

Equipping pockets for **125 years**



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Ibach in Canton Schwyz is home to the Victorinox factory

When Karl Elsener founded his cutlery workshop in the small town of Ibach in 1884, he opened the first chapter of an ongoing success story that has defied challenges including competition from German mass-production, two World Wars, and unparalleled social and economic change in Europe. Join *Swiss News* as we celebrate 125 years of Victorinox: creator of a Swiss icon and a true design classic.

By Matthew Beattie | They are essential for every outdoor person. They have been the difference between life and death in some of the most inhospitable places on the planet. They have even seen action in space. But one doesn't need to have wrestled bears in the woods or fought frostbite on a windblown mountaintop to appreciate the Swiss Army Knife.

With limited financial means, but the motivation to create jobs in Switzerland at a time of mass poverty and unemployment, Karl Elsener founded the Swiss Cutler's Association in 1891. Through this cooperation, he delivered the first Soldier's

Knives to the Swiss army later that year. These basic knives were intended for the ordinary rank and file troops and featured three other tools, including a punch, screwdriver and tin opener.

Shortly after, he developed a knife featuring six tools. In addition to the tools making up the Soldier's Knife, it also included a corkscrew and a second blade. More elegant than the Soldier's Knife, it became known as the Swiss Officer's and Sport Knife – and it also became an instant success. This model later became known as the Original Swiss Army Knife.

Victorinox pocket knives have been

supplying the Swiss army, as well as soldiers and civilians around the world, ever since. And they're immediately identifiable as Victorinox's, thanks to the cross and shield emblem Elsener chose to distinguish them from fakes in 1909.

A real-life MacGyver

Douglas MacIver, an engineer from the Portland, Oregon in the United States, owes his life to the humble Swiss Army Knife. In a letter he wrote to Victorinox, he recounts how on the night of December 3, 1992 he used his "Swiss Champ" knife to free himself from the lift of a four-

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storey building. As he descended in the lift, the elderly lift motor began to over-heat, starting a fire in the lift shaft.

“As I was travelling ... it began to slow down and fill with smoke,” he wrote. “A few seconds later it came to an abrupt halt ... I was alone and trapped. The lift continued to fill with smoke.”

With a dwindling air supply and no sign of rescue, MacIver remembered the knife he always carried. He used it to remove the bolts securing the door and was able to free himself from the lift for an eventual rescue by the fire brigade.

MacIver's story and name bore such remarkable similarity to the situations encountered by the protagonist of the hit U.S. TV series *MacGyver*, the media quickly picked up on the story. For a

Symbols of faith

Today, Victorinox offers over 360 pocket knife and multi-tool models, ranging from key chains and the familiar soldier's knife models to specialist lockable-blade jack knives for craftspeople. The company produces 60,000 pocket knives and tools each day, and 13 million every year, with over 90 per cent of its products intended for export.

The knives enjoy huge popularity in the United States and Europe; however with subsidiaries in China and India, Victorinox also clearly recognises the importance of emerging markets.

The brand enjoys particular popularity in India, where Swiss Army Knives are known as MacGyvers in reverence to the role they played in the U.S. TV series. In

“We see ourselves as a brand which stands [not only] for high quality and functionality, but for reliance and confidence as well,” Elsener says.

Company founder Karl Elsener established the brand after the death of his mother Victoria in 1909, by naming the company in her honour. When stainless steel – also known as “inox” – was invented in 1921, Elsener combined it with “Victoria” to create the Victorinox brand name so famous today.

From its humble workshop origins, the Victorinox factory in Ibach is now the largest employer in Canton Schwyz, employing some 900 people, 750 of whom work in production. Many employees have been with Victorinox for 20 and even 30 years.



Evolution from the original Soldier's Knife ...



... to the Officer's and Sport Knife ...



... to a new incarnation with a USB stick

time, Douglas MacIver became a local celebrity.

In the weeks following the incident, sales of Swiss Army Knives rocketed across Portland, as local suppliers were swamped with buyers keen to possess their very own “lift-escape knife”.

Stories like MacIver's are not unusual. Many owners of Victorinox's Swiss Army Knives see their pocket knife as more than just a knife: a companion to be called into service at a moment's notice, whatever the challenge. The design may have evolved over the years, but the pocket knife's versatility and reliability has not changed in more than a century.

2004, Victorinox even launched a range of ceremonial knives, or *Kirpans*, for the country's Sikh community. Devout Sikhs are required to carry a *Kirpan* at all times.

Family values and social responsibility

Despite the company's growth in terms of financial success and the wealth of products it produces, the Canton Schwyz company continues to remain true to the principles of its founder, Karl Elsener.

It also remains a family-run company. Current chief executive officer and president is Carl Elsener Jr., the fourth generation of the Elsener family to run the company.

“Our customers and employees, along with the quality of our products, are the prime factors behind our entrepreneurial thinking. Key to our long-term success, however, are also Christian values, such as honesty, trustworthiness and modesty,” says Elsener.

