

GENERATIONS OF INSPIRATION

Being a family-run manufacture goes far beyond genealogy. Successors must share not only blood but values, visions, and understanding. In a touching conversation with Nicholas Foulkes, Thierry Stern recalls his early memories of his father, Philippe, and reflects on how his father still inspires him every day

By his own admission, Thierry Stern is a man who looks forward rather than back. "It's difficult to talk like this about the past," he says. "I don't hold onto the memories of the past. What's done is done."

And yet for this special issue of *Patek Philippe* magazine, which aims to pay tribute to the achievements of his father, that is what Thierry is trying to do. Hearing him tell anecdotes of his childhood, one is immediately reminded of what the leading Charles Dickens scholar, Lord David Cecil, once wrote of the novel *David Copperfield*, "Though the world that he reveals is more exaggerated, lit by brighter lights, darkened by sharper shadows than that of most

grown-up people, it is exactly the world as seen through the eyes of a child."

Unsurprisingly, the earliest memories that Thierry has of his father concern Philippe Stern's two great passions: sailing and watchmaking. "My earliest memories are of my dad sailing [see below]. He was a great yachtsman. It was obvious to me, even from a very young age, that he always wanted to race, not to sail. Seeing my dad on the lake, winning with his team and celebrating, that's when I also saw that he is really quite stubborn. He likes to win.

"Another early memory is of sitting in his office on the rue du Rhône. I can't have been more than 6 years old. I used to sit

on the floor while he worked at his desk. I was playing with my toys, but then I went to open one of the display cabinets' drawers and saw the pocket watches from Blois."

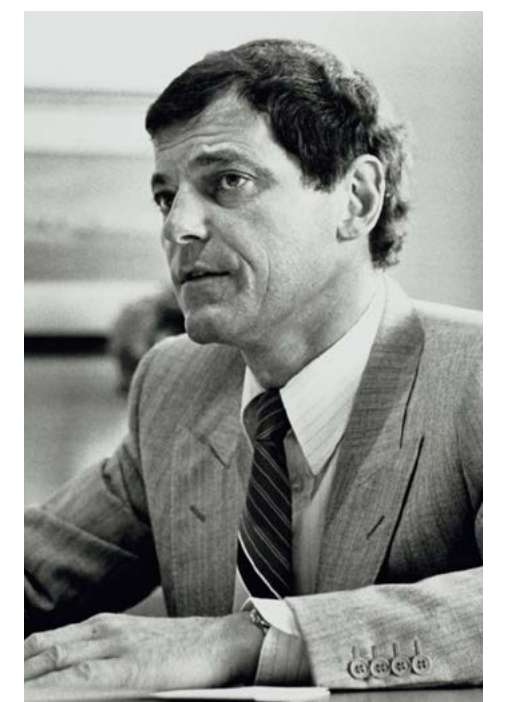
These jewels of the early seventeenth century were glimpsed for only a few precious minutes, but they had impressed themselves deeply onto Thierry's 6-year-old mind. "I remember them very well. They were beautiful. It's also one of my first memories with my dad. He allowed me to open the drawer, but he didn't let me touch the pieces. I still remember the smell, the red lining, and those blue pocket watches."

In one sense, it is a common memory that Thierry shares with millions, that of



Opposite: in this 2009 photograph taken in Plan-les-Ouates at the manufacture, Mr. Stern looks down at his son, Thierry, who was to succeed him as the president of Patek Philippe that year. Left: three generations of the Stern family are shown here, with Thierry (front), Henri (center), and Philippe (back). Watchmaking knowledge has been relayed through the generations of

this family-run company for decades. Above: Philippe Stern's competitive streak made him the champion at the Bol d'Or race seven times between 1977 and 1992 with his multihull boats, each named *Altaïr*. Right: Philippe Stern ran the business from its former headquarters on the rue du Rhône. On his watch, the building was redesigned as part of the Geneva Salons in 2006



PHOTOGRAPHS: JASON BELL, JACQUES-HENRI ADDOR

a son visiting a father at work, but it was also a personally momentous one. “After that day I told him I wanted to make watches. He didn’t push me, but he always told me, ‘We will see, you have plenty of time to decide.’ But I never changed my mind.”

When Thierry was slightly older, the headquarters on the rue du Rhône became something of a playground. “I was maybe 10 years old; all the assistants were giving me candy, and I loved riding the old elevator. It was lovely, all made of wood, with a beautiful gate. There was a meeting room where you could almost see through the floorboards into the shop, and you could hear everything that was said on the shop floor. I would run around the floors, and I was always impressed to see, for example, Mr. Buchs, a very serious man who worked with my dad for a long time; Mr. Banbery, who did so much to build up the museum collection; and my father and grandfather, whose offices adjoined. A door connected their rooms; one smelled of pipe tobacco, the other of cigarettes.”

