

Fritz Sauter, Swiss Entrepreneur

Fritz Sauter (* July 17, 1877 in Grindelwald, Canton of Bern; + January 26, 1949 in Basel) was a Swiss entrepreneur.

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Fritz Sauter ca. 1895



ca. 1910



ca. 1930



ca. 1947

Life

Fritz Sauter was the son of the tanner Jakob Sauter (1844-1916) and his wife Susanna, née Bohren (1843-1910). His parents operated a village tannery and a small mountain farm in Grindelwald. Of his three siblings, only his sister Ida, who was two years older, reached adulthood. In 1914, Sauter married Rosalie, née Bernet (1884-1965), who also came from Grindelwald. The marriage produced two daughters: Margaretha (1915-2003) and Susanna (1916-2015). The former later married the Basel ophthalmologist Roland Brückner, while the latter married the manufacturer Walter Merker from Baden (Canton of Aargau).

After seven years of primary school and two years of secondary school in Grindelwald, Sauter trained as an electrical and mechanical engineer at the technical college in Burgdorf. From 1898 to 1910 he worked for Brown Boveri & Cie. AG (BBC) in Baden - initially in the winding department, then in the development department, and from 1899 onward as a commissioning engineer.

This position took him almost constantly throughout Switzerland and abroad, where steam turbine generators manufactured by BBC were installed. His longest stay abroad lasted from mid-1906 until February 1907 in Chile, where he installed an 800-kW generator for Santiago's municipal tramway system. Nevertheless, Sauter did not regard this work as his true vocation. He repeatedly applied to other companies for positions as plant or factory manager.

In Baden he became friends with the engineer Gottfried Grossen, who was four years older than him. After Grossen became director of the Aarau Electricity Works, he introduced Sauter to electric time switches. According to Grossen's experience, the products then available on the market had considerable shortcomings. He provided Sauter with various devices so that Sauter could examine their technology and weaknesses. From 1908 onward, Sauter devoted himself intensively to the idea of a perfect time switch.

In mid-1910, Sauter resigned from BBC and returned to his parents' home in Grindelwald to establish himself as an inventor and manufacturer of a perfect time switch. When production began in 1912, he employed his future brother-in-law Christian Bernet (1890-1979). By September 1912, he was already able to sell the first prototype units. The device automatically switched electrical

systems - particularly street and outdoor lighting - on and off according to the seasonally changing evening and morning hours. The controls were mechanically programmable.

Initially, Sauter purchased the clockworks used in his devices from various clock manufacturers. However, after the first commercial success of his superior product, competitors pressured his suppliers. Eventually they boycotted him and stopped supplying clock mechanisms - with the exception of the Angenstein clock factory near Basel. As a result, Sauter became completely dependent on this single supplier.

From January 1914 onward, Sauter was forced to work under exploitative conditions as plant manager at the Angenstein clock factory. His inventions had to be marketed under the factory's name, future developments became the property of the employer, and a two-year non-compete clause would have prevented him from marketing his own products after leaving the company. In return, he received clockworks and a production facility for his time switches. In practice, he lost his independence.

This situation did not last long. After the outbreak of the First World War at the end of July 1914, the clock factory suspended operations and dismissed all employees. Sauter was thereby released from all obligations.

After Sauter and most of the servicemen returned from the military to civilian life, Sauter was able to resume production of his product in early 1915 on the premises and with the staff of the wall clock factory - this time without restrictions on his independence. Due to the wartime closure of borders to German products, demand for his time switches increased significantly.

In January 1916, Sauter relocated his business to rented premises in Basel's St. Alban district. His most important customer at the time was the Basel Electricity Works (today IWB). Rudolf Gengenbacher, a senior employee of the utility, was so impressed by Sauter's abilities that he and his family invested financially in Sauter's business - initially through a limited partnership and later through shareholdings.

Establishment of the Company

In 1916, Sauter received a commission from the Basel Electricity Works to develop a water heater. Due to the energy shortage during the First World War, surplus nighttime electricity was intended to be used for heating water. From 1917 onward, his design, marketed under the brand name "Cumulus," first conquered the Swiss market and later international markets as well. In France, "Cumulus" even became a generic term for boilers.

At Sauter's lifetime, numerous additional products were introduced, including thermostats, warming cabinets, water distillers, small steam boilers, relays, remote switches, and solenoid and motorized valves. During the Second World War, household appliances and military searchlights for air defense were also produced.

In spring 1917, Sauter purchased a plot of approximately 9,000 square meters north of Basel's Badischer Bahnhof railway station. Initially, he required only a small part of it for a two-story factory building into which the company moved in 1919. The remaining land was gradually developed and fully utilized for operations by 1965.

