

# Eurasian Odyssey

Rolf W. Schnyder, who spends six months each year in Malaysia, is an exceptional phenomenon among the bosses of the big Swiss watch brands. His life's many adventures culminated in his turning Ulysse Nardin into one of the world's most innovative watch companies.

BY LUCIEN F. TRUEB

**C**ircuitous routes and peculiar quirks of fate led Rolf Willy Schnyder, who was born the son of a Zurich merchant in 1935, to the Ulysse Nardin watch firm in Le Locle. Schnyder attended elementary and secondary school in his hometown. Afterwards, he took courses at the mercantile association and simultaneously apprenticed at Globus, a department store in Zurich. Eager to improve his knowledge of French, he went to Geneva in 1955, where he worked in Jaeger-LeCoultre's advertising division. The administration, which was housed in Tour de l'Île, also included Vacheron Constantin, because at the time both firms belonged to the Ketterer family. Schnyder soon realized that his co-workers had problems with foreign languages. Near panic broke out each time an order arrived in English. Schnyder helped as well as he could, but he, too, needed more practice with the language, so he spent six months working for the company's London subsidiary, which was known as "De Trevars" and located on Cromwell Road. His salary wasn't exactly princely, but he managed to survive on the 20 pounds he earned each month. He spent half of each day at a language school, where he earned his proficiency certificate, and the other half working at De Trevars.

Soon after returning to Geneva, Schnyder was once again struck by an attack of wanderlust. He saw a help-wanted ad announcing that the Diethelm firm was looking for a junior executive to work at its Bangkok subsidiary. He applied for the job and was hired in 1958. For the journey to Thailand, his new employers offered him the choice of flying – a very tiring odyssey with numerous stopovers via propeller plane – or going by ship. Schnyder chose the nautical option and enjoyed two exciting months on the high seas. He embarked on the good ship Asia in Genoa, sailed through the Suez Canal, and touched at ports in India, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and Singapore, where he experienced sundry adven-

**Swiss-born Rolf Schnyder has always had a taste for wild adventure and outrageous invention. His travels to Asia began in 1959.**

tures on shore. In Singapore, he boarded a freighter bound for Bangkok. A pleasant surprise awaited him when he finally arrived in Thailand to begin work: two months' pay. His new employers had obviously considered the

journey to be in the line of duty – and paid him accordingly.

Diethelm was the largest trading company in Thailand at the time. The business imported and distributed just about everything imaginable: pharmaceutical products, condensed milk, tires, timepieces, soap, toothpaste, chewing gum, paper tissues, batteries, etc. In recognition of his professional experience, Schnyder was appointed director of the timepiece division, which included the Oris, Longines, and Ebel brands, as well as Parker writing implements and Ronson lighters. Schnyder also advised and accompanied the members of Diethelm's sales team on their journeys throughout the country. To diversify its activities in Thailand, Diethelm opened a travel agency, of which Schnyder became the manager when the person originally responsible for it returned home to Europe on a six-month leave of absence. Among other duties, Schnyder organized excursions to Angkor Wat, which at that time was only accessible to tourists who were willing to fly there aboard an old DC-3.

Whenever he had a vacation, Schnyder deliberately opted to spend it in the most adventurous way he could imagine. He organized numerous expeditions for himself, his colleagues and friends, including, a jaunt to the Burmese frontier where, with the help of the local people, he built a bamboo raft for several days of rafting on the River Kwai. He visited war-torn regions in Laos, where three different factions were fighting for control of the country. Traveling in the infamous Golden Triangle was by no means without its dangers: this territory in Burma, Laos, and northern Thailand ranked among the world's leaders

in the cultivation of opium poppies. As a hobby, Schnyder wrote reports about his travels. The *Schweizer Illustrierte* magazine published



**Schnyder's latest stroke of genius: the Sonata is an alarm wristwatch with a second time zone and countdown displays.**



his River Kwai story in 1959 and printed on its cover a photo taken during the expedition.

