Jebsen & Porsche
Winning the race together since 1955

Remembering Jacob Jebsen & Heinrich Jessen
How the co-founders built and rebuilt the company

A Tribute to Lai Pui (1911-1999)
The Group’s longest-serving staff

A Symbol and Spirit, Inherited
Tracing the history of Jebsen’s three-mackerel logo
I cannot confess to remembering every speech that I have ever delivered, but there is one that I remember quite vividly. It was a memorable March evening in 1995, at a recital that Jebsen & Co. was hosting in celebration of our centennial. Given the occasion, I was asked to say a few words, and these were among them: “What are the key issues when looking towards the future? Confidence and commitment.”

Perhaps the reason why I’m able to remember something that was said 24 years ago is because those words still ring true today. We are confident and committed to the markets we serve, the business partners and brand principals that have placed their trust in us, and, most importantly, the colleagues whom we work alongside.

Commitment is a value passed down through the generations from the time of our founding. While it was a shared vision that led our co-founders Jacob Jebsen and Heinrich Jessen to establish Jebsen & Co. in 1895, it was their commitment to the company that enabled them to keep going through difficult times, especially after the First World War destroyed everything they had worked for.

We have carried on this legacy of commitment well. It shows in the many long-standing relationships that we enjoy with our business partners and with our staff. These include our 64-year partnership with Porsche and our longest-serving staff member, the late Mr Lai Pui, who was a member of the Group for 67 amazing years.

As we approach our 125th anniversary in 2020, their stories are a timely reminder that we must continue to do things wholeheartedly and put in our best efforts if we are to achieve enduring success for future generations.

You can read their story on pages 7 and 11 respectively.

Hans Michael Jebsen
Group Chairman
Protecting a partnership through two World Wars

In 1897, Jebsen secured the agency of BASF to trade synthetic indigo dye in South China. The partnership lasted 84 years, and left its mark in China for revolutionising the way Chinese dyers, who had previously used vegetable indigo, coloured their materials.

Becoming one of the largest Porsche dealer groups in the world

Jebsen made the bold move of introducing Porsche luxury sports cars to colonial Hong Kong in 1955, marking Hong Kong as one of the first international markets for the brand. Hong Kong has topped the charts for Porsche ownership per capita in the world for more than two decades. Jebsen then went on to introduce Porsche to Mainland China in 2001. With 10 Porsche Centres, Jebsen is now one of Porsche’s largest and longest-standing partners in China.

Standing with China through thick and thin

Even when other foreign firms started to pull out of China in the 1950s, Jebsen stayed on. It was one of the last to leave and first to return. After closing its Shanghai office in 1962, the Group was able to maintain trade with China thanks to its faithful participation in the Canton Fair since 1957. In 1976, Jebsen made a comeback by converting a room at Beijing’s Xin Qiao Hotel into a temporary office. As one of the first foreign companies which re-entered Mainland China at the very beginning of its reform and opening-up, Jebsen continues to represent quality products, services, investments and solutions across its business lines — Beverage, Consumer, Industrial, Motors, Logistics, and Jebsen Capital.

Forging a lasting bridge between East and West

Having built a home for itself in China, Jebsen has never forgotten its roots. Its commitment to bridging East and West was recognised as early as 1968, when the South China Morning Post ran a supplement that read: “If anyone asks a question about German products in Hong Kong, two places can supply the answer – the German Consulate General and the firm of Jebsen & Company.” The article went on to describe Jebsen at the time as “big suppliers of industrial equipment and big buyers of Chinese products including basic metals, feathers, hides, toys and textiles.”
For well over a century, Jebsen Group has been identified by its distinctive three-mackerel logo. But what if we told you that the logo is older than the Group itself?

Those familiar with the Jebsen story would know that relatives Jacob Jebsen and Heinrich Jessen co-founded the company, Jebsen & Co., in 1895. By that time, however, a blue flag bearing three mackerels was already a common sight in the harbours and along the South China coast.

It was the flag of the M. Jebsen Shipping Company.

The M. Jebsen Shipping Company was founded in 1878 by Jacob’s father, Michael Jebsen (IV), in their hometown of Aabenraa. In June 1881, the first Jebsen steamer to enter Hong Kong, Vorwärts, brought with it the company’s three-mackerel flag. It is said that the company later fared so well in its Far East ventures that its “three pieces of fish”, as the locals called it, became widely recognised.

So, in 1895, when Jebsen was established as the sole agent for the M. Jebsen Shipping Company, it was a natural choice for the co-founders to adopt the same flag.

Under their stewardship, Jebsen quickly diversified into trading. Recognising that 19th century China was a huge market for British cotton goods, they secured a deal with two Manchester-based cotton trading companies, Hiltermann Brothers and Edmund Heuer & Co., and began importing printed cotton sheets into South China. The three-mackerel flag was adapted into a trademark chop for their goods department. In 1899, the mark was registered for the first time in Hong Kong — essentially becoming a precursor to today’s Jebsen logo.
An Ode to Aabenraa

The answer to the question ‘Why mackerels?’ requires a journey further back in time, before the M. Jebsen Shipping Company was even founded. It is believed that the earliest version of the three-mackerel flag was created in Hong Kong in 1859 by a lady named Jakobine Ingermann.

