

A Dangerous Profession

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The watch and jewellery trade is a very special one and not only in Germany. A very large amount of money is needed if someone is determined to become the owner of only an average retail store for jewellery and watches. You need at least more than half a million euros just to purchase the stock that will enable you to compete with other small stores. The branch is the one with the highest average price paid for a square metre of furniture, equipment and installations. It is the business with the highest insurance rates and the most difficult insurance conditions. Jewellers and watchmakers need the most expensive safety installations such as video cameras and alarm systems for their stores, showcases as well as safes, in order to fulfil the highest safety conditions. Besides all these difficulties and the expenses that come along with being a retailer, the profession has become more and more dangerous over the past years because of crime. Jewellers, especially those trading high-class jewels and top quality watches, have always been victims of robbery or theft. Since the turn of the century, however, brutality and violence have increased in a frightening way. At the end of the nineties so called 'flash burglaries' became a 'common criminal working method' whereby they rob as many precious items as possible as quickly as possible. They steal a car, put some weighty things like paving stones in the trunk in order to give the vehicle more force and drive it at high speed into the entrances or show windows of jewellery stores at night. Within a few minutes the robbers grab the watches and jewellery indiscriminately and disappear before the police can show up. Doing so, the gangsters not only get away with goods worth hundreds of thousands of euros, but also cause serious damage making expensive reconstruction work necessary. Another variation is to destroy showcases with sledgehammers. Once the retailers had protected their shops with special safety panes and Rolläden, the criminals turned to more violent armed hold-ups during the daytime. Statistics show that as a result of the protective steps taken by jewellery retailers, the number of flash burglaries decreased. For instance, the police of North Rhine Westphalia (NRW) registered 27 criminal attacks on jewellery stores during the fourth quarter of 2002 of which 23 were flash burglaries and four hold-ups. Already in the first quarter of 2003, eight of the total number of 16 registered criminal cases, not less than 50 per cent have been armed hold-ups. The most spectacular event to date took place in Düsseldorf. On April 23rd at 10:40 a.m. three masked men armed with submachine-guns, attacked a subsidiary of the jewellery chain René Kern on Königsallee the most prestigious shopping street in North Rhine Westphalia's capital. After they had entered the store, where four customers and five sales personnel and a guard were present, the criminals started shooting wildly. While one of them began throwing precious watches into a bag indiscriminately, the second man threatened the sales people and customers with his gun and the third criminal watched the entrance. During the few minutes that the burglary lasted, a man entered the store and was lucky not to be hit by a shot. In the end, fortunately only one sales woman was hurt by a grazing shot. The damage to property was considerable and the value of stolen watches added to some 2.1 million euros. After they had left the store, the criminals had a gun battle with the police, who had arrived in the meantime after receiving an alert from the René Kern guard. The gangsters escaped, changed cars, setting the first one on fire in order to cover their DNA tracks and disappeared in the direction of the Netherlands. As of now, they have not been found. As a reaction to these worrying events the Juwelier Warndienst (jeweller's warning service), which was founded in NRW in 1970, became more and more important. This service alerts all members of the trade in Germany and the surrounding countries about any crimes committed. In an effort to avoid further crime, they provide around 450

jewellers who are associated with the service detailed descriptions of how the criminals work and photos of any suspects. The information is updated on a daily basis and arrives by e-mail. The annual membership fee is only 45 euros - a very small amount in relation to the risks that watch and jewellery retailers and their employees have to face every day in a dangerous profession.

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