One of Schnyder's friends, the Swiss artist Theo Meier (who spent his painting career in Thailand and on Bali) always urged him to discover new things and to stay open to new ways of understanding. Schnyder first visited Bali as a guest of the Prince of Ubud in 1959, when he photographed the extremely elaborate rites surrounding the cremation of a deceased nobleman. Bali was a very poor island at the time. Tourists seldom visited it. Cameras and transistor radios were exotic novelties that the astonished locals passed from hand to hand. Thailand, too, was seldom frequented by tourists. Pattaya was a sleepy fishing village where Schnyder would spend weekends water-skiing, sometimes accompanied by the King of Thailand or Prince Bira. Recognizing Pattaya's tourism potential, Schnyder invested his first savings in the Nippa Lodge. The lodge became the village's first hotel, but Schnyder never reaped any earnings from his investment. On the weekends he often flew to Saigon, a city with a strong French influence and excellent restaurants. Crispy baguettes were ubiquitous. One could also drive to Dalat to enjoy the luscious strawberries. Schnyder experienced firsthand the beginning of the second Vietnam War.

After renewing his contract with Diethelm, Schnyder assumed responsibility for all of its consumer products, which included merchandise made by well-known brands such as Procter & Gamble, Union Carbide, and Kimberley Clark. He initiated the local production of relatively simple items, thus eliminating the need to import them. He soon realized that it

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would also be possible to manufacture technically demanding products in Thailand. His Thai employees were intelligent and highly motivated, and their discipline at work was considerably better than that of their Swiss counterparts. The most important factors, Schnyder realized, were education, supervision, and quality control.

Schnyder was the only continental European who played rugby by the Royal Bangkok Sports Club. He even advanced as far as the rank of team captain, a position he accepted when the incumbent captain suffered a broken leg. Among his other duties as captain, Schnyder gave a speech at a banquet in Hong Kong. Afterwards, a distinguished-looking gentleman named Hamish Maxwell introduced himself. Maxwell, who turned out to be vice president, international, for Philip Morris, offered Schnyder a position with the firm. The next time Schnyder had a vacation in his homeland, he hopped on a flight to New York, introduced himself at Philip Morris's office – and was promptly hired. In 1965, after seven years with Diethelm, he turned his back on Bangkok and began a new career.

To train for his new job, however, he first had to return to Switzerland, namely, to Philip Morris's European headquarters in Lausanne and its subsidiary FTR (Fabriques de Tabac Réunis) in Serrières, west of Neuchâtel. This was the first time in his life that he wasn't involved, either directly or indirectly, in the watch industry. Naturally, the people at Philip Morris capitalized on his Far Eastern experience and entrusted him with responsibility for the enterprise's Asian business. He was dispatched to Hong Kong, where he cultivated the Far Eastern market until 1968. His

**Hats off: high spirits at an elephant polo match in Nepal, 2003**





**Schnyder first visited Bali as a guest of the Prince of Ubud in 1959, when he photographed the extremely elaborate rites surrounding the cremation of a deceased nobleman.**

**Creations for the third millennium: the Freak (left) and Genghis Khan**

territory included the Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore. He was able to visit China in 1966, when the Cultural Revolution had reached its peak. China was mostly off limits to foreigners at this time. The Associated Press purchased Schnyder's photos, some of which were published in large-circulation daily newspapers around the world.

On the way to his homeland on the aforementioned extended vacation, Schnyder's itinerary carried him to Australia, the South Sea Islands, Chile, and New York, where, in addition to landing the job with Philip Morris, he also chanced to meet Marcel Stern, a manufacturer of watch

dials and a cousin of Philippe Stern, who is now the president of Patek Philippe. Marcel Stern invited Schnyder to drop by Geneva for a tour of his dial factory. In the course of that tour, the idea occurred to Schnyder that high-quality dials, which embody a very demanding combination of technology and crafts-

manship, could also be produced in the Far East. He pitched the idea to Stern of starting a joint venture in Thailand, who agreed in principle but needed another full year before he could persuade his colleagues in the ultraconservative dial syndicate to grant their approval.