The unique structure of the company – 10 per cent of its stock is held by the family, and the remaining 90 per cent is held by the Victorinox Foundation – secures it from a takeover. This strategy has ensured the survival and continued success of Victorinox and its employees, despite the various crises presented by the global economy over the years.

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Inspiring loyalty

Even with the advantage of being able to call upon experiences from the company's long history, Elsener explains the current economic climate has presented its own challenge.

"We were also surprised at Victorinox by the speed and severity of the current economic crisis in the financial markets. Our customers around the world are uncertain and they have become more cautious in what they order. We have not seen any signs of recovery for the second half of the year," he adds.

The financial crises of both 1936 and the early 1970s had a massive impact on the Swiss economy, with many people out of work. In spite of this, Victorinox's business strategy allowed the company to emerge in both cases without making redundancies. "As in the past, we will counter the cycle by investing," says Elsener.

The strategy of remaining loyal to existing employees and offering apprenticeships to future generations of employees has also served Victorinox well. It ensures the skills and knowledge of the workforce remain strong, and also inspires a fierce sense of company loyalty among employees.

One such example is Hans Peter Klötzli – or HP as he is known to the world – a man who knows his knives. The 63-year-old craftsman apprenticed with Victorinox between 1962 and 1966. When he concluded his apprenticeship, Klötzli had a family business to take over. He now runs the family knife business that can trace its roots back to 1846, and few would argue that his education with Victorinox hasn't served him well over the years: a point best illustrated through the quality of the knives he produces in his own workshop.

His small shop on the historic Hohen-gasse in Bern stocks some of the finest knives in the world. Perhaps the greatest affirmation of Klötzli's continued faith in Victorinox is that his selection includes a vast and impressive range of Victorinox products. Klötzli stocks everything from miniature key ring-mounted knives, retailing for around SFr 15, to Victorinox flagship models, which can retail for well in excess of SFr 100.

"Probably the biggest seller for us in the Victorinox range is the 'Swiss Champ' knife," Klötzli informs me, "although their clear-handled knives are also very popular. We have [also] recently seen a growth in the popularity of Wenger knives."

Originally a competitor and co-supplier of knives to the Swiss army, Jura-based Wenger was bought by Victorinox in 2005.

Company founder Karl Elsener



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CEO Carl Elsener Jr.



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Klötzli doesn't just sell knives. He is also the great-grandson of Friedrich Ernst Klötzli – the man who co-founded the Swiss Cutler's Federation with Victorinox's Karl Elsener in 1891. HP Klötzli is now the Swiss Cutler's Federation's president.

Development and diversification

Recent years have seen Victorinox develop and expand its range of products. The brand now includes luxury watches as well as perfumes, luggage and a fashion la-

to success.

"We want to continue surprising our customers with innovative and outstanding quality products," he says. "The uniqueness of the original Swiss Army Knife should be passed on to all of our products and areas of business."

Cutting-edge technology

The world has changed almost beyond recognition since Karl Elsener produced the first Swiss Army Knife. It has seen the first aeroplane fly and the first man walk

and technological development has been presented with a tool to do the job.

If we ever manage a space mission to Mars, we can be sure the astronauts will be carrying a little piece of Switzerland in their pockets in the form of a Victorinox knife. Whatever the future holds, it will undoubtedly always have a place for the Swiss Army Knife.

Practical application

As a footnote, I would like to add a personal anecdote about the Swiss Army



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Innovations like flashlights, laser pointers and clear handles have helped Victorinox change with the times

bel ranging from coats and outdoor wear, to leisure wear. Although some purists may argue that such developments are a step too far, diversification is key to fulfilling the huge potential of the brand and continued success of the company.

"We are focusing on sustained growth and see potential in all of our product categories. We are particularly excited about how our fragrances and fashion lines will develop," says Elsener.

With the brand's expansion into uncharted waters, Elsener remains committed to the ethos that has led his company

on the moon. It has seen the industrial revolution and the computer revolution. Throughout this innovative and often turbulent period in history, Victorinox has been quietly working away at developing and evolving its products to meet each new challenge.

Blades and hand-tools have been augmented with USB sticks and laser pointers. From the American GIs stationed in Europe after World War II, to the NASA astronauts who have carried Swiss Army Knives on countless space missions as part of their standard kit, each new gener-

Knife coming to the rescue.

On August 8, 2009, an unnamed *Swiss News* journalist attempted to defy his genetic ineptitude for jobs around the house and fit a door-trim to the front of his new dishwasher. It was not an unmitigated success.

After much blood, swearing and exhausting a toolbox full of hammers, a visiting British houseguest shoved him out of the way and finished the job in five minutes flat. He did it with the help of a souvenir from his visit to Switzerland – a shiny, new Victorinox "Swiss Champ" knife ...