The rapid expansion of the company required additional equity capital. Therefore, at the end of 1920, Sauter transformed the company into the joint-stock corporation "*Fr. Sauter A.G. Fabrik elektrischer Apparate.*" He recruited the industrialist Alexander Clavel (1881-1973) as chairman of the board, a position Clavel held for 36 years.

In 1922, Sauter hired the talented businessman Paul Riesen (1894-1957) as commercial director. After Sauter's death, Riesen managed the company until 1954. Christian Bernet also assumed leadership responsibilities within the business.

During the 1920s, the company expanded its sales network throughout Europe. Subsidiaries were first established in France and Germany: in 1923 the boiler factory *Société pour l'exploitation des Procédés Sauter Sàrl*, and in 1925 the *Cumulus-Werke GmbH* in Freiburg im Breisgau whose first managing director was Willi Becker. Becker maintained a friendly relationship with Sauter until the latter's death. The company was renamed later "*Sauter-Cumulus GmbH*."

In 1927, Sauter introduced an occupational pension plan for his employees that was half a century ahead of its time. In some respects it even exceeded the requirements later established by Switzerland's BVG pension law of 1982 (retirement pensions of 60% of the final salary, with two-thirds of the financing borne by the employer and one-third by the employee).

His caring treatment of employees earned him the internal nickname "Papa Sauter." He regarded the company as a large family and integrated many relatives and longtime associates into management roles. This family-oriented corporate culture led to an extraordinary number of employees celebrating 50 years of service. The most prominent jubilee celebrant was Willy Langbein, who began his apprenticeship at Sauter in 1932 and, as head of the apprentice workshop from 1945 to 1982, trained more than 700 young people to become professionals.

In 1931/32, Sauter replaced the old family home in Grindelwald with the modern chalet "Auf der Gerbi." There he welcomed business partners in a warm and familiar atmosphere. During the Second World War, the chalet also served as a storage site for important business records and temporarily as an alternative management headquarters.

From the founding of the corporation until Sauter's death, the company's inflation-adjusted revenue increased tenfold.

Later, Sauter was appointed to leading bodies such as the Basel Chamber of Commerce, the Swiss Mustermesse trade fair, the Basel Employers' Association, and the Employers' Association of the Swiss Metal and Watch Industry.

His entrepreneurial success was based not only on technical talent but also on industrial foresight and natural authority. This is illustrated by a letter from Basel finance director Prof. Carl Ludwig dated February 16, 1943, in which he thanked Sauter for a company presentation and emphasized the importance of private initiative in the economy:

It has rarely been so clear to me as it is today what private initiative means in the economy. [...] When one hears such an account, one feels almost wretched - wretched because one then realizes how little is fundamentally achieved by those who have let themselves be fitted into some administration, even in a so-called leadership position.

On the occasion of his 70th birthday, the Faculty of Philosophy and History of the University of Basel awarded him an honorary doctorate in July 1947. The laudation praised him as a man who had developed electrical apparatus with exceptional skill and who had rendered great service to the public through his successful factory.

To celebrate his 70th birthday, Sauter invited all employees that same year on an excursion to the Rütli Meadow on Lake Lucerne.

Fritz Sauter died of a heart attack in Basel on January 26, 1949. Although he spent much of his life in Basel, he always remained deeply connected to Grindelwald and was buried there, as well as later on his wife Rosa who died in 1965.

Development of the Company after Sauter's Death

From 1970 onward, the company shifted its focus to building automation, namely systems for the energy-efficient comfort control of large buildings. An important contribution was made by Andreas Brückner, Fritz Sauter's grandson and then head of development. In 1990, the words "*Factory for Electrical Apparatus*" were removed from the company name; thereafter it was known simply as "*Fr. Sauter AG.*"

From 2000 onward, *technical facility management* was added as another business division, due to the initiative of the Sauter employee Werner Ottilinger in Augsburg. Hardware manufacturing became increasingly less important, while software development and services gained significance. Due to the strong Swiss franc, the company relocated its manufacturing facilities to Germany in 2016. Since 2017, accounting has been conducted in Euros. Headquarters, development, logistics, marketing, and Swiss sales remained in Basel.

Further information on the company's history can be found in the book "*Aus eigener Kraft*" (English translation "*On His Own Strength*") and in the Wikipedia article on Sauter AG. Information on current business activities is available on the [homepage of Fr. Sauter AG](#).

Basel, February 2024

Christian Brückner