

Innovative [traditional]

The three decades of history of Erler+Pless GmbH of Hamburg

Authors: Ludwig Pless and his son Simon Pless.

To give you an idea of who we are ... by Ludwig Pless

The story of a one-man backyard business that developed into one of German's major photo labs - do you really want to know? I don't really like writing this since you, the client, and your needs are at the centre of our efforts and not the company. The result is that even our business associates and long-term clients know very little about us. Perhaps that's a good reason for telling the story.

In 1964 Horst Pieter Erler, a professional photographer, returned to Hamburg. He wanted to settle in the city and intended opening a photographic lab in Hamburg's borough of Bergedorf. His friend Lorenz Pless, a professional industrial manager, was happy to help him deal with the paperwork after hours. On 25 October 1964 the company of Erler+Pless was entered in the Hamburg Commercial Register.

Many companies, advertising agencies, graphic artists and photographers soon came to know Erler+Pless as a good photo lab. The 15 sqm backyard soon became too small for Erler and his three employees. Larger premises were needed. The company therefore moved to Hamburg's borough of St. Georg, initially in 1969 to the Lindensstrasse and in 1973 to premises twice the size in the Bockmannstrasse nearby.

In 1975 I became a partner in, and financial director of, the partnership. As a graduate in business management I was well aware there was plenty of reserve in the partnership yet to be exploited. So we started making use of all those reserves by restructuring, training the staff, introducing efficient labour practices and modernising the machinery. We also invested in marketing by improving sales and customer service, using mailing drops and sending out a newsletter and spoiling our customers with the first pickup service in the industry. All our efforts were crowned with success and our turnover soon began to climb steeply. Our developing machines often hummed busily for ten hours and more daily to deal with the work flooding in.

In 1977 our lab had 25 staff and my brother Lorenz joined as managing partner. His strengths were technology and a reliable nose for new trends and growth markets.

Our abilities complemented one another very well. Our market success reflected this. By this time we had about a thousand clients all over Germany and 65 staff. Our technical equipment had expanded and improved to meet demand. In the end we had eight large developing machines, eight horizontal and fourteen vertical enlargers, duplicators, laser and overhead foil copiers, EBV and Mac workplaces, three laminating presses, cooling rooms, workshops, chemical rooms, various daylight rooms, office and a lot more.

Our range of goods and services expanded too. Erler+Pless had long since become an all-rounder offering full service from photography via duplication to printing, from large slides on railway stations and airports to large photos at exhibitions and fairs.

My two sons Lewis and Simon grew up familiar with all this. They often spent their time after school in our labs. Some employees who now work for my sons introduced them to the mysteries of photo lab work a couple of decades ago. It all goes to make for an unusually good working atmosphere and very personal relationships between management and staff. These close relationships and informal working atmosphere make for excellent commitment at all levels.

Horst Pieter Erler retired in 1988. He sold his shares to my brother and I. This was further motivation for us to restructure the partnership for success. We also had to arrange the handover to the next generation in good time.

Fortunately my two sons were very well qualified and able to take over after gaining professional experience elsewhere. They were very keen to take over and at the right age to tackle the pending challenges. So the handover was smooth and made in good time to greet the new technology of the digital age.

[Here's the son .. by Simon Pless](#)

No one can claim we weren't prepared. Okay, Ludwig is our father, but in my early twenties I wasn't keen on making a career out of series photos. The exciting world of advertising was something quite different. I very sensibly took the opportunity of working for a Hamburg advertising agency when it came.

We've now been managing partners for over seven years and I sometimes feel this industry is even more interesting than advertising. Perhaps because we're part of the latter anyway. The boundaries between agencies and media services contractors seem to be getting more and more vague.

When I decided to follow in my father's footsteps in 1989 my brother Lewis was already in the throes of building up a light box range as a logical and sales-promoting extension of our range of large slides. Lewis was and is our sales talent. The relationship is like that between my father and his brother - two people with complementary abilities.

The litho companies were already working with large EBV systems at the time. We had a photo lab and earned most of our money from large photos. So my uncle thought it quite natural to first introduce me to the mysteries of photographic chemistry. Silver halogenide, graduations, Newton rings, black shield effects – some of it was very new. Major enlargements, lamination, desilvering and recycling - there was a lot to learn - right down to the laws of algae growth in developing machines.

We wanted to get in on the EBV age as soon as possible, of course. . But digital picture resolution needed to be large enough to permit 30x or 40x enlargement.

The Kodak EBV „Premier“ system was just what we wanted. First-class and a great help in mastering complex photographic composing and colour retouching tasks. The only snag was the price of a million Marks a time. That was way over the petty cash budget. My uncle considered digital pictures an unstoppable trend, however. So we bit the bullet and paid up. That made us the first German photo lab to have this system.

Our clients were delighted. Freely combining pictures, creating realistic photos - what a prospect. We soon had so many orders flooding in that we had to set up a second EBV workplace for another quarter of a million. Not long afterwards we found we had a prosperous Digital Image Centre department.

We knew from the start that our EBV system couldn't remain a standalone. Even though only a few clients initially sent us text, logo and similar data for integration in illustrations or layouts we knew this would change and we needed to be ready.

Kodak offered us an interface after a while. This, however, could only deal with Macintosh data. I wanted a full service and hence an interface able to deal with text and logos. It took ages to find a supplier able to solve the problem. The answer was always, „You can't, it's impossible“. In the end I found a company in the US offering a software module that exactly met our specifications. Now we could get our slide service up and running. Our clients loved it.

German reunification affected us too - our horizontal enlarger staff did a lot of overtime. Lots of large photos for the expanding East German market were needed.

The technological benchmarks in graphics processing are set in the US. That's why I regularly visit the country to take a look at their photo labs. In 1993 I discovered a Xerox electrostatic printer for large colour formats. These prints in such excellent quality seemed to me an excellent addition to our range. So the next investment came round. The first orders for it flowed in before the machinery was installed.

Demand dictated increasing the number of Mac workplaces, recruiting more staff, starting a second shift and finally buying faster computers. The company thus added another department. In the interim the electrostatic printer had to be replaced with a newer model. Next door there's an inkjet printer and a powerful scanner for the Mac.

We'd become a digital printing outfit and not just a photo lab. Digital printing - ought we to really go for it? I discussed this with my friend Henning Siegmund, whom I've known from childhood. He was the ideal partner for this as a printing expert. Henning was very keen.

To get to know the market we started off with a mail drop offering our clients four different digital printing technologies. Feedback was good and the first orders came in promptly. We were still reliant on contractors and got to know the strengths and weaknesses of each procedure.

In mid-1996 we decided to enter the digital offset printing business ourselves together with the Hamburg Alphabetdruckformdienst GmbH litho and typesetting company, Henning's old employer. On 24 October 1996 we founded a mutual subsidiary - Hamburger Digitaldruck GmbH. Our dowry - a brand new Heidelberg Quickmaster DI.

Another module in creating a single-source company for our clients. And possibly another step away from being just a photo lab toward becoming a media services company. Perhaps. Who can give a definite answer in these days of rapidly changing technologies and markets?

We've nevertheless always adhered to our company's basic philosophy. That is that above all the clients and their needs are our primary concerns. We see ourselves as a service supplier and not as an industrial or trade outfit. We also adhere to Hamburg's long mercantile traditions. These emphasise reliability, honesty and legality. Our clients can always rely on it. Always.