She had adapted Aabenraa’s coat of arms, which features three mackerels swimming in the same direction, into a red flag so that her ship commander husband could easily spot his hired boat in a crowded harbour. Other Aabenraa captains later adopted this red flag to identify their ships arriving from Aabenraa as well.

When it came to Michael Jebsen (IV)’s turn to create a flag for his shipping company, he decided to make some changes. He used blue instead of red, turned the middle fish around so that it would swim to the right while the other two would swim to the left, and surrounded them with a laurel wreath.

There are no clear records to explain his decision to have one mackerel facing the opposite direction, although many theories have emerged over the years. As Jebsen is here in Greater China to stay, it is possible that one of the mackerels was set around to symbolise the constant connection of Jebsen between East and West.

Whichever the case, Michael Jebsen (IV) had created what he termed a “very simple flag”, not knowing that it would come to leave such a lasting legacy.
The Mackerel Spirit

When Jebsen inherited the three-mackerel logo, it received more than just the symbol; it also took on the mackerel spirit.

The mackerel is a fish born without a swim bladder, which is the organ that makes other fish weightless in water. For this reason, the mackerel must constantly swim in order not to sink. This aptly describes the entrepreneurial spirit of Jebsen.

Seizing opportunities, the co-founders set up a goods department shortly after the company was established. They focused on growing the business by acquiring and adding more goods and agencies to their portfolio. By 1913, many Jebsen agencies like Blue Girl Beer, Bolinder engines and BASF indigo dyes were doing well in China. Within 18 years, the annual profits of the company’s goods department increased by 420 times, and that of shipping had more than doubled.

Even though the decades to come would bring great turmoil, especially in the form of two devastating World Wars, the mackerel spirit passed through four generations has ensured that the Jebsen Group thrives to this day.
Jebsen & Porsche:
WINNING THE RACE TOGETHER SINCE 1955

Car ownership in Hong Kong represents less than 5% of the population — one of the lowest rates in Asia. Yet Jebsen & Co. put Porsche on the map in Hong Kong, not just as another sports car (which you may or may not need) but as a prime, self-reward, everyday automobile; the car with status, the car professionals prefer, the car smart money drives. And we’re all set to do the same in China.

"Mr Hans Michael Jebsen,
Chairman of Jebsen Group, in a March 2008 interview
On New Year’s Eve of 1894, relatives Jacob Jebsen and Heinrich Jessen renewed their acquaintance in Shanghai, more than 8,000km away from their hometown of Apenrade, Germany (now Aabenraa, Denmark).

Jacob had just arrived in Hong Kong a month earlier to represent his father’s Aabenraa-based company, the M. Jebsen Shipping Company. “It is too bad Heinrich Jessen is not in Hong Kong,” Michael Jebsen (IV) wrote to his son. “He would be a suitable personality for a companion.”

Encouraged by his father, Jacob travelled to Shanghai where Heinrich was working. The two young men met at the Club Concordia (the German Club), just a stone’s throw away from the Bund, and quickly hit it off. Consequently, Jebsen & Co. was officially founded in Hong Kong on March 1, 1895 as sole agent of the M. Jebsen Shipping Company.

How the co-founders of Jebsen & Co. built and rebuilt the company

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Jacob Jebsen: 
**Flying His Father’s Flag Farther and Higher**

Although Jacob had initially harboured dreams of becoming a chemist, he was no stranger to shipping thanks to his shipmaster father. Even his unusual birthplace, a coastal town in the US state of Washington, was the direct result of his father’s line of work. It was where Michael Jebsen (IV) had taken refuge with his family, ship, and crew during the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871).

The family returned to Aabenraa after the war. That was where a young Jacob spent his childhood watching his father go from managing the steamer fleets of Alfred Krupp, the German ‘Cannon King’, to setting up the M. Jebsen Shipping Company. In his early 20s, Jacob completed an internship at his father’s company and a commercial apprenticeship with Adolf Deppe in Antwerp, Belgium before coming to Hong Kong.

Heinrich Jessen: 
**A Shipowner’s Son with the Mind of a Businessman**

Heinrich was barely six years old when his captain and shipowner father died. He was raised largely in the care of his uncle Jes Nicolay Jessen, who was married to Jacob Jebsen’s aunt Marie. With seafaring blood in his veins, and his eyes opened to the world of trading from accompanying his uncle on short business trips, Heinrich grew up with dreams of becoming a merchant.

His first step towards realising this dream was a commercial apprenticeship with a trading firm in Hamburg that operated sailing vessels plying Europe and South America. Though young and relatively inexperienced, Heinrich’s keen business acumen caught the eye of China-based German trading house Gipperich & Burchardi. He was offered a job in Shanghai and, in August 1888, arrived on Chinese soil for the first time.

