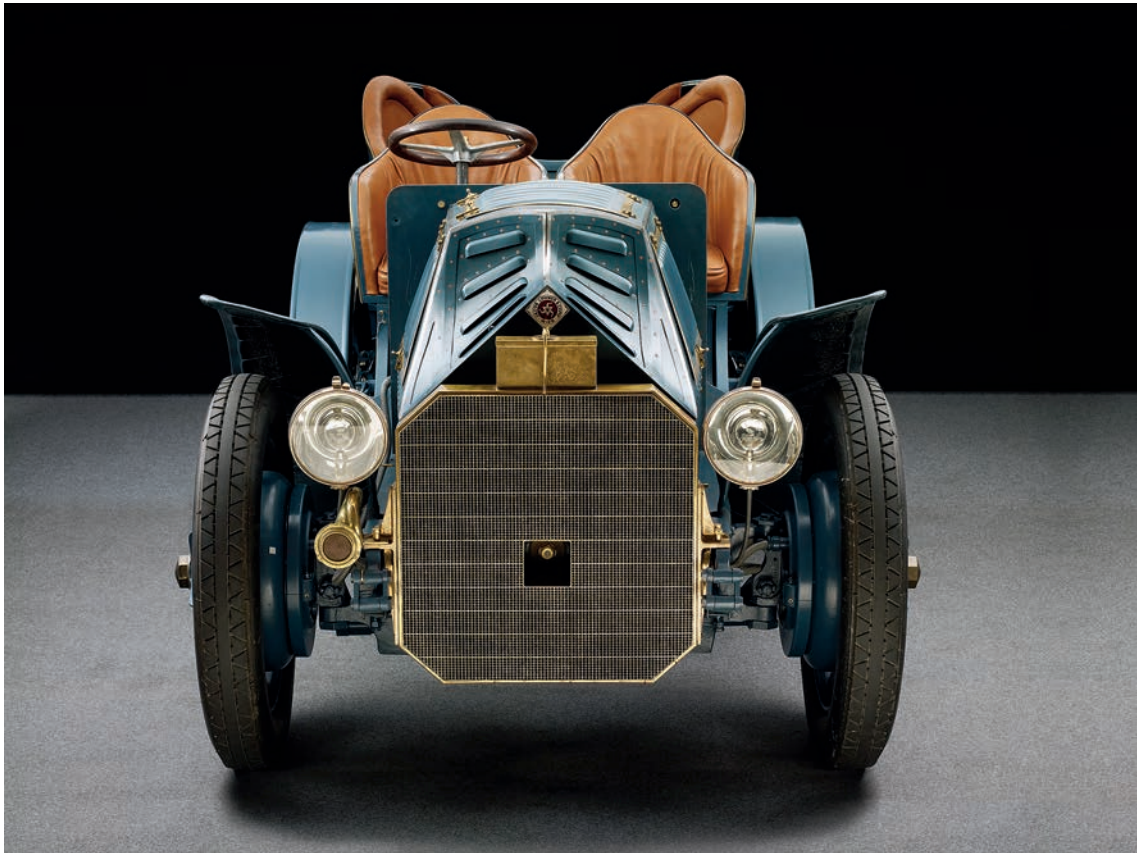


Looking for Lohner

— A Viennese transport legend —



by Duncan JD Smith

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Few people outside Austria will recognise the name Lohner. Those for whom the name does ring a bell are probably diehard transport aficionados. Lohner was a Vienna-based vehicle company. Long ago it was absorbed into other entities, with new brands such as Tesla now hogging the automotive limelight. Lohner, however, should not be forgotten. The company lays claim to an extraordinary history spanning

ABOVE: A beautifully restored Lohner-Porsche Mixte, the world's first hybrid car (1901) (photo © fahr(T)raum / Ferdinand Porsche World of Experience, Austria).

five generations, encompassing everything from scooters to seaplanes and the world's first hybrid car. With 2021 marking two centuries since the company started, it is a timely opportunity to celebrate this unsung transport legend.