In those days, all Swiss dial manufacturers belonged to the syndicate, which regulated everything strictly. Flückiger, Metalem, Stern, and others all manufactured dials via the syndicate's office and abided by the same unified pricing system. At first, Stern wanted to participate in Schnyder's Thai dial venture, along with 42 others. Naturally, this number had to be drastically reduced. Lengthy negotiations ensued. Finally, in 1968, three Swiss managers were sent to Bangkok to co-found the Cosmo dial and watchcase factory, a 50-50 joint venture between Swiss and Asian investors. The business needed a boss, so Schnyder resigned from his post at Philip Morris and began his career as an independent industrialist. He received his first big order from the Sandoz watch factory of La Chaux-de-Fonds. This first client was followed by other renowned brands such as Rado, Tissot, Camy, Fortis, Nivada, Certina, and finally even Omega.





Schnyder at his home in Malaysia, cutting the wedding cake with his wife Chai in 1992, and at the trade fair booth in Basel



But problems soon developed with the Thai partners. Schnyder sold his share of the business to its other owners and started all over again in Kuala Lumpur in 1974. He founded his new company, Precima Sdn. Bdh., in the free-trade zone near the old airport. The Malaysian government was very supportive: the business remained tax-exempt during its first 10 years, and raw materials and machinery could be imported without the company's having to pay import duties. Schnyder once again set up a dial factory. Later, he also manufactured mainsprings and balance springs for Nivarox and sapphire crystals for Comadur. In 1972, he established a factory in Manila, where steel watchcases were made. Schnyder set up his Swiss offices in the ASUAG building in the Seevorstadt neighborhood near Bienne, where the Swatch Group's headquarters are located today. In the employee cafeteria, he would occasionally meet Pierre Renggli, who was ASUAG's general director at the time.

In 1978, Renggli told Schnyder that he had hired for ETA a new man named Ernst Thomke. Renggli said that Thomke was interested in learning more about production in the Far East and that he would drop by to see Schnyder one day soon. Not long after, a man wearing a sweater and a jacket but no necktie presented himself to Schnyder's receptionist. Schnyder assumed that the fellow was a job candidate and left Thomke waiting in the anteroom. After the misunderstanding had been cleared up, he and Schnyder eventually became good friends. ASUAG became one of Schnyder's best customers. He expanded his operations in Kuala Lumpur to include bonding chips, assembling quartz modules and manufacturing air filters. Schnyder was an eyewitness to the dramatic restructuring within ASUAG, especially in relation to Ebauches SA, and the fusion of ASUAG and SSIH in late 1983.

In 1983, when Schnyder had again returned to St. Moritz to ski and race skeleton bobsleds, he heard rumors that Ulysse Nardin was for sale. Several times on the slopes and ski lifts he happened to meet his friend Balthasar Meier, who owned the Fogal stocking factory. At each encounter, the two men pondered what could possibly be done with the financially ailing Ulysse Nardin business. It became apparent that the company was little more than a skeleton with a pretty name. The deeply indebted enterprise had applied for deferment of payments and had reduced its staff to just two people. The company kept afloat by selling marine chronometers and deck watches to collectors. There was still a large stockpile of spare parts that could be used to build new chronometers. Ulysse Nardin was surviving on its reputation, dating back to 1903, of being the world's best source for mechanical marine chronometers. Merchant vessels and warships throughout the world had long relied on the legendary M.Gr.F. model to help their navigators determine their positions at sea. Ulysse Nardin's erstwhile prominence as a marine-chronometer maker is the source of the anchor in the company's logo.

After World War II, when the information was declassified, the public learned that the U.S. Navy had in 1940 ordered 10,500 marine chronometers from Hamilton, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The company delivered 9,300 of these chronometers between 1945 and 1941. This represented a significantly larger number of chronometers than Ulysse Nardin had been able to produce during the preceding century. In strict compliance with the Navy's orders, Hamilton's watchmakers had



Oechslin's second stroke of genius: Planetarium Copernicus. Here, the Trilogy Version in platinum.



**Schnyder with the rugby team of the Royal Bangkok Sports Club in 1961**

crafted thousands of exact and extremely well-crafted copies of Ulysse Nardin's legendary M.Gr.F. The only difference was that the American imitators used a superior regulating organ.

