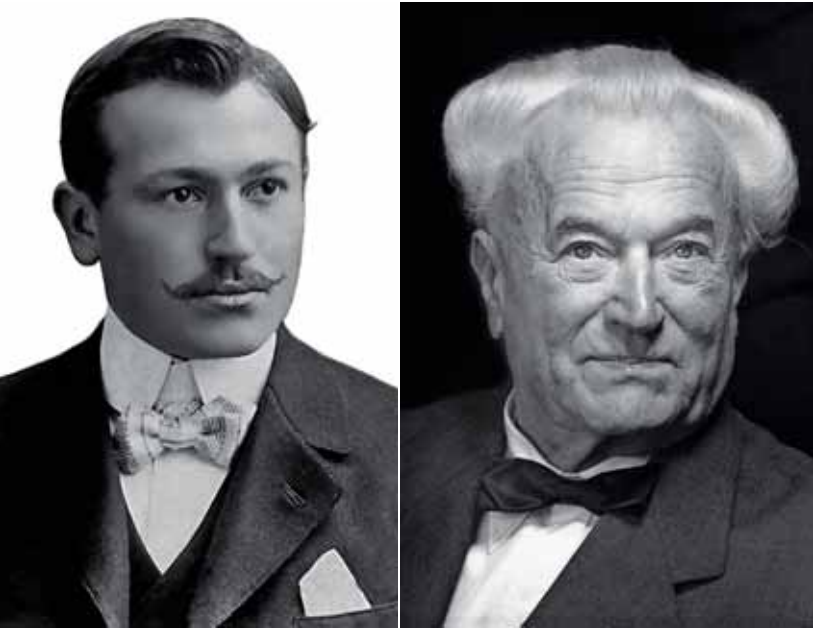


## The real Mr **Wilsdorf**



Hans Wilsdorf, the clock, and the English church in Geneva.

Alan Downing

Rolex's legendary secrecy and its mysterious involvement with an old church clock throw new light on the firm's enigmatic founder, Hans Eberhard Wilhelm Wilsdorf (1881-1960). Although usually portrayed as one of Geneva's greatest citizens, as a philanthropist and the genius behind the lucrative selfwinding waterproof wristwatch, information about his private life is scarce and often contradictory, and he remains an elusive figure.

The old clock looks out onto the Rue du Mont Blanc in central Geneva from the tower of the English church, a listed monument and a little corner of Victorian England built in 1853. It is a fine example of the turret clocks produced at Morez in the French Jura, across the border from Saint Cergue. This former clockmaking centre once built the public clocks that were symbols of civic pride in the latter half of the 19th century. As such they were built to last for centuries. The Bailly-Comte firm that made the English church clock in 1866 was a leading supplier of robust turret clocks to Switzerland and eastern France. By then the Swiss had largely given up making such clocks to concentrate on watches.

**The man from Rolex.** The clock has no bell, so it goes largely un-noticed, even by most of the congregation. The church authorities knew little about it. Yet no clock can tick away for 147 years without being wound, set and maintained. The church secretary finally remembered some vital information: "A man from Rolex comes to wind the clock every Wednesday morning."

The man from Rolex, Mr Antonio Garcia, of the Rolex Services Généraux department tasked with this duty, revealed that this service was free and exclusive to the English church and had been going on since well before his time. He didn't know why, nor did he know anything about clocks; his orders were simply to wind, set and oil it.

Now it would be futile to ask the Rolex Communication & Image Division the most benign question like "Why does Rolex look after the English church clock and since when?" without having a fair idea of the answer. The church records revealed that it had stopped paying a clock-winder in 1940. Rolex had presumably been winding the clock for more than 70 years – a human lifetime and half that of

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the clock. At that time, the benefactor could only have been Mr Hans Wilsdorf himself.

But why should this Bavarian-born Genevese watch entrepreneur have decided to take care of an old French clock in an English church in the midst of a war against his homeland?

“We regret to inform you that our communication... does not include family or private matters,” came the response from Rolex. It would be equally futile to argue that it can hardly be a family matter because the Wilsdorfs died childless more than half a century ago, or to ask how it could be a private matter if the church, not Rolex, actually owns the clock.

Fortuitously, the organisation that owns Rolex, the once-secretive Wilsdorf Foundation, has recently ventured on a more open communications policy. No, winding the English church clock is not among the Foundation’s many benevolent actions, it said. It must be Rolex. “I’ll find out and let you know,” volunteered the helpful secretary.

The Foundation reported back that Hans Wilsdorf had indeed decreed that the clock of the English

church be kept in good working order. Wilsdorf had in fact been a member of the English church in Geneva, the Foundation secretary explained. “It is in keeping with Hans Wilsdorf’s personal wishes that the English church clock is maintained by Rolex.”

“For how long?”

“For ever, I suppose.”

### **The English industrialist who founded Rolex.**

Rolex’s one page official biography of its founder dismisses Wilsdorf’s life in four lines: born in Bavaria in 1881, moved straight into the world of Swiss watch-making, started selling watches from London in 1905 and invented the name Rolex in 1908. The rest extols the company he founded and the products it makes. What Hans Eberhard Wilhelm Wilsdorf said – and omitted to say – about himself are more revealing. In 1946, he published an autobiographical note in a company book called *Vade Mecum*. It starts: “I was born on March 22, 1881, of Protestant parents, the second son of a family of three. My mother’s early death was soon followed by that of my father and, at the age of twelve, I was an orphan.”

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The Rolex name occurred to Hans Wilsdorf while he was travelling on a horse-drawn omnibus along London's Cheapside in 1908.

