



TIME AND A LIFETIME



Photos: © Sédrik Nemeth

View over Crans-sur-Sierre





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Stepping Out on the Big Stage

A few days later, during the Christmas holidays, I saw an ad looking for a watch repairman capable of managing a shop in Crans-sur-Sierre. I was happy in La Chaux-de-Fonds and had made lots of friends. I could look forward to a peaceful life there, with no more need to move around. And yet the prospect of working at my craft as a repairman with almost double the salary, in a fashionable resort in Valais, a canton with a more pleasant climate than the Jura, was more than tempting.

Aeschlimann's jewelry business handled the most prestigious brands. A watchmaker himself from the Jura, he owned one shop in Sierre, one in Anzère, two in Crans and another in Montana. "My shop", one of those in Crans-Montana, was appropriately named "Le Diamant Bleu". It was the most profitable of the group. I moved to the resort in February. It was a huge change. Besides the increase in pay, I had six weeks' paid vacation along with my health insurance.

So there I was a watchmaker-manager! The best of all possible worlds. Most of our clients were from Belgium, Paris and Milan. My Italian came in handy. I was the only one in the shop who could speak it. I will always remember my first day on the job. I was in the middle of organizing my tools when the boss called on me to look after an Italian customer. I showed him a few watches and succeeded in selling him a Patek Philippe costing 8,000 francs—quite a price-tag at the time. (A similar watch would cost around 25,000 francs today.) The boss very quickly handed over a lot of responsibility to me: opening and closing the shop, seeing to purchases and acting as manager in his absence.

I got along very well with Aeschlimann. Furthermore, between my salary, my share of the profits and incentives on unsold items (nobody thought much about the unsold watches, but I did! I was a good salesman and thought it better to miss out on a sale rather than lose a customer), I was earning between 5000 and 6000 francs a month.





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These were wonderful years. Besides my enjoyment of the work and my good relations with the boss, there was the additional attraction of the area. Crans-Montana was frequented by high society. I often served celebrities—actors, singers, politicians, even members of royal families. I was very relaxed in my dealings with all my clients, my Neapolitan side always putting business before my personal concerns. Some of these personalities made a point of dropping into the shop to say a quick hello or have a friendly chat even when they did not need anything in particular.

It was all very flattering. There I was, a little Neapolitan from the humblest of backgrounds, and finding myself in such exalted company made me think I was part of it. It never occurred to me that these people were only interested in my services, not in me personally. It was only much later that I became aware of how deluded I was—just like in my adolescence when I mixed with young lads from more comfortable circumstances that I dreamed of enjoying someday.

The Trigger

This was nonetheless a pivotal period in my life. It was then that my creative instincts helped me find my path. My desire to create was not new. It went back to my time at Hebdomas, when one of my colleagues was so proud of a patent he had been awarded. I envied him so much! Nothing fascinated me, a self-taught man, so much as the thought of a patent on my own invention. Hence, the impulse to create. The desire to make a lasting impression. As a teenager, I was aware that I could do without music and sports, just as later on I could do without the social success I thought I enjoyed in Crans. I was feeling unfulfilled. When he was 20, didn't Caesar weep because he had not achieved what Alexander had when he was 18?

At the Diamant Bleu, our clients were well-off, concerned about their image and always wanting a personalized watch. Although our shop offered every possible brand, and the most prestigious, too, they coveted something unique. I turned to the manufacturers, who informed me that at best they could engrave the case back or design an original dial. In a word, they could produce nothing personalized, though that could be done even in China or Naples. My clients were disappointed.

Then one day a regular customer called, accompanied by his wife. She showed me a splendid Breguet pendant watch from the 19th century that had been run over by a car. They asked me for an estimate on the repairs. I had a look at it. The movement could be repaired. The case,





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however, was seriously damaged. I passed on their request for an estimate to the jeweller in one of our shops. The repair of the movement—the watchmaker's concern—would cost about 800 francs (around 1,500 francs in today's terms). The repairs on the watchcase—the jeweller's concern—would come to around 2,000 francs (4,000 francs today). My client asked me just to repair the case!

