

The Immortals

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THIS October leaders of 25 of the world's oldest business dynasties will meet in Germany. They call themselves Les Hénokiens, after the Biblical patriarch Enoch, and they claim to comprise the most exclusive club of its kind in the world. The association's literature describes the rigorous selection process for membership:

"It took us one year of research and the help of 164 chambers of commerce and 15 embassy commercial attachés in order to get in touch with 174 companies. But in fact only 30 were able to meet our criteria of not only having a good balance sheet but also being able to remain up to date."

To qualify for membership, a company has to be at least 200 years old with the majority of ownership remaining in the hands of descendants of the original founders. The Hénokiens have come together, in part, to celebrate their pride and values as family enterprises and "to prove that tradition and dynamism can be allies." Enoch, who fathered Methusaleh, was said to have lived 365 years himself and then, as the Hénokiens' literature recalls, "was taken away to Heaven—what a symbol for a company!"

No doubt the members have also joined together to do a little networking and to promote business abroad. The association's literature notes that all of the Hénokiens realize most of their sales from exports. The organization has prepared handsomely illustrated materials on each member company's history for distribution.

The history and business experience represented in one room when the Hénokiens meet is awesome. The association was founded in 1981, and membership seems to have shifted as some companies have dropped out and

others have replaced them. Currently there are 23 European and 2 Japanese members. The member companies seem to have in common a genius for transforming themselves and diversifying at key points in their histories, while preserving traditions of craftsmanship and family values. A few of the members:

DACIANO COLBACHINI & SON

The Colbachinis have been making bells in their foundry since the 18th century and in 1898 were given the prestigious title of "Pontifical Foundry" by Pope Leone XII. Although bell casting in the Colbachinis' modern plant near Padua, Italy, is still done by the same process, the family has diversified into a number of technically sophisticated rubber and plastic products for industry.

HOSHI RYOKAN

In the year 717 a Buddhist priest named Taicho discovered a hot water spring on Mount Hakusan in Japan that was supposed to have miraculous curative powers. Taicho gave his disciple Garyo Hoshi the title of spring keeper. Hoshi established an inn near the waters where guests originally paid for their lodgings with homegrown produce. The Ryokan, which now has rooms for 450 guests, is said to be the oldest inn in Japan. As the brochure says: "Hoshi's remarkable sense of hospitality has been transmitted over 46 generations."

MELLERIO DITS MELLER JEWELERS

Originally an Italian family, the Mellerios emigrated to Paris and became jewelers to French royalty starting with Louis XIII in the 17th century. Mellerio customers have included Marie Antoinette, Napoleon and Josephine, and the queens of Belgium, Sweden, and Great Britain. In the 19th century, the firm also went into goldsmithing for religious artifacts. Today it even makes sports trophies. The 14th generation is now running the company. Francois Mellerio is president and Olivier Mellerio, managing director.

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MARIE BRIZARD & ROGER INTERNATIONAL

According to legend, in 1755 a charitable lady in the town of Bordeaux cared for and cured a sick traveler “from the isles.” In return, he gave her the recipe for an elixir which in his country was “capable of curing ills of every sort.” That elixir was anisette, which may not cure anything but is nonetheless a smooth, popular liqueur. Marie Brizard set out to produce the drink with her nephew Jean- Baptiste Roger in 1755. Currently, the Marie Brizard Group markets a range of fruit- based liqueurs, soft drinks, and sparkling wines worldwide. The current chairman, Paul Glotin, is a descendant of Jean-Baptiste Roger.

L.D. CAPPELEN ULEFOS IRON INDUSTRY

The Cappelens apparently started as ship owners and timber merchants, chartered in 1657 by Fredrik III, the Danish and Norwegian king. In 1727, they bought forest land in the iron-rich region of Ulefoss on Lake Nordsjö and built an iron foundry and sawmill. The Ulefos wood-burning stove is one of Norway’s oldest products and is still available in the original design from 1766. The family company today also owns two hydroelectric power stations and produces automotive parts as well as 70 percent of Norway’s manhole covers. ■