"25 YEARS OF MICRO PRECISION"

While large corporations are currently joining in the crisis hype with good grace and laying off employees, one innovative, medium-sized manufacturer of turned parts is demonstrating social responsibility and not only safeguarding the jobs of its employees, but also employing more personnel. With creative ideas, innovative production strategies and consistent focus on microprocessing, Laufer GmbH, 'Drehteile in Mikropräzision' (microprecision turned parts), remains on the road to success even in times such as these. A considerable factor in this success is the Swiss manufacturer of turning centers Tornos, which has supplied the majority of modern machine outfits as a competent partner. Manufacturing strategies are developed in close cooperation with Tornos, whose help has enabled Laufer to supply turned parts for the Czech Republic and even the Far East.

Customer service is a top issue at Laufer: Thomas and Andreas Laufer now preside over the company's fortunes under the benevolent watch of their father, Gerhard Laufer (from left to right).

Five years have passed since our last visit to Laufer, and although a great deal has changed in that time, the virtues and strength that elicited admiration at that time are still present as the company continues to grow. The company celebrates its 25th anniversary this year and the two sons of company founder Gerhard Laufer, Andreas and Thomas, have now officially taken over management of the company.

This was accompanied by repositioning and a clear strategic alignment, which is expressed in the new company name "Laufer, Drehteile in Mikropräzision" (Laufer, micro-precision turned parts). The company covers a range of diameters from 1 to 42 mm, while concentrating on high-precision turned parts in the range from 1 to 10 mm, where it sets the global benchmark. This is the segment in which the company has its roots and it is now consistently expanding these strengths. The father and company founder, Gerhard Laufer, was an automatic lathe foreman for the company Junghans until 1985. When the watchmaking industry began to decline and Junghans was looking for ways to cut costs, he took advantage of this opportunity. Nobody spoke of outsourcing in those days, but Gerhard Laufer practiced it. Together with his wife, he took over ten Tornos automatic straight-turning lathes and from that point on, manufactured watch parts for Junghans on a freelance basis. The precision and quality required by the watchmaking industry therefore shaped the company's thinking from the very start. Who can claim to have supplied only two bad parts out of a total of 32 million? Laufer can, and thus the company has continued to grow.

Always state-of-the-art technology: Laufer's machinery consists almost exclusively of the latest Tornos CNC single spindle and CNC multi-spindle automatic lathes.

In 1988, it moved to the current company premises in Hardt. This was also the year in which the first new machine, a Tornos MS7 with rod loading magazine, was purchased. The current managing directors, Andreas and Thomas, joined the company in the early 90s and focused on this technology at a time when CNC technology was still in its infancy.

A development partnership with a long tradition

The partnership with Tornos had, thus far, proved so positive for Laufer that the company even took a chance on a Tornos machine when it introduced CNC technology in 1994. At that time, the company already had over 20 cam-controlled automatic lathes when it purchased an ENC 74 as a demonstration machine. One year later, the second machine of this type followed, since it opened up a parts spectrum to the company that had previously not been possible. In addition to watch parts, antenna parts and the smallest turned parts with complicated rear-side machining were added to the range. As one of the first customers in Germany, 'Laufers' were informed by Tornos in confidence about the new Deco concept, and since the partnership had worked so well thus far, Laufer decided to go for it. In July 1996, the first prototype made its way to Hardt. It was the first Deco machine in Germany. In the meantime, this machine has clocked up over 100,000 operating hours, produced over ten million parts and is far from ready for the scrap heap. Gerhard Laufer was convinced by the concept from the very start - the quality was right and support from Tornos exemplary. In 1997, not least because of this machine, production was doubled, the area of operations was expanded from 500 to 1,300m² and the second Deco was acquired in 1998. The third Deco 13, purchased in 2000 with a diameter range of up to 16 mm is predominantly used for pre-series production and provision of samples. Today, the company has 12 Tornos CNC single-spindle automatic lathes and is excellently positioned for the current situation. *"Our machine outfit with 5-11 axis machines puts us in a position to respond flexibly and operate perfectly at full capacity,"* says Thomas Laufer.