Out of the office, Henri Stern was the more gregarious of the two men. “I remember lunches on the lake at my grandfather’s place with many, many people. That is where I really started to feel part of the Patek Philippe family, being a kid and

watching all those guys together. Everyone knew each other, as there were mainly family watch businesses then. Every summer my grandfather hosted a party, a huge one, and everybody was there, including my dad. It was the kind of lunch that when it starts, you don’t know when it’ll finish. I can remember there being a large tent with a big barbecue and a huge table.”

Some fond memories, like those of his grandfather’s barbecues, are impressionistic,

THERE IS A POIGNANCY ABOUT THE MOMENT AT WHICH A FATHER TRANSFERS TO HIS SON HIS LIFE’S WORK

composite recollections of events that took place regularly during Thierry’s childhood, and yet others spring from his memory with the crispness of heightened reality.

“The most important moment, certainly, for my father and for my family came when I was about 12 years old and my sister Christine was a little older. It was dinner time. My dad said, ‘Listen, I have to talk to you because I just took a huge risk. I believe this is going to work, but you have to know that if something happens, you may be in

trouble.’ He said that he had taken a big loan to buy back shares and save Patek Philippe. I didn’t know exactly what the circumstances were, but he was nervous. As a kid you have images that stay in your mind. I remember his face. I also remember the dishes, the plates, the table, everything. I knew it was a very important moment. But what was beautiful was that a handful of years later we had the same dinner, at the same table, set out in the very same arrangement. And that’s when he said, ‘Now we are safe.’ He had acquired Patek Philippe and reimbursed all the loans.”

The future of the company secured, Philippe Stern could go on to plan the triumphant 150th anniversary in 1989. “The pieces that we launched in ’89 and the Calibre 89 made a point,” Thierry says. “When he brought out the collection, he was saying, ‘Now we are the finest watchmaker in the world, and we are going to stay that way.’”

First as son and heir, now as *paterfamilias* and president, Thierry has played his part in executing his father’s vision, even when it came to replacing him. And in recalling that day, the respect that he has for his father’s decision is evident.

The transfer of the company from one generation to the next had been carried out informally at the family home when



Left: this 35 mm watch, made from a 1913 US\$10 coin, has a yellow gold dial with Breguet numerals. The button in the caseband at five o’clock unlatches the lid to reveal the watch, but when closed, the piece looks just like the original coin. This watch holds particular meaning for Thierry Stern as Philippe Stern gave it to him to signify it was time for him to succeed as president of the company. Right: the Star Caliber 2000, held here by Philippe Stern, was released to mark the new millennium. The timepiece is made from 1,118 parts, features a moving celestial chart, and took eight years to develop



PHOTOGRAPHS: JOEL STANS / JOHN SWANNELL / CAMERA PRESS / GRAZIANO VILLA



Above: Philippe and Thierry Stern stand in front of the Plan-les-Ouates building in 2008. The construction project, finished in 1996, expressed Philippe Stern’s vision to bring the entire manufacture under one roof. Behind the Sterns is the *Spiral* sculpture, a 270-ft-long steel loop that resembles a balance spring. Left: Philippe and Thierry Stern, pictured with an architect’s model of the new Plan-les-Ouates building, which opened in 2020

Philippe Stern had symbolically tossed his son a coin – not any old coin, but a gold US\$10 piece from 1913 into which was set a miniature Patek Philippe timepiece (see opposite). It was this coin watch that Thierry had played with as a child and was once thought to have been lost. Now newly restored, the watch signified that Thierry was to be the next president of the company.

After that came the official transfer. It was, Thierry recalls, a moment of magnitude captured within a simple act. “We just sat down and had to sign a few papers. Of course, he was happy that I would take over, but he was losing something, too. It wasn’t a happy day. But it was not a sad day either.” Both wrapped in their thoughts, there is a poignancy about the moment at which, with a few pen strokes, a father transfers to his son his life’s work, the accumulation of over one-and-a-half centuries of innovation, tradition, endeavor, and creativity.

It was a point of change. The generation of advisers with whom Philippe Stern had surrounded himself had retired. “He was happy that I was there, but all his very close team was gone. It marked a change.” Thierry pauses reflectively. “I will have to face the same in the future, but that’s part of life.”

As it happened, Philippe Stern was too shrewd and too attached to Patek Philippe to walk away from his life’s work altogether at this time. “Of course, he was still there helping me. He didn’t leave just like that. It was a very smooth takeover.”

Thierry was confident of his father’s track record of precise timing: projects such as the Nautilus, Calibre 89, Star Caliber 2000, Patek Philippe Museum, the new Salons at the former HQ on the rue du Rhône, and Plan-les-Ouates had all been introduced at exactly the right time to drive the house of the Calatrava cross to ever more commanding heights. And with that same innate, unerring sense of timing, Mr. Stern knew that Thierry’s hour had come.

“For a few years, it was not easy, because I really enjoy being with him,” says Thierry. “There are times now when I do feel a little bit alone.” But Thierry also feels that he has inherited qualities that equip him to helm Patek Philippe. “Times are different, and I’m different. I have the creativity of my grandfather...and maybe I’m quite stubborn, like my dad. I think that’s a good mix.” ♦