THE STORY AS TOLD BY THOSE WHO HAVE LIVED AND ARE LIVING IT

ADIDAS

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Always learning: Adi Dassler with German decathlon and long jump champion Bernd Luther

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EARLY YEARS

ONE MAN'S MISSION

"HE DID ALL SORTS OF SPORTS HIMSELF, HE TRIED OUT THE SHOES, HE HAD A TENNIS COURT BUILT, HE THREW THE JAVELIN, RUNNING, WHATEVER, AND HE ALWAYS USED TO SAY NOTHING BUT THE BEST FOR THE ATHLETE, RATHER THAN FOR THE FIRM, THE BEST PRODUCT FOR SPORTSMEN. HE NEVER WENT TO CAFÉS OR WENT OUT ON THE TOWN. HE JUST WANTED TO DO SPORT, RUNNING IN THE WOODS EARLY SUNDAY, THAT WAS HIS THING. YOU COULD CALL HIM OBSESSED, IN THE POSITIVE SENSE."

FRANZ SCHACHER, FORMER ADIDAS EMPLOYEE AND DASSLER FAMILY FRIEND

Pirmasens is a fairly inauspicious sort of place in south-west Germany, near the border with France. Its steadily declining population lives largely on past glories, clinging tenaciously to its one real claim to fame: shoes.

It was here in this town of less than 50,000 souls that a young man named Adi Dassler learnt his trade and fell in love. The first outcome was intentional but the second was unforeseen. Just 32, Adi had come here in September 1932 fired with a single-minded determination to hone a natural talent for the only thing he was interested in: making sports shoes of exceptional quality.

He was already extraordinarily good at it – he had a successful company up and running back home, employing about 35 people, managed in his absence by his brother – but he had never learnt his vocation formally. He wanted to perfect his natural talent to enable it to expand yet further. It was a somewhat off-beat obsession, but his devotion to sport was such that it had stimulated him to new ideas and inventions. Time would show how those ideas and those inventions would change not only his own life but the lives of generations of people to come.

Adi Dassler was a man on a mission. He knew he could achieve his unprecedented dream. But he did not for a moment imagine that his creations would one day grace the Olympic stadium, Wimbledon, Wembley and every other sports ground, large and small, in every conceivable corner of the world for decades to come. People just did not think that way.

Adi Dassler's shoes had already carried a fellow German to an Olympic gold medal in 1928. There was a growing recognition in the community of world athletes that here was somebody who could help them run faster, jump higher, maybe throw further. He seemed to have discovered a secret: his own. But Adi Dassler was only too well aware that he didn't know it all – yet. He was willing to learn. That was why he was in Pirmasens.

Adi Dassler had done his homework. With several years of enthusiastic shoemaking already behind him, he knew the importance of using best possible lasts for the creation of perfect shoes. The last is the vital piece of wood, meticulously carved and shaped to resemble a foot, on which the shoe itself is subsequently fashioned. It was the basis of the cobbler's art; it held the key to the shoemaker's success. And Adi's insider knowledge had also told him that he could learn a lot from one of the many master shoemakers in the sleepy town not far from the French border. Franz Martz's authority had earned him the local nickname Dr Last, and Adi quickly saw that much of the key to realising his own ambitions lay in perfecting lasts for his own specialist sports shoes.

So he started to learn at the master's knee, asking advice on making lasts for track shoes and football boots. But there was also another attraction in the Martz household in Pestalozzistrasse, and not just Frau Martz's renowned Wiener schnitzels and potato salad: **their teenage daughter Katharina, known as Käthe.** Käthe was a good student and her parents expected her to become a teacher. But the young Käthe and Adi changed each other's lives. The couple soon found excuses to meet, Käthe offering to take her father's lasts to Adi to work on, Adi inviting her to the cinema (although Adi's Swedish flatmate came too), and despite a 17-year age gap, the relationship developed.

Käthe's parents were not so sure, according to her brother, also Franz, who still runs his own business in Pirmasens, making lasts and shoe components for adidas and other smaller manufacturers. "She was so young, but there was no stopping them. Then one day Adi turned up, I think it was a Friday, with a bunch of red roses and we all had to leave the parlour to them and go into the kitchen, and I peeped at them through the keyhole. I didn't see much but I realised something was going on… "

It was. Not long after Adi had finished the two-year shoemaking course and earned his craftsman's diploma within one intensive year, his tutors praising his "exemplary conscientiousness" and his "active interest", he and Käthe married. It was a grey and wet day in March 1934, and brother Rudolf acted as best man. Adi took his bride off to the Alps for a honeymoon and to teach her to ski, a clear indication of things to come, and the newly-weds returned to Adi's home town of Herzogenaurach to begin real life. "He wasn't a great talker," recalls Franz Martz, "he didn't keep on about anything, but he could convince people. He didn't like things too fanciful, he was very straight, he said what he thought. My parents said it was the way that he expressed himself that won them over; they felt they could entrust their daughter to him."