CARRIAGES BY APPOINTMENT

The Lohner story starts with a German, one Heinrich Lohner. Hailing from a family of waggoners in Mayen in the Rhineland, he avoided conscription into the French army in 1811 by moving to Vienna. There he acquired citizenship and in 1821 set up

as a cartwright in the Starhembergsche Freihaus, a housing-cum-industrial complex in the 4th District of Wieden (the site is today occupied by the city's Technical University).

In 1826, Heinrich Lohner began a loose collaboration with Istrian master saddler and carriage builder Ludwig Laurenzi. This enabled him to move in 1832 to larger premises in the nearby Heumühlgasse. Still standing, this building retains its glassed-over courtyard, which once rang to the sound of Heinrich's six nephews, all employed as journeymen to help market his skills.

The story fast forwards now to the early 1840s. Heinrich's son Jacob, also a trained saddler and now in his early 20s, hiked through Europe to hone his own talents. After taking in most countries between the Czech Republic and England, he returned in 1843 and at his father's behest took a position with Laurenzi. Together the three men began garnering awards and by 1851 they had manufactured some 1,400 horse-drawn vehicles. These included luxury carriages for the Austrian aristocracy, as well as more practical mail coaches and telegraph wagons for the Austrian army.

With the death of Heinrich in 1855, and Laurenzi four years later, Jacob took over the entire business through marriage to Laurenzi's daughter Aloisia.

Intent on increasing business, he sought out royal patronage and in 1860 visited Scandinavia, where he was appointed official supplier to the Swedish Court. Thereafter, the royal

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courts of Norway and Romania followed suit. With orders increasing, the company moved to a full-blown factory at what is now Servitengasse 19 in Vienna's Alsergrund district. Ideally located in the days before the area was given over to housing,

the factory included workshops for blacksmiths, upholsters and varnishers, as well as a foundry and a steam-powered sawmill. From 1861, the company traded here as Jacob Lohner & Co., and in 1863 alone manufactured 429 carriages. By the time of the 1873 Vienna World Fair, ten thousand vehicles had been built, including not only elegant

landaus for the well-heeled but also haulage wagons and ambulances.

A painting of the original Lohner factory opened in 1861 on Servitengasse in Vienna's Alsergrund district (photo © Archiv Lohner, Wien).



By 1876, the Vienna factory was struggling to cope with demand. As a result, the company moved again, this time to even larger premises at Donaufelder Strasse 75–79 in Floridsdorf (the relocation was brokered by the City of Vienna, keen to secure inner city lots for the construction of housing in exchange for suburban industrial zones). Lohner's links to Alsergrund were not severed though since a smart administration building and showroom constructed in 1876 at Porzellangasse 2 was retained (Emperor Franz Joseph I was one of many high-profile visitors). It is still there today, albeit now turned over to apartments, and retains the company name in large gold letters across the facade. The building also contains Lohner's unique company archive, which includes shelves of leather-bound sales ledgers dating back more than a century, vintage advertising material, intricate customer sample cards, and all manner of related artefacts. Administered by present-day family member Andreas Lohner, it is in the process of being catalogued and conserved by a historian from

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A late 19th-century Jacob Lohner company showroom in Vienna with one of their horse-drawn carriages pulled up outside (photo © Archiv Lohner, Wien).



Vienna's Imperial Carriage Museum (Kaiserliche Wagenburg Wien).

Of the original factory on Servitengasse nothing remains beyond the street entrance. Typical late 19th-century apartment houses now occupy the site although in a coincidental nod to what once went on there, a garage operates on part of the premises. What is extant is the Lohner-Hof, an enormous apartment house around the corner at Pramergasse 10. Commissioned in 1885 as an investment property by Jacob's younger brother Franz, it once included a riding school and stables. This explains the wooden horse's head that still graces the doorway.

