

Erwin Hymer's Biography

Erwin Hymer

He conquered the whole of Europe from his home town, Bad Waldsee "You're going to have to think of something", were the words of the aeroplane pioneer Claudius Dornier to Erwin Hymer, whilst Hymer was working in the team for the development of the first post-war plane, the DO 27, in Spain. It is as though Erwin Hymer never forgot this appeal for the rest of his life, as he always remained able to think of something! The list of names such as Claudius Dornier, Wilhelm and Karl Maybach, Count Ferdinand von Zeppelin or Hugo Eckener wouldn't be complete without another one: Erwin Hymer. The motorhome icon from Bad Waldsee conquered the whole of Europe from his home town. Hymer is one of the inventors, engineers and entrepreneurs who frequently put down roots in the region of Lake Constance-Upper Swabia - and who achieve worldwide success.

As Count Zeppelin's electoral slogan ran, "You just have to want to do something, and it will succeed". This statement could also have come from the lips of "Mister Hymer-Mobil", Erwin Hymer. From the aeroplane, he came back down to ground level and stayed with both feet firmly placed there to build an empire which rolled over the continents from out of Upper Swabia. And yet, in spite of all his success, he remained human. Because he values his employees highly, they always stood - and still stand - behind him, even through difficult times.

How does one get from aircraft construction to the development of motorhomes? At the age of 23 years old, the youthful engineer Erwin Hymer joined a team led by the great Professor Claudius Dornier. The young man was fascinated by Dornier, and they never lost contact, even though Erwin Hymer remained more dedicated to the automobile. In just under eight weeks, he developed in his spare time the "Dornier Delta", which was later put into serial production by Zündapp under the name "Janus" (meaning "two faces"). The name "two faces" was used because this little speedster had doors at the front and back. Erwin Hymer also had time for vehicles with only two wheels. As a 17-year old apprentice, he constructed a "mini motorcycle". A unique specimen, with wooden tyres covered in a rubber coating. Of course, only a select few were permitted to ride pillion. One of these people was a dance partner of Hymer's, but only then when the road went downhill, he remembers today with a chuckle.

Claudius Dornier was to remain Erwin Hymer's only boss, as this young man, fizzing with ideas, was determined to set up his own business. This was a courageous suggestion in those times: On Dornier's recommendation, Hymer took over production of aluminium ladders in Wangen in 1962, which became the basis for the company Hymer-Leichtmetallbau still in operation today. Erwin Hymer managed two companies simultaneously. During the day, he was busy in Bad Waldsee, and in the evenings in Wangen. The business ran so splendidly over many decades that he was able to support other company divisions with the profits.

Even today, a trademark characteristic of these ladders is their red stripes.

Aeroplanes, aluminium ladders and motorhomes don't necessarily have much to do with each other, and yet they all became connecting elements in the mosaic of Erwin Hymer's story of success. It was not preordained that he would in time take over his father's business. Alfons Hymer had erected a workshop integrated into a house in Bad Waldsee, in which he began to build Landaus, later manufacturing special constructions and vehicles from truck tarpaulin covers to the omnibus. Erwin initially busied himself with the agricultural trailers produced by his father, when a sudden development proved of signal importance to his further career. The eminent technology expert, Erich Bachem, asked him if he would be able to build a motorhome. What a question!

Erwin Hymer had learned from his father, with whom he got on extremely well, that it was always good to sleep over something before making a decision. So this was what he did, even though his mind was already made up. A short time later, he developed the "Ur"-Troll on the basis of a steel skeleton construction, a picture of which still hangs over his desk today. Serial production began with the "Puck" model. The Hymer-Touring lifting roof caravan produced today stems directly from these models, and has achieved cult status. Erwin Hymer had got on the road in terms of travelling mobility.

The man who seldom uses the lift, and who still prefers to take two steps at a time at the age of eighty, has always remained down-to-earth, reserved and modest. Even today, he tends to reject preferential treatment; an excessive craving for recognition is foreign to him. He doesn't feel the need to travel first class in aeroplanes; Erwin Hymer prefers to sit in the cheaper seats even for longer journeys. He always focusses on the essentials.

Hymer never rejects other opinions out of hand; he finds positive aspects in them, testing and experimenting until he has improved on the suggestions made. For example: Fold-down beds in motorhomes. Whilst others slept at night, he tested the feasibility of this idea using cheese boxes.