Adi would continue to earn that trust and respect, not only as the head of a growing family but as the man whose professional genius helped write one chapter after another in the history of world sport. A man after his father-in-law's own heart.

If Pirmasens was a bit of a backwater, Herzogenaurach – also known for its shoes, especially its felt slippers – was an even sleepier one. But this was Adi Dassler's home turf, Franconia, the northern part of the state of Bavaria, whose locals are known for their somewhat dry, stubborn nature and are equally stubbornly proud of it.

Adi was born in 1900, the youngest of four children and two years after his brother Rudolf. He soon found the only worthwhile thing to do was to pursue an innate passion for sport. His father, Christoph, had followed the local trade and become an itinerant weaver, travelling to Gera, near Leipzig, where he met and married Pauline Spritula before the weaving trade collapsed and the family returned to Christoph's small home town on the River Aurach, just outside Nürnberg.

While Pauline put bread on the family table by washing and ironing in a little purpose-built scullery annexed to the house they had built in the Am Hirtengraben street, Christoph joined half the local workforce in shoemaking. But he was unconvinced by its prospects and encouraged Adi, slightly above average at school, to be a baker. The youngster had thoughts only for running and jumping and playing in the woods and ponds around their rural home, usually with his friend and soulmate, Fritz Zehlein. Adi was short and stocky, a bundle of muscular energy, and quick on his feet. Time also had to be spent delivering his mother's washing around town; the few pfennigs he picked up in tips were saved towards buying a football, an object of prestige among the village kids.

Leaving school, the young Adi resisted the baking profession above all because of the anti-social hours, but he had little choice other than to follow his father's insistence. He began as an apprentice with the master baker Weiss in Herzogenaurach when only 14 and had to face work at two in the morning.

Time for sport was drastically curtailed, restricted to weekends but all the more intensive for that, until the impending First World War put bread on ration and reduced the baker's hours, too.

Unaggressive by nature, Adi was not cut out for military service, but found himself reluctantly dispatched to the Belgian Front in 1917. He was spared military action, however, and his athletic fitness helped him through to the end of hostilities, when he returned in 1919 with the self-assurance to abandon baking and to pursue what he really wanted to do: making shoes, and more specifically sports shoes.

Sport a century ago had little to do with what it is now. Many sports were still the reserve of the privileged classes, and the notion of professionalism was generally frowned upon, especially, of course, by the elitist International Olympic Committee. Sport was essentially what it should be: good, clean fun, the value being in participation rather than achievement. These Olympian ideals appealed to Adi Dassler, too, but they did not dull his competitive edge; nor did they stop his belief that participation, as well as success, could be enhanced by improved equipment.

Adi put all his eggs in the sports basket. He had no inclination for music or other arts, he did not care to travel, he barely pottered in the garden. His obsession with sport was both as an active athlete himself and as an observer, combined with a love for the outdoors. At 34, when he married, he could run the 100 metres in 11.3 seconds. He was an accomplished high jumper, a good skier, a difficult opponent at tennis, a resolute footballer (playing centre-forward for the local team), he also boxed and swam and did... well, virtually everything. It was to stand him in good stead.

Spurred by visions of helping boost athletic performances through the excellence of his own products, Adi went systematically about setting himself up in business. Having first worked briefly for shoemaker Hieronymus Wild in Herzogenaurach, he branched out on his own and installed his first primitive machines, some of them home-made, in the family washroom that his mother had relinquished for his purpose. By then his mother's dedication to washing and drying for the local community was beginning to wane, and by abandoning her washroom she made way for her importunate son to set up a far more flourishing operation of his own.

The working space came free and there were plenty of local people wanting a job – inflation had decimated the felt shoe industry and by the mid-1920s Herzogenaurach had an unemployment rate of 71 per cent, one of the highest in Germany.