WORLD'S FIRST HYBRID

In 1887, Jacob relinquished company control in favour of his son Ludwig who was then nearing his thirtieth birthday. Clearly Ludwig inherited his father's commercial talent because in 1892 he received the much-prized K.u.K. Hof-Wagen-Fabrik (Royal & Imperial Carriage Makers) warrant, as Jacob had done before him. Now one of the largest coach builders in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Ludwig made three game-changing decisions.

Firstly, he recognised the potential of mass production following visits to factories in America (amongst other things, he gave the Floridsdorf factory its own rail spur to improve the flow of materials and goods). Secondly, he embraced the opportunity to work with other manufacturers so as to maximise sales across the European marketplace. And thirdly, he decided that self-powered vehicles rather than horse-drawn carriages were the future (a Peugeot he bought in 1896 in Paris was the first real car seen in Vienna).

At first Ludwig experimented with petrol engines and considered working with German automobile pioneer Gottlieb Daimler. When

that idea stalled, and smoggy steam and diesel engines proved unsuitable, he instead turned to electricity. An early devotee of green energy, he decried the fact that city air “was being mercilessly ruined by the petrol engines that now occur in such large numbers.”

Initially he partnered with the Hungarian Béla Egger, who ran an electrical company in Vienna. One of Egger’s employees was a gifted young Bohemian called Ferdinand Porsche. Between them in 1898 they created the *Egger-Lohner*, a carriage-like vehicle with a battery-powered motor mounted on the rear axle. Whilst not the first practical electric vehicle, the *Egger-Lohner* was the fastest. Capable of reaching 26 kilometres per hour, it was raced by Porsche in Berlin, where, despite the vehicle’s fragile lead-acid batteries weighing over 500 kilos, it crossed the finish line a full eighteen minutes before the next vehicle.

Spurred on by this success, Porsche jumped ship to join Lohner. Over the next couple of years, the two men broke new ground with a series of electric vehicles under the *Lohner-Porsche* name. These made use of Porsche’s first great innovation,



A two-seater cabriolet Lohner-Porsche electric car (1899–1900) in Vienna’s Technical Museum (photo © Technisches Museum Wien).

namely the transmission-free electric wheel hub motor. Given Porsche’s well-documented penchant for experimentation, it is not surprising that the 300-plus vehicles to feature what became known as the *System-Lohner-Porsche* ranged across a variety of models: from a two-seater canopied cabriolet and an open-top four-seater Mylord, which could reach 33 kph, to taxis, buses, trucks and fire engines. The company even made a one-off racing car for E. W.

WHERE TO SEE LOHNER VEHICLES TODAY

Imperial Carriage Museum Vienna (Kaiserliche Wagenburg Wien), an open-top two-seater *Personal Victoria à la Daumont* (1852) used by visiting dignitaries, and a 10-seater mail coach (1876).

Porsche Museum, Stuttgart, an *Egger-Lohner* (1898) labelled (not without controversy) as the very first Porsche (P1).

Technical Museum Vienna (Technisches Museum Wien), another *Egger-Lohner* (1898) and a *Lohner-Porsche* electric two-seater canopied cabriolet (c. 1900); also *Lohner L98* (1950) and *L125* (1954) scooters.

Ferdinand Porsche World of Experience (Ferdinand Porsche Erlebniswelten-Fahr(T)raum), Mattsee, Salzburg, a superbly-restored *Lohner-Porsche Mixte* hybrid (1901).

Italian Air Force Museum (Museo Storico dell’Aeronautica Militare), Vigna di Valle, north of Rome, an *L.127* seaplane (1916), the only Lohner aircraft in existence.

Military History Museum (Heeresgeschichtliches Museum), Vienna, a model of a *Lohner B.I ‘Pfeilflieger’* (1912).

Vienna Transport Museum Remise (Verkehrsmuseum Remise der Wiener Linien), various trams including models *G2 Nr. 2051* (1907) and *H1 Nr. 2260* (1910) both rebuilt by Lohner in 1929.

