

*The
Jewellers'
Story.*



MC

METAL CONCENTRATORS

REAL STORIES

In Conversation with *Uwe Koetter*

Words by
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on behalf of
Metal Concentrators

I walk into the large and airy showroom of Uwe Koetter Jewellers and I am directed to a tastefully arranged waiting area by a young lady in smart black attire. Sitting there is a mature lady, evidently also waiting.

Uwe appears within seconds, sprightly and dapper with an irresistibly cheeky grin. As we shake hands, he notices the lady and still clinging to my hand, he looks at her intensely, his brow furrowed in deep concentration.

“I know you...” he says slowly but not quite placing her. *“Forty-two years ago, you made my engagement ring,”* she replies with a warm smile. *“... it has been here for a repair.”*

Uwe engages with her in an intense conversation and I watch this intimate interaction between the jeweller and his long-standing client with fascination.

I interject politely. *“I’m here to write an article about Uwe and this is exactly the kind of story I need to hear... first-hand evidence of a satisfied client of forty-two years!”*

Minutes later, Uwe leads me through the expansive showroom to a meeting room. He is brisk and forthright and immediately engages in the conversation with an easy manner.

“I started in this business in 1968 - in February next year it will be fifty years!” he shares proudly.

“Tell me how you started?” I urge.

“It was in Hamburg... I was twenty... the best journeyman goldsmith of 32 students,” he responds diffidently. *“There was a final exam with the Hamburg Chamber of Commerce and my boss said, ‘if you fail, you can go and be a plumber!’ There was a graduation cocktail party and I wasn’t really paying much attention when I heard my name and I was called to ‘come up front’. I had won first prize for my piece. Anyway, I celebrated with a few drinks and an elderly lady came up to me and*

said, 'my son has a goldsmith workshop and jewellery shop in Windhoek ... he's looking for a good goldsmith'. He smiles in recollection.

"By now I was a bit tiddly but I thought... Africa... lions... and it sounded good. Two months later – that was in 1957 – I was in Africa."

"Must have been exciting!" I surmise.

"I earned ten pounds a week but I made more money after hours as a waiter. I wore a white jacket and bow-tie and drove a Lambretta scooter. That New Year, I served as a waiter at the airport until 4am. I left with 30 pounds in my pocket, a half bottle of whisky and half a chicken. Life was great ... safaris, the Etosha, Tsumeb, Fish River Canyon ... the German Clubs.

Then a year later, my friend said, 'I'm going on a trip to Cape Town. Why don't you join me and we can share the petrol?' And I went. We rode through the Kuruman all night and eventually we arrived. I remember standing on Signal Hill looking at the harbour... and I said to myself, 'I like this much more than the desert! I want to work here!'"

"And so, you stayed?"

"Oh yes... I walked down Adderley Street looking for a jewellery shop and the first I came to was Kurt Baldinger, owned by a German Jew. I went in and said; 'I'm a goldsmith – I am looking for a job.'

'Can you speak German?' was his first question.

'Of course!' I replied.

'Can you work?' he asked.

'Yes!' I said.

'OK – you got a job!'

And that was it! I returned to Windhoek, resigned, packed up and returned to Cape Town by train. On my first day, Mr Baldinger said, 'This is my son Gerald – please, you teach him!'

I taught Gerald the goldsmith's skills – my salary was doubled. Even when I was offered a position as a workshop manager for another company at a higher salary, I stayed on."

"You had a well-defined work ethic!" I surmise.

"Sure, but about a year later, I decided to open my own workshop. I rented two small rooms in the Colonial & Mutual Building – a workshop and a showroom. I had so little that I never even locked the safe ... 15gm of gold and 30gm of silver, making chains and mounting coins. I even struggled to pay the rent.

Then one day, a customer walked in and said, 'I'm getting engaged and I need a ring. Can you show me your diamonds?' It was my first real order and I had nothing to show him. So, I told him a fib ... I said, 'My diamonds are locked away at Nedbank next door. Can you come back tomorrow?' That night, I made a 9ct gold ring with a claw setting

for a .25ct diamond. And the next day I set out to hunt for a diamond. Next to the Groot Kerk was a diamond dealer, A Cohen – he was also a Dutch Rabbi. I walked in and said:

‘My name is Koetter. I am from Germany. I need a .25ct diamond.’ He looked at me, went to the safe and came back with the diamond. ‘That will be R120, German.’ He said, holding out his hand.

“Mr. Cohen, I can’t pay you right now. If you let me have the stone I will pay you in two hours.’

‘But it’s only R120!’

‘I don’t have that!’

‘You have come all the way from Germany so you can borrow from me?’

He looked at me for a long time and then, with a sigh said ‘OK – I will give it to you on *appro*.’

