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The Swatch

Polo Hofer (Photo: Beat Krattiger)

The castle of Morges
(Photo: Ch. Kern)

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The Inventive Genius of Swiss Watchmakers:

High technology at the lower end

However could a product be born into the world – especially the traditional world of watchmaking – which convulses the whole tradition of which it is the fruit? This is the adventure of the Swatch. Its history already reads like a legend. But nothing rises from obscurity, and to procreate a product you need, as in nature, not only a good soil and a little seed but also some water and some sun, a bit of luck, good fortune and the tenacity of life. Well then, once upon a time there was a transistor...

On the 23rd of December, 1947, three American engineers carried out an experiment which was to convulse the technologies of the second half of the 20th century: they passed a current between two gold electrodes fixed on a piece of germanium. They had invented the transistor. Thenceforth it was possible to control a flow of electrons in ultra-high-speed operations of the order of a millionth of a second.

The first Swiss quartz watch

Twenty years later this technology was tamed by a new generation of watchmakers who would manufacture, entirely in Neuchâtel, the first Swiss quartz watch. It was presented at the *Concours de Chronométrie* of the Neuchâtel Observatory in 1967, where it smashed all the records for accuracy ever won by a wrist-watch. The same result was achieved by a Japanese watch. The world had entered a new era of horology, an age of physicists and chemists who no longer spoke the same language as the highly-skilled mechanics of watchmaking.

The irruption of quartz into the watch was to have its effect on the pride and joy of Swiss watchmakers: utmost accuracy and ultra-high-precision were to become a commonplace.

This universal availability and sim-

ultaneous cheapening of extremely high accuracy came at the same time as the economic recession of the mid-seventies. For the traditional watchmaking firms it was a hurricane which hit them all over the world; rather few of them were to rise again.

So, something else had to be invented – something which would

swatch