Or the solar radiation into his museum, which was opened in 2011. Erwin Hymer tinkered so long on the incline of the lamellae on the windows until they were also able to heat the floor. At trade fairs, he doesn't just wander through the aisles, and remains undeluded by colourful brochures on fancy pavilions.

He himself gets under the exhibited vehicles, and tests the showers and toilets in the motorhomes, checking every detail. He doesn't miss a trick. If his developer reports that the wardrobe in a motorhome is ready, he will appear with two suits to test the design for the practicalities of everyday life. His employees know that his suggestions for improvement will be excellent - and also that he tries out his developments himself in the test workshop. The former aeroplane developer took much knowledge with him on the way from the cockpit into the driver's cab.

There are few who are simultaneously able to cope with the technological and the commercial areas of a business. Erwin Hymer is one of them. He is both an engineer, and a highly-talented merchant. He tinkers with fine details, fosters a passion for research and development, and, during his daily visits to the company, regularly causes the financial data to be presented to him.

His Accounting Department calls him the “curve fetishist”, as he prefers to read off the report figures as hand-drawn curve charts. One single glance at a calculation is sufficient for him to recognise errors. “If I don’t complain, that’s praise enough” - this Upper Swabian phrase applies to Erwin Hymer, who places value on remaining familiar with the past in order to survive in the present and the future. Erwin Hymer is a man of vision who was always in the right place at the right time. He has an exceptionally wide network, also thanks to his cordial character, which has opened up business relations for him right up to the American market.

Hymer, as the owner of a flying license, is a well-travelled man, and not only in the motorhome.

His word is his bond for his employees - and their loyalty is a matter of course. His love of his home town means that Erwin Hymer remains faithful to his original location, even if this lies away from the city centres. As is common knowledge on the markets, it isn’t a disadvantage to come from Upper Swabia with unusual ideas and products. Hymer from Bad Waldsee is well-known - worldwide.

Yet over all these decades of superb work, Erwin Hymer has not just served people with workplaces and products. He is a committed member of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry for Lake Constance-Upper Swabia, and also dedicates himself to art, still remaining a member of the Board in the non-profit association “Otto Dix-Haus-Stiftung” (Foundation) in Hemmenhofen, Lake Constance. Fitting to his sunny nature, this entrepreneur, who always radiates cheerfulness and optimism, has been Honorary Guild Councillor in the Fool’s Guild in Bad Waldsee for many years. He is a foundation member of the Association Against Strokes, and a member of the Rotary Club.

The successful entrepreneur fully supports his home town, where he also indulges in his hobbies. He possesses all skipper’s patents for Lake Constance, initially steering a wooden boat, and now a motorboat, past his holiday residence in Lindau on Lake Constance. The former golfer, rower and cyclist still does gymnastics every day to preserve his level of fitness.

In 1990, Erwin Hymer converted the traditional Hymer brand into a stock corporation, in which he is the majority shareholder and has taken on the position of Chair of the Supervisory Board. Today, the brands Hymer, Eriba, Bürstner, Carado, Laika and Niesmann + Bischoff, as well as the accessory brand Movera, are all part of the Hymer Concern. The motorhome and caravan brands Dethleffs, Sunlight, LMC and TEC are bundled into the Holding CMC.

Hymer has received multiple awards for his diverse range of services.

Particularly impressive are the Officer’s Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, the Founder Prize of the State of Baden-Württemberg and the Business Medal of the State of Baden-Württemberg.

His vocational legacy includes a foundation for the Erwin Hymer Museum in Bad Waldsee, which was opened in 2011 and which rounds off his exemplary life's work. Here the collection of his motorhomes and caravans is not just concentrated on his own brands. In particular caravans from manufacturers who are long gone and those from the former GDR can be seen. This, too, promises to become an exceptional success.

Text: Siegfried Großkopf, 2010

We are sorry to announce that Mr. Erwin Hymer died on 11. April 2013.

Erwin Hymer Museum Press and Public Relations Contact: Susanne Hinzen
Robert-Bosch-Str. 7 88339 Bad Waldsee
Tel. 07524-97667-67 Fax 07524-97667-61
presse@erwin-hymer-museum.de