But the power to drive even the most low-energy machines was in critically short supply. Adi Dassler demonstrated his inventive flair by rigging up a trimmer attached by a fan-belt to an old bicycle mounted on wooden blocks; he employed friends and others to "ride" the bicycle in one- and two-hour shifts and thus provide power for his rudimentary treadmill. He used and modified the system until the advent of electricity in 1923 transformed his working conditions.

Adi had already pioneered his first running spikes, cobbled together with a leather sole and hand-made spikes from nails provided by another friend, Christoph Zehlein, a blacksmith. They weighed in at 223 grams, and he was impatient to make more. First, though, he had to content himself with fairly routine business. He may have heard the clarion call of the Olympic stadium but his early steps were more mundane, repairing shoes for many of his 3,500 fellow citizens and only tentatively producing his own prototype sports shoes, making the most of scraps of obsolete military material as all Germans were encouraged to do in the face of severe deprivation after a debilitating war. Even his sister Marie helped in the job of cutting up strips of leather from helmets and wartime haversacks to be incorporated into sports shoes. But life was inching its way back to normal: the German football championship had been revived within two years of the end of the war, with the local team 1. FC Nürnberg beating neighbours Spielvereinigung Fürth 2-0 to clinch the title, and the national team had played its first match, losing to Switzerland, 1-4.

Sport was showing signs of re-animating the crestfallen German nation and the fledgling business showed enough promise for Adi's brother Rudolf to join the crusade in 1923. Rudolf had already had several jobs since leaving school. He had worked alongside his father at an established

shoemaker's in town, the Vereinigte Fränkische Schuhfabriken, then as a policeman and finally at a porcelain studio and in a leather store. Less idealistic than Adi, he had thus acquired some specific trade insights in addition to his natural sharper commercial awareness to apply to the newly created Gebrüder Dassler Schuhfabrik, the Dassler Brothers' Shoe Factory. The company was registered on 1 July 1924, with a capital of 6,000 Reichsmarks, and its name abbreviated experimentally to Geda. It sported its first logo, a diamond-shaped concoction with a profile of Herzogenaurach's distinctive ancient Türmersturm tower and the assertive slogan, *allen überlegen* – better than all the rest. Cheaper, too: at less than two Reichsmarks a pair, Dassler shoes soon found buyers.

As early as the following year, 1925, Adi began submitting what would eventually be hundreds of patents for sports shoe inventions, the first being for track shoes with hand-forged spikes and for football boots with nailed leather studs. A dozen workers turned out about 50 pairs of shoes a day. The first big order arrived, for football boots for the local sports club, Turnverein 1861, at 2.39 marks a pair. Profits rose, and Adi treated himself to a Triumph motorbike, complete with sidecar.

The Dassler boys were on their way. It was not an easy alliance from the start, thanks primarily to their fundamentally different personalities and interests: Adi the rather quiet, reserved sportsman dedicated to extracting every minute technical advantage from his ceaseless supply of creations, and Rudolf the more boisterous, self-proclaiming businessman whose focus was on figures and sales. Thrown together in the claustrophobic washroom-cum-workshop, it was only a matter of time before they got on each other's nerves. Nevertheless, it was the start of an adventurous road that, a quarter of a century later, would diverge in two fiercely competitive opposite directions.

But the early days were harmonious as the brothers worked together, the fraternal peace also being kept, no doubt, by father Christoph, who had also quit his job to join his son's project from the start. By 1927, when they moved into new premises as a downtown shoe factory became vacant, they were employing some 25 workers, with a respectable production of about 100 pairs of sports shoes a day. The better working conditions strengthened the brothers' resolve, and they not only broadened their range of products but took an unprecedented initiative by sending each sports club in Germany a package of Dassler shoes to try out, and to keep. Some recipients were confused by the unexpected generosity but mostly the gesture served its purpose of making athletes up and down the country aware of what the Dasslers had to offer.

Adi knew, however, that his shoes needed to reach a bigger, broader stage. His own ambitions as an active athlete had fed his fascination with the performance of top-quality sportsmen and women, athletes of Olympic calibre. By the time of the 1928 Games in Amsterdam, he believed his shoes were good enough to compete with the best.

It may be difficult to imagine today, but at that time virtually no attention was paid to what a top-class athlete was wearing on his feet. Running spikes had first been developed in England in the late 1890s by J.W. Foster & Sons, who took for their logo the Union Jack flag – which still survived, somewhat incongruously, when the company became Reebok in the following century. Shoes were mostly an anonymous black, with no sign of the distinguishing stripes and flashes that would eventually follow. Nobody knew what runners and jumpers were wearing and, frankly, nobody much cared.