Not until 1965 was it learned that the Seiko marine chronometer that the Japanese Navy had used during the war was also a copy of Ulysse Nardin's M.Gr.F. One of the ironies of horological history is that American and Japanese warships in the Pacific used the same marine chronometer, i.e. copies of the Ulysse Nardin M.Gr.F. Amiraute from 1903.

Mechanical chronometers were rendered obsolete by the invention of far more accurate quartz marine chronometers. The inarguable superiority of electronic movements prompted the Neuchâtel Observatory to discontinue its competitions for mechanical chronometers in 1975, when the observatory published its final report. This summary calculated that Ulysse Nardin had held a virtual monopoly in the "marine chronometer" category for many decades: of the 4,504 certificates that had been issued, 4,324 had gone to Ulysse Nardin. Furthermore, the company had also been awarded 1,069 first prizes for large chronometers and 747 first prizes for pocket-watch and wristwatch chronometers.

Mechanical marine chronometers no longer had a future, but the brand's potential was very tempting. Schnyder acquired Ulysse Nardin in 1983. Balthasar Meier and the techno musician Dieter Meier (Yello) came aboard as minority partners. The owners agreed that the brand could only be successfully re-launched if it could debut a truly inventive watch that was appreciably different from all others. In his search for ideas, Schnyder visited Jörg Spöring's timepiece atelier in Lucerne, where he saw a gorgeous astronomical table clock, a so-called "astrolabium." It had been built by a most extraordinary "apprentice" named Ludwig Oechslin, who was already working on his doctoral dissertation, but dabbled in watch-



**The founding of the Cosmo watchcase factory in Bangkok in 1968**

making on the side. Oechslin would later go on to become a private instructor at ETH in Zurich and curator of the international watch museum in La Chaux-de-Fonds.

Schnyder arranged a meeting with Oechslin, who already wore a pince-nez with semicircular lenses instead of ordinary eyeglasses. Schnyder asked Oechslin if he would be able to build an

astronomical wristwatch. Oechslin's realization of this idea was destined to repeatedly catapult Ulysse Nardin into the pages of the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Though he had doubts about the commercial prospects of such a tiny astrolabium, Oechslin accepted the challenge and constructed two prototypes. One of the two was worn by Schnyder, who proudly showed it to his friend Ernst Thomke. The timepiece evoked such strong enthusiasm in Thomke that he urged Schnyder to get ETA involved in the watch's further development and production.

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Acting on this advice, Schnyder got to know Urs Giger, the head of ETA's mechanical development division. Giger

entrusted the project to Bruno Erni, his best designer. Erni was the man who conceived the Astrolabium Galileo Galilei as a relatively slim, ball-borne module that used the ETA 2892-A2 as its "motor."

The astrolabium, which was one of the watch industry's most daring innovations in the 20th century, remains a specialty of Ulysse Nardin exclusively. Translating this dream into ticking reality required extreme miniaturization and brand new micromechanical concepts. The watch's dial displays local and solar time, the orbits and eclipses of the sun and moon, and the positions of several of the brightest fixed stars.

The astrolabium was the first in a trio of astronomical wristwatches. It was followed by the Planetarium Copernicus, which combines the ancient notion of a geocentric universe with the more recent Copernican heliocentric concept. Its dial shows the positions of the sun, the moon, and the five classical planets from Mercury to Saturn. The final member



**Versatile:** Schnyder's press card (1971); celebrating a water-skiing victory in 1972



**True blue, through and through:** the Blue Wave version of the Maxi Marine Diver



of the trilogy, the Tellurium Johannes Kepler, depicts the Earth in polar projection. The starry firmament progresses along the ecliptic and requires one year to complete one revolution around the sun, which remains motionless at the "12." Meanwhile, the Earth completes one counterclockwise rotation every 24 hours and the moon completes one orbit of the Earth every 29.53 days. A spring stretched across the polar projection of the Earth bends to correspond to the seasonally determined terminator (edge of twilight) in the Northern Hemisphere. A glance at the dial reveals which regions of the Earth are presently basking in sunlight and which are shrouded in nighttime darkness. A so-called "dragon hand" indicates solar and lunar eclipses.