Erstes Österreichisches Motorradmuseum Sammlung Ehn, Sigmundsherberg and Motorradmuseum Vorchdorf, various Lohner scooters.

Hart & Company of Luton, England. Nicknamed *La Toujours Contente*, it was the world's first four-wheel drive vehicle (with the first four-wheel brakes to match), and inevitably turned heads at the 1900 Paris World Exposition. There was a downside: the vehicle's 1,800 kg batteries rendered it wholly unmarketable. Even potential buyers for the regular *Lohner-Porsche* models expressed concern at the limited range imposed by the vehicles' reliance on batteries, as well as their barebones bodywork.

All this prompted Lohner and Porsche to think again and in 1901 they unveiled their *Lohner-Porsche Mixte*. The world's first petrol-electric hybrid, it replaced heavy batteries with a novel serial drive wherein a Daimler petrol engine was used to drive a dynamo, which in turn powered two front wheel hub motors. Aptly dubbed *Semper Vivus* because

of its dual power source, the vehicle was lighter and more comfortable than its predecessors. It was also capable of reaching almost 80 kph — enough to break several Austrian speed records — and featured a clever switching system that ensured the right amount of electricity was supplied to the hubs at the right time, with excess energy dispersed as heat via the vehicle's metal frame.

Now the stage seemed set for mass production — but it was not to be. In 1902, Porsche was drafted into military service, where as a reserve infantryman he chauffeured Archduke Franz Ferdinand (1863–1914) in a *Lohner-Porsche Mixte*. Far from providing welcome publicity, however, this high-profile passenger served only to highlight how expensive the cars were. Other well-heeled customers included Viennese department store owner Julius Meinl, German chocolate manufacturer Ludwig Stollwerck and British banker Baron Nathan Rothschild.

Research and development had by this time cost the company a fortune and only fifty-two hybrids were ever built. When Porsche was eventually released from the military in 1906, he decided against returning to Lohner due to a dispute over patents. Instead, he was snapped up by Austro-Daimler as their technical director for Mercedes. Afterwards Ludwig Lohner said of him: "He is very young, but is a man with a big career before him. You will hear of him again." Little did he know that Porsche's wheel hub motors would eventually inspire NASA's battery-powered Lunar Roving Vehicle.

AIRCRAFT, TRAMS AND SCOOTERS

With Porsche gone, and hybrid-car production abandoned, Ludwig Lohner now looked to the skies. In 1910, he began building powered aircraft and once again became a

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LEFT: A Lohner Sissy sales brochure from the 1950s (photo © Archiv Lohner, Wien).

market leader in Austria-Hungary. Two huge assembly halls were erected in Floridsdorf, where, between 1911 and the end of the First World War, 685 aircraft were built. These included the *Lohner B.I 'Pfeilflieger'* reconnaissance aircraft, and its successor, the *Lohner B.VII* (both built for the Austro-Hungarian army). Also manufactured was the *Lohner L* flying patrol boat commissioned by the navy. Production this time was halted by the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, which forbade aircraft construction in Austria. In order to stay solvent, the versatile Ludwig turned his hand instead to truck and trolleybus body construction for home-grown companies Steyr and Gräf & Stift.

Ludwig Lohner died in 1925 — he is buried alongside his father in the flamboyant Lohner family grave in Vienna's Pötzleinsdorfer Friedhof — after which the company changed name again. As Lohnerwerke GmbH Wien, and now headed by Ludwig's son Max, the company built bus and tram bodies for Vienna's city transport. Business was good until 1934, when the Great Depression saw the Floridsdorf factory mothballed. It only reopened in 1938 following Austria's annexation by Nazi Germany, this time to produce aircraft wings for the Luftwaffe.

