



People

The Schneider Sisters

4/5/2018 , 5 min.

Since 1975 KHS' business in East Africa has been successfully managed by a family from the Rhine-Neckar Metropolitan Region. The second generation is now at the helm – which is driven by two women.

PHOTOGRAPHY / ILLUSTRATION

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COVER PHOTO

Two unlike sisters: together Denise Schneider-Walimohamed (44, left) and Daniella Pleitz (36, right) run the KHS office in Nairobi, Kenya.

Nobody asked Denise Schneider-Walimohamed and Daniella Pleitz if they wanted to go to Africa. No wonder, really: at the time of the move one of them was just one-and-a-half and the

other a very distant twinkle in her mother's eye. The two women now head the KHS Regional Center East Africa: Schneider-Walimohamed as managing director and Pleitz as general manager. This is no coincidence but the continuation of what the parents of the two sisters began 43 years ago in Nairobi.

Father Detlef Schneider, who started his apprenticeship as a mechanic at the age of 15 with Enzinger in Worms in Germany, was often away on assignment in South America as a site manager for installations. He met his later wife Marliese at his place of work: she had completed her commercial training with Enzinger in Mannheim in the 1960s and worked in the Export Dept. When they were both asked if they wanted to set up a business in Africa with the support of an investor already active in the region, they didn't wait for long. Both of them knew the business, were down to earth, had a strong sense of adventure – and weren't afraid of hard work.

“Women play a very important role in many regions of Africa.”

Denise Schneider-Walimohamed
Managing Director, KHS East Africa Ltd.

Very busy parents

In 1975 Denise and her grandmother (responsible for 'family logistics') thus moved to Nairobi where her parents managed sales and service for the newly founded Afrotech company throughout all of East and West Africa, with mom responsible for the office and spare parts and dad dealing with sales and technology. The Schneiders worked 12 to 14 hours every day.

They thus had little time for their children – who were nonetheless never bored. “In the early years especially we had lots of visitors,” remembers Schneider-Walimohamed. “Everyone who came to Kenya from Germany stayed with us – engineers, salespeople, right up to members of the executive management. Sometimes I had to vacate my room for them.” She also remembers some of things they had to do without. “There wasn’t any bottled water in East Africa at that time, so at home we only drank products out of the glass bottled on Enzinger machines – usually Sprite or soda water but never juice. Sometimes we even had shandy – albeit well watered down,” she admits. Denise and her sister Daniella, eight years younger than herself, had a wonderful childhood and adolescence in Africa, during which they came to love the country and its people. They had lots of friends, did many kinds of outdoor sports and went on unforgettable safaris during the vacations.

In view of the fact that her parents spoke of little else but their job, even during their free time, the younger sister always swore that she didn’t want to become part of ‘the firm’. Schneider-Walimohamed, on the other hand, had set her sights on doing just this since the very beginning. After finishing her studies she took on a job as a consultant. In the meantime Enzinger’s Kenya office had moved to a new, bigger building, complete with a spacious warehouse and service center. When the managers thereof, also husband and wife, left the company, she joined in September 1997 and helped her parents manage the company.



↑
Denise Schneider-Walimohamed
(left), Daniella Pleitz (right)



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During the 1980s in Kenya: little
Daniella (left) climbs onto a bongo
antelope, helped by her mother
Marliese, while sister Denise watches.

About the persons

Denise Schneider-Walimohamed

44 years old; moved to Kenya in 1975 at the age of one and a half. She has lived and worked here ever since – except for a four-year period in France studying economics and languages and two further years in Great Britain. She has now spent a total of 20 years working for the company (now KHS East Africa) which was run by her parents in Nairobi and taken over by KHS in 2013. At the beginning of 2017 she also took on the post of head of Regional Center East Africa.

Daniella Pleitz

36 years old; was born in Nairobi. After receiving her high school diploma in Kenya she studied in Germany and England. She began her professional career in Germany and then spent a few years working in Canada for construction machine manufacturer Komatsu. Pleitz returned to Nairobi in June 2011 where as general manager she is chiefly responsible for after sales and various organizational tasks.

In 2010, when her father gradually began to retire from work, she asked her sister Daniella, who had since moved to Canada, if she would like to come back to Kenya. As the result of ever more overhauls and line relocations the local workforce had greatly increased and Denise sometimes felt out on a limb as the only German. Both women spent a long time considering whether a sisterly cooperation would work or not before Daniella, now also the mother of one daughter, agreed. It was the age difference which finally triggered Daniella's decision to move back. "Denise was always the big sister – more of a second, strict mother than a playmate," is how Pleitz now describes the special relationship the two enjoy. "When she left for college, I was just eight years old." Schneider-Walimohamed laughs. "That's pretty concise: I'm the boss." Her sister agrees.

“This was never a problem between us as she’d already been in the company for many years and had a vast amount of experience and technical expertise while I was totally new to the industry.”

The clear allocation of tasks and responsibilities between the two also helps: Denise is responsible for the new machine business while Daniella looks after the after-sales section as ‘Girl Friday’, as she laughingly adds. Since July 1, 2013, when KHS East Africa was officially taken over by the Dortmund systems provider, a total of 53 employees have been working for the branch office – 32 of whom are service engineers. With the exception of the two German women, affectionately known as the Schneider Sisters at KHS, the workforce is entirely Kenyan.

“We have to exert all our powers of persuasion to convince people that maintaining their investments is worth while.”

Daniella Peitz

General Manager, KHS East Africa Ltd.

Women in power

The second generation of Schneiders doesn’t find it unusual that they hold managerial positions as women in Africa. “Women play a very important role here. They look after the children, take charge of the household budget and are often the main breadwinners,” explains Schneider-Walimohamed, herself a mother of three. “African women work hard in order to be able to

give their children something.” Women are thus often found in executive posts, such as at the head of the second-largest brewery in Kenya, to name but one example. The challenges in Africa are different. “Here, machines are often run until they stop working,” states Pleitz. “We have to exert all our powers of persuasion to convince people that it’s worth maintaining their investments.” Schneider-Walimohamed is convinced that the sisters’ roots are an asset. “Like our parents we’ve stayed German all these years. We thus find it easy to pass on our values and sense of discipline to our colleagues.”

Any further questions?

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