Although he made his religious background and family details known, Wilsdorf never mentioned where he was born and grew up. It was in fact in Roman Catholic Bavaria of bourgeois parents, in the town of Kulmbach, today known for its beer, *Bratwurst* and *Schloss*. His uncles sent him to a good boarding school where he became proficient at languages. After working for a watch exporter in Switzerland and doing his military service in Germany, he moved to London in 1903. In 1905 he set up his first watch company, Wilsdorf & Davis, with the financial help of Alfred James Davis about whom virtually nothing is known. He is often mentioned as having married Wilsdorf's younger sister Anna, but he disappears from Rolex's history. The firm imported watch movements from a factory in Biel and exported finished watches all over the Empire. On April 13, 1911 at St. Paul's church in Penge, South London, Wilsdorf married a 29-year-old English secretary, Florence Frances May Crotty, and shortly afterwards became a British citizen. May Wilsdorf died childless in Geneva on April 26, 1944, and her funeral was held at the

English church. Shortly afterwards, Wilsdorf transferred the ownership of the Rolex company to the foundation that bears his name.

World War I must have sorely tested Wilsdorf's loyalties. His older brother, Karl, was fighting for the other side on the Western Front as an officer in a Bavarian sapper regiment<sup>1</sup>. Anti-German feeling and severe wartime customs duties obliged Wilsdorf & Davis to operate from its offices in Biel, and in 1919 Wilsdorf moved to Geneva where he established the Rolex S.A. company.

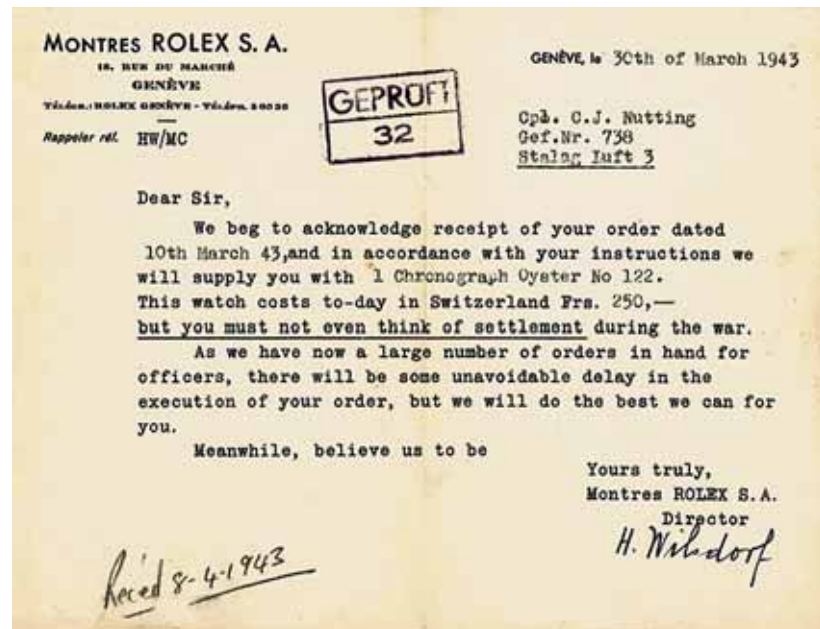
**The captive market<sup>2</sup>.** In World War II, when his adopted country was once again at war with his homeland, Wilsdorf discreetly showed where his sympathies lay with his valuable gesture to the English church. He also abandoned a "Hans

<sup>1</sup> *Bavarian personnel rosters for 1914-1918*

<sup>2</sup> *From A POW Rolex recalls the Great Escape, by Alan Downing. Published by Antiquorum 2007 and on TimeZone.com. Private papers of Clive Nutting (ex POW), including correspondence with Hans Wilsdorf.*

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The gratis invoice sent by Hans Wilsdorf to Clive Nutting who contributed to the “Great Escape” from Stalag Luft III.



Wilsdorf” line of luxury watches, as sounding too Germanic. By 1943, when the tide of battle was turning, Wilsdorf could be more overt in showing his allegiance in a remarkable marketing ploy that illustrated his flair for combining business with good deeds. At the height of the war, when the surrounding Axis had cut off Swiss watchmakers from their main markets, Wilsdorf found a literally captive market on his doorstep – the tens of thousands of allied prisoners of war in camps across the border in Germany. From neutral Switzerland, Wilsdorf staked his watches on an Allied victory in an astonishing offer to captured British officers. Trusting their word to be their bond, he sent them Rolex watches with a gratis invoice and a personal letter: “You must not even think of settlement during the war.” The offer was irresistible and the watches an undoubted morale booster, besides being useful when escaping. More than 3,000 watches were reportedly ordered by British officers in the Oflag VII B POW camp in Bavaria alone. No such offer is reported to have been made to German officers in allied camps.

### The silence of effective communications.

Rolex’s brilliant communications policy of saying nothing ensures that it is the best-known and most talked about watch brand on the planet. The proof is in this story. Rolex’s benevolent action, untainted by any commercial interest and discreetly performed, might not have been made known without its steadfast refusal to confirm or deny any connexion with the English church clock.

As for Hans Wilsdorf, he might have considered himself English and remained a British citizen, but that is conveniently forgotten. Geneva has adopted him and Switzerland claimed him. The empire he founded is the Canton’s biggest employer and the brand he thought up on the top of a horse-drawn omnibus in London’s Cheapside in 1908 is the country’s pride.

Meanwhile, every week, the man from Rolex climbs the 38 steps spiralling narrowly up the church tower to wind and set the clock, as his predecessors have done at least 3,500 times before him, according to the wishes of the real Mr Wilsdorf. ●