play with as a girl. She wanted a piece of jewellery just like them. Eventually, everything revolved around the rope. In 2027, there will be a huge celebration to mark the 50th anniversary of the icon.

Cherchez la femme: the brand’s two other icons came from the wives, too. Christoph Wellendorff wanted to give his then-fiancée Iris a colourful cold enamel ring that didn’t consist of red rubies, blue sapphires, green emeralds and white diamonds – his father’s colours. Hanspeter Wellendorff wasn’t very enthusiastic about it at first - there were quite heated disputes - but, in the end, the customer vote – in the form of huge sales success – won him over. Georg Wellendorff gifted his wife Claudia, who is responsible for the company’s communications, the innovation ‘flexible gold’ – a bracelet that does not require a clasp. During the Coronavirus pandemic, the company’s material experts concentrated all their efforts on finally making the goldsmith’s long-time dream come true.

‘Flexible gold’ became Wellendorff’s third icon, following in the footsteps of the ‘softest necklace’ and the ‘most vibrant ring’. Each part of the family has mastered their own revolution – the parents and the brothers.

How do icons like these come about? “The original motivation was love for my wife”, says Christoph Wellendorff. “You usually only go beyond your own limits out of fear or love. Love is the better reason.” His brother Georg explains: “You can’t plan it. When the muse kisses, you have to press on.” The company is working internally on the next surprise.

18-karat Diamond-W boasting a full-cut diamond. This would become the most valuable trademark in the world.

So, in the beginning it was not a word, but rather a letter. Brand development was supported by many marketing measures, working against the organised resistance of some of the court jewellers at the time. Modern technology was also introduced, and by using precision machines from Switzerland,



“If you do something out of love, it will be good.”

*Christoph Wellendorff*



Brothers Georg and Christoph Wellendorff are very keen to thank their parents.

“We have other projects that have the potential to become iconic. But nothing is final yet, we are in the fortunate position of being completely free from any external pressure”, says Christoph Wellendorff. To put it simply, there are no external investors expecting great stories and pushing for milestones. Their story results from their founder’s mission to “make no compromises!”

Wellendorff wants to grow in depth, not in breadth, i.e. through innovation and quality, but not with large quantities or an attitude based on “ever-further, ever-faster, ever-higher”. “We’re talking about pieces of jewellery, not products,” notes Christoph Wellendorff. The brand’s internal logic is: art comes from skill and quality comes from effort. The result is, as ever, a good balance.

Every day there is a temptation to grow at the expense of quality, says Georg Wellendorff. When

performing quality control under the microscope, the same questions always come up: Can I just leave it? Is it acceptable? “These questions pervade our lives every second. It never stops. Complete perfection is never attainable. There is always room for improvement.” Around a dozen patents secure Wellendorff’s achievements. Nevertheless, technically inadequate copies keep cropping up.

What is the company’s mission? “We want to inspire people to capture their moments of happiness, love and success with special jewellery for a lifetime”, answers Christoph Wellendorff. This mission is closely linked to the ‘Genuine Values’ that the Jewellery Manufactory stands for – a watchword, if you will. In keeping with this philosophy, the Wellendorffs select their touch points with the world very responsibly.

For example, a love of nature is one of the “Genuine Values”. Georg Wellendorff: “We are glad that the discussion about sustainability has finally begun. How we treat the planet is in humanity’s best interest. We have no choice but to use resources carefully, and not just because the price of gold is always so high. Wellendorff only processes recycled gold and has done so since 1893.” His brother Christoph: “Our jewellery is not worn for six months, but for a lifetime and then passed on. It doesn’t get more sustainable than that. And as a family business, our entire value chain is based in Pforzheim; there is no supply chain.” Communication is seen internally as a crucial means of solving problems. Christoph Wellendorff: “We keep on talking until a decision is reached. It’s okay to be offended sometimes, but not permanently. Taking a step back is key



to it working.” This principle applied when, for example, Wellendorff’s claim, or brand essence, was hotly debated. Georg argued that in the end, what counted was quality, extreme precision to hundredths of a millimetre. For Christoph, on the other hand, it was all about feelings, love and appreciation. Eventually, the idea of combining emotion and precision came about and the wording “From love. The best.” was born. Our ‘Genuine Values’ guide how we treat each other, says Christoph Wellendorff. His mother’s great, inestimable value always lay in “the fact that she was always able to manage and balance the strong egos that existed in such a way that

the best decision was made in the end.”

With the family as its basis, the brand as its shield and the innovations as its backing, Wellendorff has gained international recognition. No testimonials or influencers were paid; rather, customers, including celebrities, liked to wear the jewellery with the distinctive “W” often in public. The customers are also trend scouts, just like their own wives, as Christoph Wellendorff explains: “That’s why we don’t need market research or analyses from management consultants.”

Good contact with customers is maintained through the company’s own 15 boutiques. In total, the company relies on just a hundred points

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of sale. “We limit ourselves”, says Christoph Wellendorff. “This guarantees that we are always among the best.”

Wellendorff will, therefore, remain present in North America, German-speaking countries, China and Japan. Every customer buys “a little bit of Made in Germany – and with it engineering, precision, perfection, and meticulous craftsmanship”, says Christoph Wellendorff. Germany is also viewed from abroad as the land of poets and thinkers – and romanticism. “And here we are, back to love again.”

The company sees itself as crisis-proof. In times of threat, the price of gold rises, as does the value of jewellery. Georg Wellendorff: “The more uncertainty, the more awareness of genuine values there is. They survive difficult times. That’s what makes gold and jewellery so valuable.”

This continuity also applies to the Wellendorff company itself. Family businesses think in terms of generations, not quarters. Discussions are currently underway on how the transition to the next, fifth generation should take place in the future. Isabelle and Katharina, daughters of Christoph and Dr Iris Wellendorff, already work in the company. They bring a new spirit to the company, they say. Everything digital, everything clean. Everything without paper, pencils and binders. Digitalisation won’t stop at manufacturing either, for example when creating samples and prototypes.

How does Hanspeter Wellendorff see himself in these modern times? “You see yourself and you are seen”, he explains. “I follow the development of the company with great interest and contribute my opinion here and there. I am very happy that one day my grandchildren will take over the reins and we will remain a family business. That is hugely satisfying.” His generation has achieved a lot. But what came of it under his successors in management was “unprecedented in commitment and success”.

Christoph Wellendorff returns the praise to his parents: “We, the fourth generation, would like to thank the third generation for giving us the opportunity to take over and drive forward this company, based on core values. You gave us all the love for customers, the pursuit of perfection and modern production from the cradle. You inspired us early on and gave us financial flexibility, enabling us to develop this company in harmony.”



Later, after leaving the house, your gaze falls on a large granite rock covered in gold leaves in the riverbed of the Enz, which flows directly past the Wellendorff building. It is a gift from the family to the city of Pforzheim; where special works of art have been created from the treasures of nature using traditional craftsmanship for over 250 years.