“**My goal of doing business independently and on my own account was achieved with the founding of the company. However, the preparations for this had brought me to the age of 29 and I had learned that anyone seeking to carve out a professional path must overcome obstacles with patience and endurance before the way ahead is clear. When I look back today on the years which were devoted to building up our company, the memory of this life’s work fills me with pleasure and satisfaction.”**

An excerpt from Heinrich Jessen’s memoirs (1918).
A Roaring Start

Jebsen & Co. was off to a good start with sole agency of the M. Jebsen Shipping Company but the co-founders were ambitious and keen to diversify the business.

Heinrich, with his experience in China trade, led the establishment of a goods department. The company most notably acquired the agency of BASF indigo dye in 1897, and went on to boost BASF’s annual sales in South China by 10 times within 10 years. The scale of the BASF agency grew so large that it warranted the setting up of a separate department, headed by Heinrich himself.

In 1899, Heinrich made his first trip home after more than a decade in China. After stopping by Ludwigshafen to call on BASF, he returned to Aabenraa, where he visited the Jebsen family. There, he met, fell in love, and married Jacob’s sister Johanne. Sadly, this marital bliss came to an abrupt end in 1907 when Johanne died unexpectedly on a sea voyage from Shanghai to Hong Kong.

A grieving Heinrich decided to relocate his family and his work to Hamburg, where, with Jacob, he co-founded Jebsen & Jessen Hamburg in 1909 as a purchasing office for Jebsen & Co.

Heinrich, being in Hamburg at the time, escaped internment and continued to keep in touch with Jebsen & Co’s Guangzhou office until it was wound up in 1917.

In 1916, Jacob was transferred to Australia, where he was held until the end of the war. While he was fortunate enough to return home, four long years of captivity had robbed him of many things, including his life’s work — Jebsen & Co’s offices were all closed and its entire shipping fleet had been lost. They were back at square one.

From Commitment to Enduring Success

Jacob and Heinrich had spent close to two decades building Jebsen & Co. into a successful business, only to have it toppled in one fell swoop. Nevertheless, they remained committed to the company and to China, and old connections were quickly rekindled. In 1919, Jebsen & Co’s former comprador, Chau Yue Teng, loaned them US$40,000 to restart their business in Guangzhou. Gradually, they regained their foothold in China and the Hong Kong office was re-opened in 1923.

The 1920s and 1930s saw further business diversification: shipping and dyes were handled alongside fertiliser, motors, and motor accessories. These popular, high-quality products helped sustain the company even during the hardships of the Great Depression and the Second World War.
Mr Lai Pui was just 21 years old when he started working for Jebsen in Hong Kong. When he passed away 67 years later, at the ripe old age of 88, he was still officially in employment. This is a man who dedicated his entire life to the Group and seemed to relish every moment.

“I started working as a messenger at Pedder Building. Within two years, the company expanded from one floor to one and a half floors. At that time, there were only 20 or 30 employees, but now we have more than 1,200 staff,” said Uncle Pui with a hint of pride when interviewed by the Jebsen Bulletin in 1994.

As the Group's longest-serving staff member, Uncle Pui journeyed with Jebsen through thick and thin — even during the Second World War. At a time when people were fleeing to Portuguese-ruled Macau, he was one of just three staff members who remained in Hong Kong and helped keep the company going. In turn, the Group offered Uncle Pui and his family safe refuge by housing them in its office premises.

“I was so pleased that the company allowed me to live in [Pedder Building with my family],” he was quoted as saying.

The Group further expressed its gratitude for Uncle Pui’s commitment in 1995, when he was presented with a small 24-carat golden pig by then-Group Chairman Mr Michael Jebsen (VI). This held special meaning as 1995 was the Year of the Pig and both men were born in the same Chinese Zodiac year. Two Zodiac cycles later, in the 2019 Year of the Pig, we are pleased to honour and remember Uncle Pui.

“My late father had been proud of his service to the company. We are deeply grateful for all the friendships and experience he had gained during his many decades working for Jebsen.”

Ms Lai Suk Yin, daughter of Uncle Pui, after his passing in 1999.
About Jebsen Group
Jebsen Group is a Hong Kong-headquartered company representing quality products, services, investments and solutions across the beverage, consumer, industrial, motors, and logistics industries, which enables some 200 of the leading product companies and their brands to successfully market their products throughout the Greater China region. Brands are attracted to Jebsen because it has a track record of adding value to their presence in Greater China and because it has built consumer trust in its company and partners. Jebsen’s success in Greater China is complemented by the demonstrated commitment to being a responsible business partner, employer, and corporate citizen. Outside the region, the Jebsen Group enjoys close ties with sister companies in Southeast Asia, Australia, Germany and Denmark. For more information, visit www.jebsen.com.