Except Adi Dassler. His first interest was fixed on a pioneering runner from Karlsruhe, Lina Radke, who had been encouraged by her husband and coach Georg to defy the belief held even by the Olympic founder, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, that running was too exhausting for women. Lina had already broken the world 800 metres record twice, against admittedly not very serious opposition, in 1927 and on 1 July 1928. Adi persuaded the 24 year-old Lina to wear his black, six-spiked shoes in the 800 metres in Amsterdam. And while the Baron felt justified in his opinions by many of the runners failing to finish, Adi felt even more vindicated by Lina scampering home in baggy white vest, long black shorts, black Dassler shoes, and a world record time of 2:16.8, a mark that was to

stand for another 16 years. **"He knew that any shoe worn by an Olympic champion would go down well with the public,"** says Franz Martz, admiringly. "It was a new idea, product placement, the first time anyone had done that."

Success was very welcome, and soon led to the first Dassler reps being appointed in neighbouring Austria, Switzerland and Hungary. But success did not immediately change Adi's world. Above all, it confirmed in his own mind that his ideas were right, and it sharpened his aim to make a good thing even better. While track and field remained his first love, and his output had been confined almost exclusively to running shoes throughout the 1920s, his eclectic approach to sport soon saw him turning out the first ice hockey boots (to meet the demands of his own favourite winter sport) as well as football boots, with leather strips combined with studs, and the world's first two-coloured training shoes. They sold over 10,000 pairs of spikes and 1,850 pairs of football boots in 1930, and the next year even saw the first tennis shoes – a good four decades before tennis became a major weapon in the adidas armoury.

Adi returned from his formal training in Pirmasens in the early 1930s not only with a young bride but also with a more solid technical base. He matured in his personal and professional life, investing his new wealth astutely in a new house, the so-called Villa, to counter economic uncertainty. But life was not made easier by continual discord with his brother Rudolf, whose family appeared to find it increasingly difficult to acknowledge Adi's development and effective leadership of the company. According to handwritten notes compiled later by Käthe Dassler, the year 1932/33, when Rudolf was in charge of the business while Adi was in Pirmasens, was the only year its progress faltered.

The general upward curve of the business was arrested more emphatically, however, by the threatening climate that was brewing in Germany in that tumultuous decade. Football boot production fell from 24,500 pairs in 1932 to 9,200 in 1933. Käthe, settled into the role of rural housewife with a brood of hens and turkeys out in the yard, and surprisingly displaying an increasing understanding of football, had another more discerning mouth to feed when their first child, Horst, was born in March 1936. As with Rudolf's sons, legally the infant Horst automatically became co-owner of the Dassler Brothers' business. In what may have been an attempt at reconciliation with his brother, Adi gave Horst the second name Rudolf. But the fraternal gesture was soon to prove woefully inadequate.

The year 1936 turned out to be a benchmark year, in more ways than one. The young father, Adi, was facing the biggest opportunity of his professional life: the Olympic Games, the focal point of world sports, were coming to Germany.

Lina Radke's success in Amsterdam had been followed, modestly, by German sprinter Arthur Jonath taking bronze in the 100 metres in Los Angeles in 1932, wearing a new style of Dassler shoes, in thin leather and featuring stitched stripes but still all dark brown. But California had been a world away for the young shoemaker from Franconia with his drastically limited budgets. So now the Games being held barely 450 kilometres from home was an extraordinary stroke of good fortune.

The Berlin Games wallowed in bombastic Nazi propaganda. But such was life in Germany at that time that it hardly seemed unnatural. Certainly the International Olympic Committee and most of the rest of the world's sporting fraternity seemed ready to turn a condescending blind eye to the omnipresent swastikas and jackboots.

To defy the Nazi might was more than a folly. Nobody could be so naïve as to be oblivious to the perils of contradicting the regime, and Adi Dassler was a responsible new father with a personal and professional interest in not stepping out of line. Aware of this, he and Rudolf had both already joined the party in April 1933, and Adi was also briefly a member of the National Socialist Motor Corps – but never held any office or responsibility. He also signed up as a football coach with the Hitler Youth, later claiming – credibly – that his only interest was the sporting activity, regardless of the political connotations. His fanaticism was reserved for his products, and it knew no bounds.