To take a little break from his work on the astronomical trilogy, Oechslin created the Perpetual Calendar Ludwig for Ulysse Nardin. This self-winding wristwatch shows the second, minute, hour, date, day of the week, month, and year. It's also the only watch of its kind equipped with an ingeniously simple mechanism for rapid adjustment in both directions via a single crown. Even in the "dreaded" year 2100 (which ought to be a leap year, but won't be), the as-yet unborn owner of the Perpetual Calendar Ludwig won't need to readjust the calendar mechanism.

Ulysse Nardin also manufactures somewhat more conventional watches, e.g. the GMT±, which has two push-pieces (at the "2" and "8"), which respectively advance or move back the hour hand in full-hour increments without affecting the position of the minute hand. This makes it child's play to reset the hour whenever you enter a new time zone. The resetting process is so convenient and user-friendly that you don't even have to take the watch off your wrist. The GMT± always shows local time on its main dial and indicates the hour in your home time zone inside a little window at the "9." If the watch is ever allowed to run down (which would put its perpetual calendar out of synch with the pages of the world's calendars), you can rectify the discrepancy

by twisting the crown. The construction of the stepwise switching mechanism is wholly innovative: similar to the astronomical wristwatches that preceded it, the GMT± works without cumbersome and often unreliable hand-fitted levers and springs. The entire mechanism relies on gears instead. No matter where the hour hand happens to be, each time the corresponding push-piece is pressed, the hand advances or retreats through exactly 30° of arc, which, of course, corresponds to one hour on the 12-hour dial. Since 1997, the GMT± has also been available with a double-window "big date" display.

Another Ulysse Nardin watch, the chronograph, also incorporates very complex yet nonetheless sturdy and reliable mechanisms. The same holds true of the limited-edition models with minute repetition and full-hour strike-trains. Ulysse Nardin celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1996 by launching a new edition of its famous marine chronometer in a miniaturized version for the wrist.

Ulysse Nardin's Carousel is a central tourbillon wristwatch with a distinctive difference. Unlike conventional tourbillons (in which only the escapement system rotates around its own axis), this watch has a special

**One of the minority investors in Ulysse Nardin is the renowned techno musician and Zen practitioner, Dieter Meier, of Yello.**

rotating carriage that bears the entire gear train, which contains 80% of the movement's components. Rotating

around its central axis once every 60 minutes, the carriage performs the function ordinarily performed by an hour hand. Winding the mainspring and setting the hands is accomplished by first lifting and then rotating the bezel. This solution was chosen because it was impossible to install a conventional winding stem. This extraordinarily unconventional movement was developed by Carole Forestier, the only female watch designer with an international reputation and a degree from the technical academy in Le Locle. Though she hadn't yet begun working for Ulysse Nardin when she invented this movement, the company bought her invention nonetheless. The principle on which the tourbillon Carousel is

based isn't essentially new: it was developed in the 19th century, but had never been widely disseminated. A similar fate beset Carole Forestier's construction: because it requires so much energy to keep it in motion, the watch's power reserve is impractically brief. When Forestier left Ulysse Nardin to work at Cartier, Schnyder restored the rights to her inventions to her.

The freakiest watch in Ulysse Nardin's collection is undoubtedly the Freak, for which Ludwig Oechslin reinvented nearly all of the basic concepts in the art and science of watchmaking. A huge mainspring fills nearly the entire volume of the case and gives the Freak an eight-day power reserve. The movement itself performs the functions ordinarily

fulfilled by a watch's hour and minute hands. The passage of the minutes is indicated by the position of

Oechslin's new, lubricant-free, "dual direct" escapement. This revolutionary invention relies on silicon wheels to reduce its overall weight and makes do without a lever or an escape wheel. The mainspring is manually wound by rotating the back of the case; the positions of the hands can be reset by turning the bezel. Polycrystalline synthetic diamond is used for the escape wheels and balance spring on experimental models.