What? He wasn't the least bit bothered that the watch wouldn't actually work. He was only concerned about its looks. I was shocked. He pretended to love watches, but couldn't care less that the movement was engineered by one of the greatest watchmakers in history! That told me that my craft counted for nothing. It meant that a jeweller could earn 2,000 francs while a watchmaker could not even earn 800. This realization produced a major tremor inside me. From that day on, I was determined to create a watch that people would buy solely for the beauty of its movement as soon as possible.

This episode filled me with a desire for revenge. The watchmaker's craft is demanding and thankless. Especially when it comes to repairs. You have to take a watch apart, and understand its workings before you can even begin, whereas the jeweller has nothing more to do than to solder or file down various parts. Even at Richard, I had run into this injustice. The jewellers there earned 20 to 30% more than the watchmakers. Our craft was undervalued.

Towards a New Concept of Watchmaking

I was filled with rage. Of course, I had it all, I was earning a good living and I had two wonderful daughters. But I was gripped by a sense of uselessness, of emptiness, of meaninglessness. All this had come over me so suddenly, as if my craft and the watchmaking industry were only a matter of smoke and mirrors, without any solid foundation. I wanted to go further, test myself, and prove to myself what I was capable of. It was the exact opposite of what my life had been up to then—the pursuit of recognition, of a standing which, in the end, had not got me anywhere.

I now wanted to try to create something that came from me alone. I was haunted by feelings like this when I decided to buy a watchmaker's lathe. To be sure, it was bottom of the range, the type you can pick up in a department store. It cost me 500 francs.

In the mid-70s the oil crisis and the fall of the French franc had caused a serious decline in business. Furthermore, the introduction of electronic watches was a critical challenge to mechanical watches, and the number of people employed in the industry fell from 120,000 to less



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than 20,000. My profession, if continued in the traditional way, was going to die. It was not my nature to sit back and see what would happen. So I decided to specialize in the restoration of old watches.

My boss knew all about it and he had no problem with it. My salary, comfortable but barely sufficient for a decent living for my family and me, would not allow me to buy any machinery. Taking courses in watchmaking was also out of the question, since there was no school for watchmakers in Valais. With my little second-hand lathe I was at first content to get an 18th century fusee watch back in working order. I managed to replace the damaged verge with another one. This was a question of fitting, rather than of manufacturing, since I had only had to shorten it somewhat. Still, I was pleased and proud of this initial success.

However, I realized that I was not suited to restoring watches. Every time I took on a new job, I wanted to improve the item after my own fashion. Fortunately, I was ethical enough not to do so. But I was either going to have to find a different sort of work or carry out my own in a different way. I then decided to start creating my own watches. Until then I had done no more than submit ideas to various people whose sole response was, "Unrealistic". I was miserable. To be sure, I was excellent at repairs, more than competent, but I had no theoretical knowledge of the manufacturing process. Moreover, though I had some mechanisms of my own invention in mind, my lathe was too limited for me to actually make them.

Further Training at Patek and Rolex

I used my six weeks' paid vacation to take the first step towards solving my problem. I divided the time in two—three weeks spent with my family, then three weeks devoted to training courses with the manufacturers that supplied our shop. If several of these courses taught me nothing, two of them were immensely rewarding.

The first was in 1975 at Patek Philippe. They ran their repairs workshop in the traditional manner. Their craftsmen possessed skills that you could only dream of, and their spirit of cooperation was exemplary. During this three-week course, I learned how to make various parts, such as a pull-out piece, the arbor for the winding-mechanism, the arbor for the balance fashioned by a pivot-maker.

It would be difficult for me to explain these matters to the uninitiated, but a watchmaker or a knowledgeable connoisseur will certainly be impressed. It was obvious that my recent experience in restoring old watches helped me gain a lot from this course. The only snag was in the Setting Department, where the manager tried to prove that his





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way, the traditional way, was the only valid one and that I had strayed into heresy.