I had no idea what ‘*appro*’ meant but I agreed. He handed me the diamond.

‘You owe me R120 – bring your money in two hours!’

I rushed back to my shop, set the diamond, concluded the deal, then returned to pay Mr. Cohen. He asked, ‘Are you Jewish?’

‘No.’ I replied.

He did not ask me to sit – a practice that was to continue for a long time. The next month, I needed another diamond and I went back to Mr. Cohen.

‘Hello German – you want another diamond on *appro*!’ He stated.

This went on for over a year. He never called me anything but ‘German’ – he always made me stand and he gave me diamonds with no paperwork.

After a year, he said: ‘German, sit down!’

‘What’s wrong,’ I asked.

‘Nothing! You are punctual and you are trustworthy. I want to give you a consignment of diamonds... 15, 20, 25 and 30 pointers. But now you sign.’

At last, I had stones I could show clients. I always sold the biggest stones first. I went back to Mr. Cohen and he allowed me to take 35, 40 and 45 pointers...

My business started doing well – and over time, he allowed me even bigger stones. Then one day, he again said, ‘Sit down. I am 65 now and it is time to retire... I want you to take over my business!’

‘I cannot do that – I am a goldsmith!’

“You turned him down?” I question with incredulity.

“Not entirely – I said that I could not take over his business. So he decided to give me all his stock on *appro*. He produced a handwritten list of all his stones and asked me to sigh for them – the value was over four million rand!

He went to live at Highlands House, the Jewish old age home in Vredehoek. I visited him three or four times a month and on each occasion, he took a ruler and pen and scored off the ‘appro list’ those diamonds that I had sold and paid for. After seven years, it was finalised.

If it was not for Mr Cohen, I would never have made it!”

“What an incredible story!” I remark.

“Ah yes,” reflects Uwe wistfully. “But it didn’t end there. A couple of years later, a lawyer arrived with a brown envelope. He informed me that Mr Cohen had died and had bequeathed this to me. Inside was the silver mille-diamond shovel he had used throughout his lifetime. Come, let me show it to you...”

He takes me to a display in the centre of the showroom and there, together with other memorabilia from the past lies, Mr Cohen’s little silver shovel – testament to a bond of trust and friendship formed through mutual respect over many decades.

He then shows me a series of wall-mounted photographs that show some of the more famous designs over the years. There is the peacock brooch that Nelson Mandela commissioned for HM Queen Elizabeth II, and the entry for the Anglo Gold Riches of Africa award 2003 – intricate copies of actual dragonfly wings arranged on a thick necklace spreading out like a mystical halo from nature, all made in his workshop.

There are the entries for De Beers Shining Light Awards 2003 and Plat Africa 2005 – stunning creations that defy verbal description. Finally, we come to a picture of a truly exquisite necklace pendant. The card beneath it simply states:

“Hamburg Chamber of Commerce 1958”

“This is the piece that won my first award. I gave it to my wife, Magda on our wedding day... she was my lover and best friend...”

He turns to me and relates the touching story of how they met. He contemplates for a while and then says:

“During our courting days, one of her favourite songs was ‘Bye, Bye Love’ – The Everly Brothers... I played the song at her funeral four years ago.”

For a long period, I am unable to speak. I have been gifted with a personal insight into the life of an honest man who arrived in Africa with nothing but determination and talent. A man who gained the respect of a wise old businessman who helped him create a business and left a memorable legacy. A man who has loved and lived and yet remained true to himself and his trade.

May there be many who learn from his example.

The Jewellers' Story.

An initiative from Metal Concentrators.

Neville Crosse, his wife Charlotte and son Grant purchased Metal Concentrators (Pty) Ltd (MetCon) in late 2015 and rapidly became aware of the issues and difficulties faced by retail jewellers and manufacturing jewellers on a day to day basis. This led to a lot of thought and discussions as to whether MetCon could play a role in improving the sustainability of the industry.

To that end, MetCon created The Jewellers' Story. An initiative intended to provide a platform for dialogue and debate within the industry.

The first phase was a series of published caricatures presenting the compelling case to the public that purchasing South African manufactured goods has a number of benefits for the jewellery purchaser as well as developing the industry to be more inclusive of all the talented people in the country.

The second phase seeks not only to highlight the most apparent issues, but as a space to share knowledge and wisdom from the most senior and innovative participants, and to nurture emerging talented jewellery makers, as well as to help established businesses struggling to compete at the global industry level. To tell important stories. To share lessons learned. To establish a sense of community within the industry.

There are many challenges ahead for the industry, from both direct and indirect forces. Only by working together to confront them as a community can we triumph over them and provide a new hope for all South African jewellery retailers and manufacturers.

This hope we place in The Jewellers' Story.

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