

The Hotel Story

The history of the „Parkhotel de Wiemsel“ is also the history of entrepreneur Henning J. Claassen.

H. J. Claassen (HJC), the son of a fourth generation baker's family in Lüneburg, completed training as an industrial clerk in Hamburg and then boarded a freight ship bound for the United States. After studying Economics and Psychology in California for three years, he returned to Germany, where he started his own business and became an agent for an American machinery manufacturer for adhesive applications.

A few years later he founded „Meltex GmbH“ and began designing and constructing hot melt adhesive systems. The company grew, establishing branches around the world, including a facility in the USA. Customers and agents visited the headquarters in Lüneburg regularly. Since Lüneburg did not have a suitable hotel for business travelers, HJC decided to build his own, collecting ideas from other hotels he visited in the course of his travels around the world.

The final tally was 1000 points that contributed to the design of the „Meltex Hotel.“ The ultimate goal was for the guests to feel at home, no matter where they came from, regardless of whether tourist, business traveler or conference participant. And the name had to be fitting too: appealing yet neutral. As chance would have it, HJC spent

the night at a hotel in the USA named „Bergström.“ This was to be the name. To be able to found a company named Bergström, there had to be a shareholder of the same name. It took some effort and a respective fee, but the Norwegian Oynfried Bergström agreed to lend his name and become a shareholder for a few minutes to establish the company „Bergström GmbH“. To make sure everything was done properly, the respective documents on his joining and leaving the company were signed at the German embassy in Oslo.



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Hotel „Bergström“ in Lüneburg

There were no more obstacles in the way. HJC already had his eye on property in the Lüneburg harbor district, a parcel of land with dilapidated, uninhabited buildings, right on the banks of the Ilmenau river. When he showed his mother Greta what he was planning, he opened the door to a building, where she promptly stepped on a rat's nest and exclaimed: „Henning, don't do it! You won't be happy here.“ But her son Henning was not to be deterred: In the existing complex, he built a small, very nice hotel with 65 rooms. At virtually the same time as the grand opening of the hotel, he sold his machine factory, „Meltex GmbH“, which had grown by then to 300 employees in Lüneburg and Atlanta. The headline in the local newspaper: „Claassen sells „Meltex“ and opens a hotel.“

But HJC had other plans. He discovered niches in the hotel business that needed attention too. He soon founded „Ciscom Hotelcommunications“ for the technology, „CMC Hotelausstattungen“ for interior furnishings and „Direct Leasing“ for financing. And all the while the „Bergström“ was being expanded. After „Ciscom“ became Germany's largest provider of hotel pay TV and „CMC“ furnished over 100 hotels, HJC sold



Hotel „Altes Kaufhaus“ in Lüneburg

both companies and detached himself from „Direct Leasing“.

What does a thoroughbred entrepreneur do when he feels like he has extra capacity? He starts a new company. HJC had business friends from around the world dating back to his „Meltex days.“ He convinced them that they should join him in investing in „surface technology,“ the branch of the future. The result was „Impreglon SE“, a company listed on the Frankfurt stock exchange with 37 plants in 14 countries and 150 million Euro in revenue, the leadership of which HJC passed to the Dutch corporation „Aalberts Industries B.V.“ in 2015.

And the „Bergström“? The high occupancy was a clear indication of how content the guests are. This was HJC's incentive to apply a lot of patience and sensitivity to restoring the old water mills „Abtsmühle“ and „Lüner Mühle,“ creating modern hotel rooms in the charming Bergström hotel ensemble. He also added three fairytale suites in a 500-year-old water tower with its own bridge across the Ilmenau river. So the hotel developed into a 4-star superior hotel with 131 guest rooms, 3 restaurants, a spa/wellness center, a wine

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shop, the bakery „die Backstube“ producing bread and rolls in a traditional stone oven, and its own perfume: the „Seaport Spyce,“ the scent that HJC, an enthusiastic sailor, had created for the „Bergström“ by a small perfumery when he was sailing in the Gulf of Mexico, and last not least the „Palais am Werder“ with large ballroom and conference rooms, as well as the „Forsthaus Rote Schlei“, a traditional Lüneburg country style restaurant.

His experience from the „Bergström“ let HJC then in 2010 in the opening of another hotel in-flow: the hotel „Altes Kaufhaus“. Also in a historic building directly on the waterfront of the Ilmenau, the 3-star-superior-hotel has 83 hotel rooms, the „Canoe“ restaurant, an expansive fitness area with sauna and massages, and with the „Galerie im Alten Kaufhaus“ a fascinating collection of contemporary art that HJC has acquired over the past 30 years.



„Seaport Spyce,“ the perfume created by the enthusiastic sailor HJC.



And this is where the de Wiemsel story begins...

HJC and his wife Helga had a favorite hotel in the Netherlands, where they went for a short vacation every year: „Hotel de Wiemsel“ in the small artist town of Ootmarsum.

When they tried to book their vacation in 2014, they were told that the hotel had closed. HJC looked into the reason and discovered that the hotel had filed for insolvency but that it had been sold to a new investor who intended to re-open it soon. So



Henning J. und Helga Claassen at the grand opening of the Hotel „Altes Kaufhaus“ in 2010.

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the short vacation just had to be postponed. But that did not happen.

Four months later, HJC received a call from the insolvency administrator, telling him, „The buyer of the de Wiemsel failed to pay!“ He then asked, „Are you interested?“ It was a tempting proposition. HJC was already planning to hand over management of the Impreglon group in 2015, and now he was given the opportunity to start something new. The result: The „Restaurant de Wanne“, built in 1968 and expanded to „Hotel de Wiemsel“ in 1978, became the new Relais & Châteaux „Parkhotel de Wiemsel“.

In the meantime the completely renovated „Parkhotel de Wiemsel“ with its 56 suites and guest rooms, the spacious 70,000 sqm park and the gourmet restaurant “De Wanne” has become a hideaway insider tip for guests from the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. And of course the love for art pulls its red thread again. In spring 2019 HJC will open the “Kunstgalerie Parkhotel de Wiemsel” in the park of the hotel.

Since his children have chosen other professions – Björn is a professor in the USA, Sönke runs his own health management consulting company in Australia, Sibylle lives in

Stuttgart with her husband and three children, and Britt is an architect in Lüneburg – HJC has sold the hotels in Lüneburg, which have been leased to the Dormero Group since 2017, in 2020 and is now planning to build a new gallery in the heart of the city for its diverse collection of contemporary art. HJC and his wife Helga want to keep the “Parkhotel de Wiemsel” for as many years as possible and make it one of the most popular private hotels in the Netherlands.

At the end of this story, HJC’s personal commitment is worth mentioning: The initiative he founded in 1997, “Schützt die Opfer e.V.” (“Help the victims”). This initiative draws attention to the imbalance between state care for victims and perpetrators. It especially helps women and children who become victims of violent crimes or find themselves in need through no fault of their own. Since the initiative was founded, people in need, groups of people and recognised organisations have received over 500,000 € in support measures. More information can be found at: www.schuetztdieopfer.de

In recognition of his numerous diverse achievements the Council of the City of Lüneburg awarded HJC the Honorable Citizenship on April 1, 2017.