The second training course, at Rolex in 1976, was a completely different experience. The shop foreman annoyed me to no end for the entire three weeks, going on and on about how in their shop, everything was done right, and a part should never be repaired, only replaced. He was forgetting that I had been one of their dealers for the last four years. I knew their work practices perfectly well. By the end of this course I was appalled by such obtuseness.

At Patek Philippe, on the contrary, I learned something about modesty. Their staff went about their work very knowledgeably but with restraint. I was happy to meet colleagues who knew so much more than I did. Nonetheless, I was still unhappy to see that despite their mastery of their craft, they stuck to the old rules that were so solidly established that I believed they hindered the true spirit of creativity.

I was convinced that innovation required the courage to leave the well-beaten path, for it's a fact that there's an exception to every rule. I would have to find my own way.

Schwarzenbach's Collateral Effects

Meanwhile, tension between immigrants and the native Swiss was at its height. True, the "Schwarzenbach Initiative", aimed at reducing the numbers of foreigners, was rejected by 54% of the vote. Still, it was a profound shock to foreigners long settled in Switzerland, and many of them decided to return to their own countries.

My sister and her husband went home, but my mother decided to remain in Switzerland and came to live with me in Valais. I gave her the room where I had had my workshop, which I then set up in the bedroom my wife and I shared. I can still hear my wife joking when she found filings in the bed!

The First Calabrese Creation: The Golden Bridge

My recent experience had strengthened my determination: I had to create my own watch! I had learned my craft inside and out, but I had no diploma to show for it. I decided to set a test for myself in creative watchmaking, freely and purely for myself, so that I could feel fully entitled to call myself a watchmaker.

Clearly, with my primitive tools, I could not aspire to create a masterpiece. I thought I could start with simple inventions, perhaps a





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small clock, even a movement for an alarm clock or pocket-watch. To start with, I needed some metal, though I neither knew what sort nor where to buy it. I began looking about for the raw materials I needed. At Aeschlimann's shop we received a case of watches which was fastened by some large copper staples. I thought about using them. I took them all, while noting that they were too narrow to be of any use for a watch movement, even for a ladies' watch. Furthermore, the copper was so soft that you could bend it with your fingers.

So I came up with the craziest challenge ever: to create a movement that no one had ever seen before, to create the personalized watches that my clients were always seeking but which had never been produced. To be sure, there were famous movements dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, in the shape of a mandolin, a cross or a death's head. But these movements were solid constructions with the gear-train concealed. My movements would consist of initials, symbols or any other figure the client requested. Above all, I wanted the entire gear-train and escapement to be visible so that people could admire the beauty of the mechanism.

I decided to call this new genre of watchmaking "Spatial". I wanted to make the movement independent of the watchcase so that it would be free in its own space, which would allow me to place any figure at all therein. In other words, I wanted to cut the umbilical cord between the movement and the rewinding and time-setting mechanisms. It should be clear that the challenge no longer lay just in my ability to make a complete watch from scratch.

However, as the Italian proverb has it, there is an ocean between saying and doing! What was needed was something truly innovative, a movement that had never before been conceived or dreamed of. Early movements had been rewound with one key, while the time was set with another. At the end of the 20th century, I could not imagine returning to that state of affairs. I owed it to myself to devise a system that was simple and user-friendly. Night and day for nearly two years, there was only one idea in my mind: I was obsessed with finding the solution to this problem.

After almost two years, when I woke up one morning, I had it. A daring solution, even for a well-established manufacturer. As if in a trance, I began to devise this system that would permit the creation of my spatial watches. I held the solution in my mind, like an image materialising before my eyes. In my bedroom workshop, I at last began to design it, to drill through the metal, construct the gears and to fashion the watchcase. And all that with tools two centuries old.





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Not only had I passed the test I had set for myself, but I found myself travelling a road that could properly be called philosophical. I was filled with the conviction that I could at last begin to express my truth concerning horological matters. And, who knows, perhaps concerning life itself. When my watch began ticking away, I began to cry. As when my daughter was born, silently the tears began to flow and I could not stop them. I realized then that my life was going to change.

