

Adolf Messer's first steps into international markets

Messer history is family history: the two are inextricably linked. The success of the book “100 per cent Messer” shows the importance of being aware of this history. That is why, starting in this issue of messenger, we are bringing you a small series on the Messers who shaped the company. We start with the founder, Adolf Messer.

Adolf Messer was born on 6 April 1878 in Hofheim/Taunus, the son of Johann Matthäus and Margarethe Messer. In 1898, aged 20 and still a mechanical engineering student, he set up a small workshop, which quickly led to his first successes with the construction of acetylene generators and lighting appliances. Even at this very early stage, Messer was looking beyond the German market. In the first seven years following the founding of the company, approximately 300 installations were exported.

Since acetylene lighting installations were increasingly suffering from the competition from gas lights and electrically powered lighting systems and, moreover, the demand for acetylene for cooking and heating was decreasing, Adolf Messer was quickly forced to change his product range: he took up autogenous welding and exported his first air separation units before the First World War. The expansion of the company was reflected above all in the establishment of branches and subsidiaries both at home and abroad, which became an important mainstay of the company. The outbreak of World War One in 1914 put a temporary stop to the company's international expansion. After 1918, in the difficult economic conditions of the post-war era, Adolf Messer put a lot of energy into regaining the export markets after the company assets in Great Britain and the USA had been seized and auctioned off. In the 1920s, the company once again built up its contacts with foreign customers and consolidated its domestic market position in the cutting and welding sector, since the production facilities had survived the First World War almost unscathed.

Even though Messer succeeded in continuously diversifying and modernising its product range, the company was not spared the effects of the Great Depression of 1929 – 1932/33. The global economic collapse led to a dramatic crash in industrial production. Sharply declining sales and job losses also characterised Messer's day-to-day business from the late 1920s onward.

After the collapse of the Weimar Republic in 1933, the Frankfurt-based company was operating in a macroeconomic environment that was increasingly recovering from the severe economic crisis. German industry had already come through the worst of the recession by the spring of 1933, from which point it benefited from the global economic upturn as well as the armaments and employment programmes pushed through by the NS regime. At Messer & Co. GmbH, as at other companies, the day-to-day business was increasingly overshadowed by the forced military build-up, resulting in, for example, several orders from the German Army Ordnance Department for the construction of special machinery. Thus, electrical welding equipment from Messer was used for joining tank walls, for improving resistance welding technology in order to achieve gas-tight seals on pressure hulls and hollow bodies, or for developing the Nivosec curved-space oxygen cutting machine, which made it possible to carry out three-dimensional work on pressed armoured cupolas for armoured vehicles. The company was also involved in the research into the construction of missiles, which the army tested from 1936, and delivered four large-scale installations for the production of liquid oxygen to the army testing facility at Peenemünde. With the advance of the Allies in the final weeks of the war, all of Messer's production facilities gradually came to a standstill in the spring of 1945. The three years or so between the end of the war on 8 May 1945 and the currency reform were characterised by improvisation in every area. In terms of the company's development in the post-war period, it was an invaluable advantage that relations with long-standing foreign business partners could be quickly re-established on a basis of mutual trust in spite of the devastation caused by the NS state's aggressive foreign policy. In April 1946, for example, Adolf Messer had invited Raoul Amédéo to visit, followed shortly afterwards by his sons Pierre and Jean, in order to

revive their collaboration through the formation of the Société Française des Appareils et Procédés Messer. Before Adolf Messer succumbed to a serious illness on 13 May 1954, he had ensured that the company would remain in family ownership: one year before his death at the age of 74, he had decided to transfer the responsibility for the overall running of the company to his son, Hans.

Dr. Jörg Lesczenski, author of "100 per cent Messer"