In its early years, Schnyder's "new" Ulysse Nardin outsourced design, research, development, construction, and manufacturing tasks to extramural consultants and suppliers. The assembly, final quality-control checks, servicing, and maintenance of its watches have always taken place at the main headquarters in Le Locle. As the years went by, Ulysse Nardin equipped itself to perform progressively more modes of production and also acquired numerically guided cutting machines, precision lathes, and spark-erosion machinery, not to mention ultra-precise laser-based measuring devices for quality control. This equipment made it possible for the company to produce even very difficult-to-make components on its own premises. The manufacturing of plates and bridges, for example, has become routine. The already available equipment, along with other pieces of newly acquired machinery (including a second numerically guided processing center), were set up in a fully renovated, two-story factory building in La Chaux-de-Fonds in the spring of 2004.

Ulysse Nardin does not aspire to be a completely independent *manufacture*, of which no single example exists in the entire Swiss watchmaking industry. But having its own production machinery means that the company can do its work with greater efficiency, faster, and above all with more flexibility than would be possible if Ulysse Nardin were obliged to purchase critical components from external suppliers, some of whom have a pesky habit of breaking their promises and failing to deliver shipments on schedule. The facility in La Chaux-de-Fonds also provides space for Ulysse Nardin's design and development division, which consists of a team of six designers and their boss, who sit in front of computer moni-

**Oechslin's realization of Schnyder's idea catapulted Ulysse Nardin into the pages of the Guinness Book of World Records.**

tors as they develop basic calibers and various complications to augment those calibers. One of their most important tasks is to translate Ludwig Oechslin's ideas into functional systems that are amenable to serial manufacturing methods. Directly adjacent to the D&D division is the prototype department, where numerically guided machinery makes all of the components for newly developed calibers.

The chronometer line includes chronographs whose movements are outsourced to Dubois Dépraz, which builds a module that's mounted atop an ETA caliber 2892-A2. Models like the Marine Chronometer, the Ulysse line, the GMT Big Date, the GMT Perpetual, the Freak, and the Sonata are all assembled by Ulysse Nardin's own watchmakers. For the assembly of re-

peater movements, the firm works with Claret in Le Locle, although Ulysse Nardin is now capable of assembling these

movements on its own, albeit with reliance on Claret for some components. Ulysse Nardin is one of the best customers for Christophe Claret, who specializes in exotic complications and animated figurines whose antics enliven watch dials. Ulysse Nardin also collaborates closely with other artisans in the region, such as those specializing in enamel painting, cloisonné, engraving, decorating, or the crafting of skeleton movements.

Ulysse Nardin employs relatively few foreign workers. Swiss citizens account for more than 70 percent of the company's 130 employees in Le Locle and La Chaux-de-Fonds. Annual production totals roughly 12,000 watches. Demand far exceeds supply, so deliveries must be apportioned on a quota basis. Annual growth is in the double-digits. Ulysse Nardin's products are "Swiss made" in the truest sense of the phrase: even the steel cases are made in Switzerland. That's unusual in the Swiss watch industry, which imports a large percentage of its cases from China. For

Schnyder, Ulysse Nardin began as a hobby, but quickly metamorphosed into a calling. He sold his factories in Malaysia and the Philippines so that he could fully devote himself to his watches. He still maintains a residence in Kuala Lumpur, where he lives with his Malaysian wife and their three children. Schnyder spends roughly half of each year there. He divides the remaining months between Switzerland and trips to visit customers throughout the world. When he's not in Switzerland, his business there is managed by his deputy, Pierre Gyga, who also directs the development and production divisions.

The joy that Schnyder derives from Ulysse Nardin is truly contagious. Two important elements in the business's culture are an orienteering race each autumn and a big Christmas party each December featuring skits and other entertainment created by the employees themselves. Schnyder sees it as an enormous advantage to be independent, to have no debts, and to be able to finance the business's growth with his own capital. Because he doesn't have to pay dividends to shareholders, he can invest all the profits back into the company. Above all, he's glad to be able to bring innovative products of the highest possible quality to the market. ■



**A classic: GMT ± Big Date Dual Time**