I realized that my concept of watchmaking, with its freedom in space, offered infinity of variations. Any figure can be drawn with a line, which can be straight or curved. So, recalling the thin staples I had taken from the case, I fashioned the world's thinnest watch, as narrow as a match, endowed with a movement suspended in space, without a dial which conceals the watchmaker's skill. Those around me were amazed. My wife, of course, but her family as well, including her uncles, who were also in the business. My brother-in-law was a prototyping watchmaker at Jaeger-LeCoultre. When I showed him my watch, he looked it over from all angles, and then whistled with admiration, declaring, "This is a bombshell!" That's when I knew I was on the right road, for he was very sparing with praise.

I needed to apply for a patent to protect my invention. I was familiar with the procedure since I had never been able to pay an engineering consultant. My brother helped with the technical design. Later I would also take on this task myself. I could already see myself inundated with orders from jewellers who would make expensive watchcases to house my unique movements.

It took off from there. I showed my baby to the curator of the Musée International d'horlogerie in La Chaux-de-Fonds, and he was full of praise as well. When he asked me what I planned to do with my watch, I told him my hope was to find a manufacturer who would buy my prototype. Once I had my patent, I knew I would be free to create my own watches. "I know someone," the curator told me.

In fact, he was friends with René Bannwart, the owner of the Corum firm. Three hours later, the contract was signed! I had sold the manufacturing and production rights, on condition that the movement would be made of 18-carat gold. There would be no dial, and the case would be completely transparent so that the movement could be viewed from all angles. As the movement was mounted on a single bridge, Bannwart suggested calling it a "Golden Bridge".

In his enthusiasm, he glimpsed the possibility of fashioning the entire watchcase in transparent white sapphire. Such was the birth



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of my “Golden Bridge”! Though at the time I considered it a lesser child amongst my creations, 40 years later it remains an icon, admired throughout the world. I had achieved the impossible: I had created a watch that people would buy for its beauty and the apparent simplicity of its movement. The Golden Bridge has become a flagship of the industry. The Maison Corum can take pride in offering one of the best-selling watches in the world.

Winning Recognition

A few months later, in November 1977, the International Exhibition of Inventions Geneva was held. My prototype won the gold medal. At last my name would be known, money would come in, I was taking flight. At this time, all the great watchmaking firms were in hibernation. René Bannwart realized that with my unique movement his company had every chance of becoming a big player in the industry, which later proved to be the case.

Sure that I held my fate in my own hands, I left Aeschlimann. I decided to leave the mountains with a view to setting up in my own right. So began my initiatory journey.