Entering the automotive industry

When the watchmaking industry and the mobile phone market experienced a slump at the start of the century, Laufer looked for new sales markets. At this time, a new turbo charger generation was experiencing a downright boom, and the family council decided to give this technology a try. For this, the Laufers needed a CNC multiple-spindle automatic lathe and, in keeping with tradition, decided on a Tornos Multi-Deco 20/6b. It probably does not need to be said that this machine was, in turn, the first in Germany. In February 2002, Gerhard, Andreas and Thomas Laufer travelled to Moutier for the first turning tests. These were for a part for a turbo charger, of which 9 million were going to be produced. The requirements for this part surpassed all existing limits and together with Tornos technology, the process was fine-tuned until it could be fine-tuned no more. The material, a difficult-to-machine 1.4845 steel, varied from batch to batch, the dimensions were tiny, machining operations complex and tolerances extremely narrow. After

a nine-month test phase, the system partners Laufer and Tornos had the manufacturing process under control and had opened the door on new production technologies. This is how Laufer got its start in the automotive industry, which is currently, despite the crisis, one of the most important customer sectors for Laufer. But there is great variation within the automotive industry. There is, as there always has been, a huge demand for special parts that can only be fulfilled by very few suppliers.

Concentration on core competency areas

In past years, Laufer has positioned itself very well strategically. The company concentrates on manufacturing high-precision turned parts in the micrometer range and has an almost uncatchable head start in this area. Investments in the machine outfit and in employees have been made with foresight and a sense of proportion. *"One also has to see, however, that we are now moving into entirely different dimensions. If, before, we were happy about 100,000 units, we are now manufacturing series in the millions. And, moreover, in a diameter range competitors will not attempt. Our strengths lay in the range from 1 to 16 mm, with 90 percent of our parts under 6 mm."* Screws with M1 threads, M1 threaded rod with slot and tip or little buttons with a diameter of 1.3 mm - these are the parts that Laufer is supplying as far afield as the Czech Republic and China. Customers in the electronics and automotive industries have recognised that they cannot manufacture such parts on site to this kind of quality and at this price, so they come to Hardt.

Practiced corporate responsibility

For this reason, Laufer has been spared a dramatic slump during the crisis. In fact, the effects of the global drop in demand did not stop at Laufer's doors, but instead of laying off employees or reducing working hours, the company invested in further education and quality assurance measures and recruited new people and trainees. *"We consider ourselves responsible for our employees,"* agree Andreas and Thomas Laufer. *"We would rather forego profit in poor years than complain later on about the lack of skilled labor."* For this reason, Laufer also partners with Technolino, a project in Hardt that introduces pre-schoolers to technology at an early age, teaching them basic manual skills. As part of their systematic partnership with Tornos, they now even employ an exchange employee from Switzerland. He was not taken on by Tornos after his training and can now expand his skills at Laufer before returning to Switzerland when

Nothing works at Laufer without a magnifying glass. The company is the specialist for micro-precision. 90 percent of the parts range falls into a diameter range of less than 6 mm.

The Tornos specialists are often on-site: Siegfried Broghammer (left-hand image) in conversation with Thomas Laufer and Sven Martin (right-hand images) talks shop with Andreas Laufer and his team.

Tornos' orders pick up once again. This measure shows just how good the relationship between Laufer and Tornos has become over their years together. Ultimately, Laufers attribute some of their success to these machines. With 95 percent availability, a rate of complaints in the tenths of a percent and productivity that has yet to meet its match, Tornos machines are a safe investment. In 15 to 17 shifts per week, they have produced, on average, around 80 million challenging turned parts per year over the last 25 years, with a failure rate of nearly zero. Gerhard Laufer has, therefore, good reason to smile. He knows that his life's work is in the best of hands with his sons, Andreas and Thomas. Now, despite the crisis he can celebrate at the company anniversary celebration on 18 September 2010.

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