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This was followed in 1953 by the *Lohner L200*, which offered a maximum speed of about 60 kph and the option of a lightweight sidecar known as a *Beiboot* ('dinghy'). The best-known scooter though was the *Lohner L125*, which came the following year. Built to compete with its main rival, Puch, its



Present-day family member Andreas Lohner in the Lohner archive in Vienna (photo © Duncan JD Smith).

maximum speed of 80 kph and distinctive curved front made it a bestseller. In 1958, the *Lohner L150* built on this success by including a four-speed gearbox designed to handle Austria's mountain roads.

In 1957, the company entered new territory again with the *Lohner Sissy*. Austria's first pillion-compatible moped, it had a 50cc engine built by the Austrian engine company Rotax-Werk AG. With its low fuel consumption, three-speed twist-grip gears and storage space in the fake fuel tank, it sold 3,300 units in the first year providing Lohner with another bestseller. Its success enabled Lohner to purchase the majority of shares in Rotax two years later.

BOMBARDIER AND BEYOND

In 1966, the last of Lohner's two-wheelers left the production line in Floridsdorf. Changing fashions and the unstoppable popularity of the motor car

POSTSCRIPT

In 2010, Andreas Lohner re-established his family's company name after a forty-year break to manufacture the *Lohner Stroler*. Licensed in America as the *Lohner Falkon*, this smart two-seater moped offers a maximum speed of 20 mph courtesy of its electric wheel hub motor. More details at www.falkonbike.com.

had reduced sales significantly. Once again, the company — now headed by fifth and final boss Thomas Lohner — looked elsewhere for business. In the short term three very Austrian solutions were found: hay loaders, gun carriages for the Austrian army, and *skidoos*. The latter, a brand of snowmobile, was manufactured by Lohner's Rotax subsidiary under licence from Canadian company Bombardier Inc.

The *skidoo* deal would ultimately bring about a defining moment in the Lohner story. In January 1970, Bombardier entered the rail business and in so doing acquired the Lohner company, together with its shares in Rotax. After 150 years of considerable highs and lows this meant the end of the line for the Lohner name — but it wasn't quite the end of the story. Since the 1950s, the company had been a medium-sized manufacturer of trams and it was this side of the business that now flourished. As part of Bombardier-Rotax GmbH, the factory in Floridsdorf manufactured trams for Vienna and other Austrian cities under licence from German manufacturer Düwag. By the 1990s, trams were

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being exported as far away as Brussels, Croydon, Stockholm and even to Eskişehir in Turkey. Closer to home, the low-floor *Flexity Swift* articulated underground rail vehicle was developed for use on Vienna's then new U6 metro line.

With the acquisition in 2001 of Adtranz (DaimlerChrysler Rail Systems), the renamed Bombardier Wien Schienenfahrzeuge (Bombardier Vienna Rail Vehicles) focussed exclusively on body manufacture. By this time, however, the former Lohner factory had grown outdated. As a result, in 2008 the company moved again, to Hermann-Gebauer-Strasse in Vienna's Donaustadt district. Here in January 2021 Bombardier's Austrian transport division was itself absorbed by French rail giant Alstom.

For a while, the old machine halls in Floridsdorf were left standing albeit empty. Today modern offices occupy their place with only a distant street name, Lohnergasse, to recall them. Despite this lack of any real on-site memorial, there is no denying the Lohner family's remarkable achievements, kick-started two centuries ago by a refugee from the Rhineland. ■

An ornate invoice (1900) from Jacob Lohner & Co. after the company's move to Floridsdorf (photo © Archiv Lohner, Wien).



This article was written with the kind assistance of Andreas Lohner of the Archiv Lohner, Wien and Mario Döberl of Vienna's Imperial Carriage Museum, with inspiration from Holger Lang and Hans Weiss.

Duncan JD Smith is the sole author and publisher of the 'Only In Guides', a series of city guides aimed at independent cultural travellers. The next guide in the series, 'Only in Seville', is published in December 2021. You can find out more about his work at www.duncanjdsmith.com.