1977 Prototype of a Spatial Watch



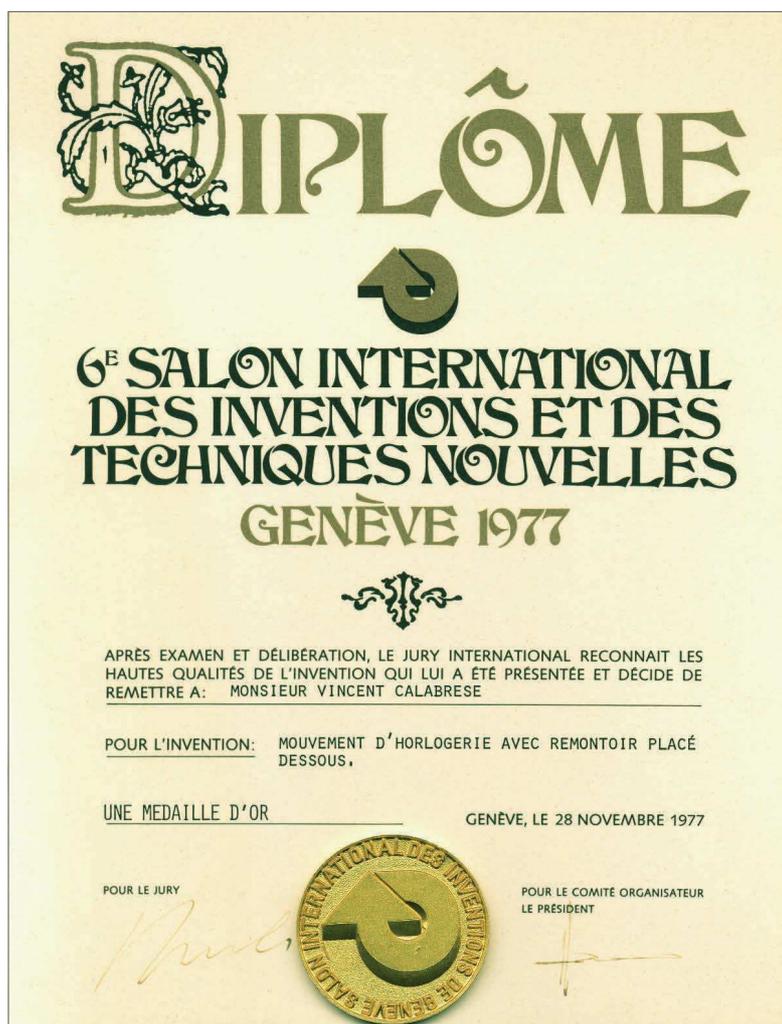
Specifications: movement in Nickel Silver. Length 29 mm, width 2.3 mm, thickness 3.2 mm. Setting of the time and rewinding of the spring by means of the barrel arbor. The peculiarity of no apparent link with the rewinding and time-setting mechanisms allowed for the crafting of movements of any shape, since they were independent within the space provided by the watchcase.





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Noting that watches were in fact appreciated more for their case than their movement, I decided to reverse the situation and to create a watch admired primarily for the beauty of its movement and secondarily for its case.





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1980 Golden Bridge

The first of my Spatial watches produced by the Maison Corum, the Golden Bridge, was officially christened in 1980 at the *Musée d'horlogerie* in La Chaux-de-Fonds. Its instant success, due to the beauty of its movement, continues today, 40 years after its creation. This watch has become an icon in the world of watchmaking since the beauty of its movement is not concealed beneath a dial but remains visible through a transparent sapphire case. The utilization of a traditional case would have cast a pall over the watchmaker's ingenuity.



Golden Bridge Front and Back
Watchcase in 18ct yellow gold and synthetic white sapphire.





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A Time of Disillusionment

I decided to settle in Lausanne. I preferred it to Geneva, which I knew well from the training courses I had done at Rolex and Patek and which had less character. In Montchoisi, a working-class district of Lausanne, I discovered a jewellery shop that had closed down. What with my savings and the 20,000 francs I had got from the transfer of my patent to Corum, I was able to put down the rent deposit. I was happy to rediscover my roots after a fashion in this modest neighbourhood.

Early on I realized that this would not be a rose garden. Actually, to be honest, it was a nightmare from the very start! My turnover barely covered the 600 francs rent. In the first month I only sold a few watches and rare jewels. Furthermore, I was feeling extremely isolated since my daughters, then eight and six years old, had stayed in Crans so as not to have to change schools. I only saw them on weekends.

For three years, from 1977 to 1980, I earned next to nothing. After a year, when I still was not earning a living from the repairs I did for various shops, I decided, like the self-taught man I was, to learn jewellery-making. The idea came to me quite naturally since the place had formerly been a jewellery shop. Well, I have to say that these hard times had a positive, in fact decisive, influence on later events. Especially because, forced to learn this new craft to get by, I learned some valuable things about the analysis and utilization of gold, the handling of fire, setting, enamelling and engraving.

Since, for lack of money, I could not subcontract any of the work, I had to do everything myself. Eventually, I realized, in my isolated, little retreat, that my prestigious clients in Crans-Montana had never been interested in my humble self or my talents; they only dropped in to see the manager. They had forgotten me and never showed up in Lausanne. A fine lesson in humility. What I call "business-card syndrome", the advertisement of your services along with your self-image and your illusions.

It was at this time that I began calling everything into question. Up to then, the road I was embarked on was closer to seeming than being.