1
The teenage **Adi Dassler**, a reluctant conscript in 1917

2
The Gebrüder Dassler Schuhfabrik – Dassler Brothers' Shoe Factory in 1928, officially registered and employing 20 workers

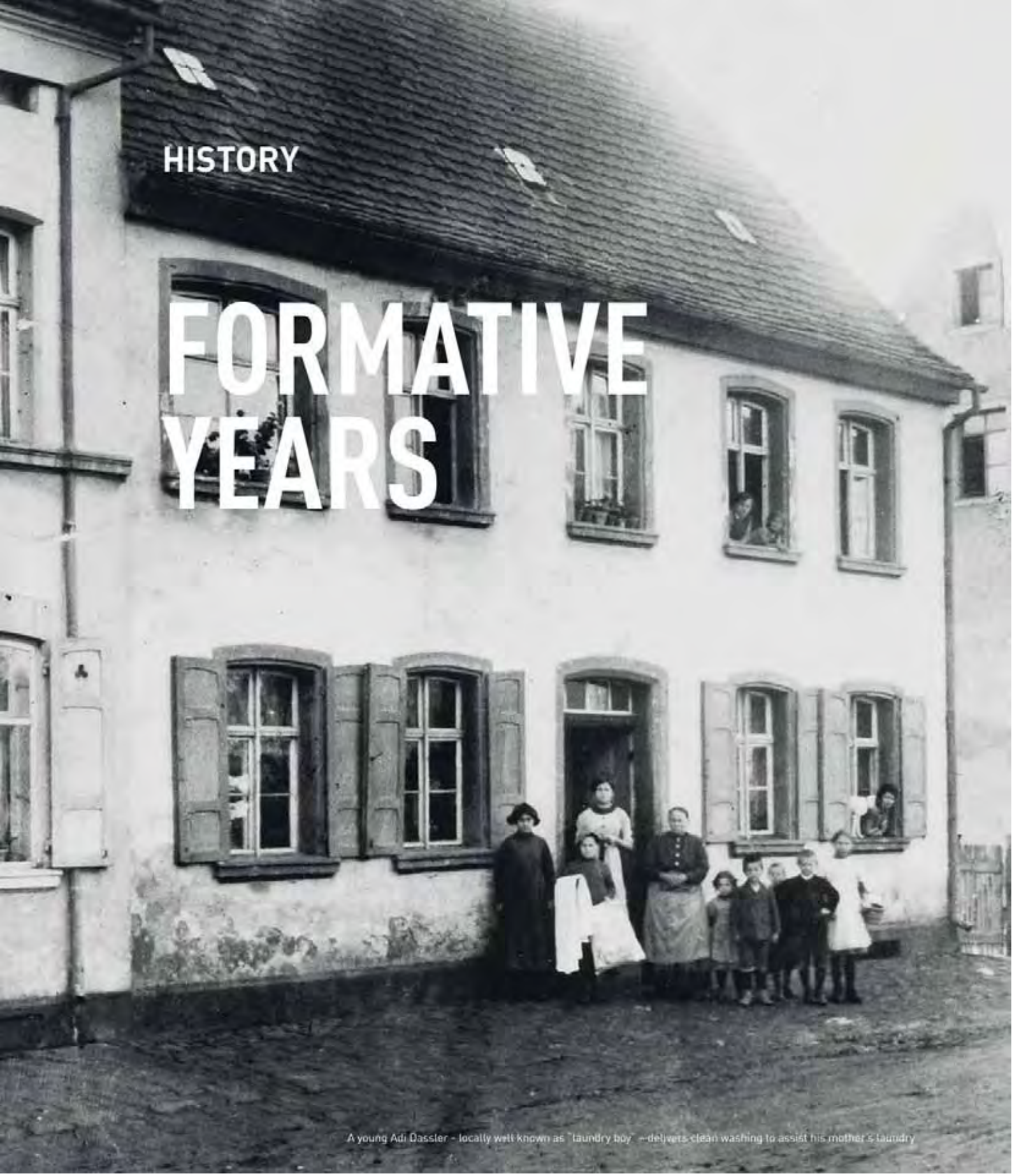
3
By the mid-1920s, Adi Dassler's shoe business was making enough for him to buy a Triumph motorbike

4
Man in charge: **Adi Dassler** in his first factory

5
The first of many: **Lina Radke** claims the first-ever Olympic gold in Dassler shoes, winning the 800 metres in Amsterdam, 1928

HISTORY

FORMATIVE YEARS



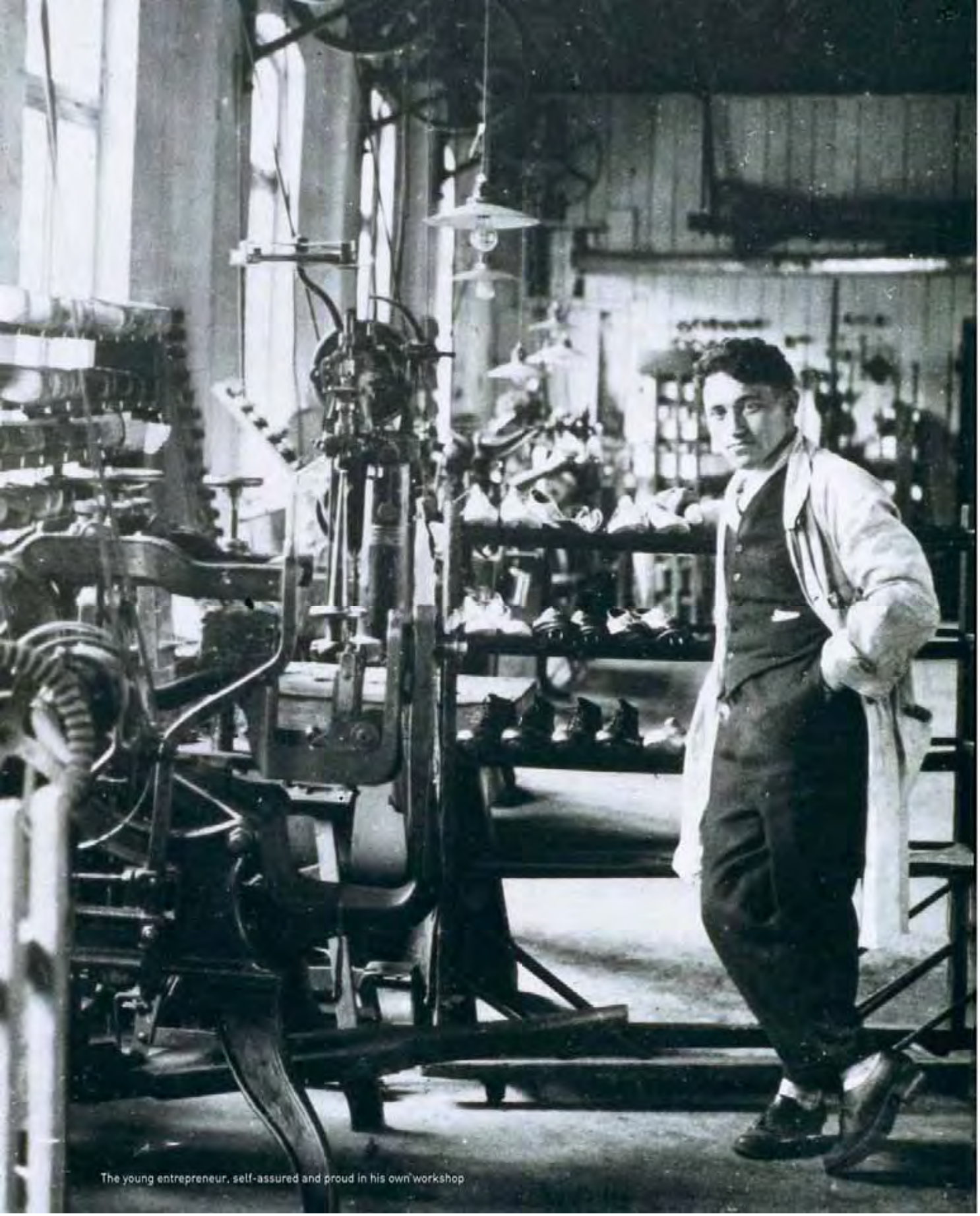
A young Adi Dassler - locally well known as "laundry boy" - delivers clean washing to assist his mother's laundry

A proud Dassler family group from the early 1900s: (left to right) sister Marie, mother Pauline, father Christoph, brothers Rudolf and Fritz, and Adi

A confident young businessman with his mother, Pauline

From amid the clutter on Adi's workbench emerged a series of innovative sports shoes that belied the simplicity of the tools that had crafted them

The legendary treadmill apparatus that Adi created, before the benefit of electricity in his workshop, with a colleague paid a modest fee to generate energy to operate machines by pedal power



The young entrepreneur, self-assured and proud in his own workshop

As head of his young company, Adi Dassler (third from right) delighted in taking his staff on trips such as this, to Pommersfelden Castle - combined of course with a day of sporting competition (opposite page)