



Automatik Technik Berlin (ATB) in Berlin, Germany

Transmission Business as a Hobby



ATB founder and President Dimo Madjaroff

When Dimo Madjaroff decided to leave his career in science at the beginning of the 1970s, automobiles seemed like an attractive alternative.

Born in 1942 in Bulgaria, Dimo attended university in Germany,

graduating in 1969 with a master's degree in electronics and medical equipment, and worked for Bosch and Siemens before deciding to pursue a different career.

He opened his first shop in 1971 in Berlin, buying sports cars, restoring them and putting them back on the market.

In 1973 Dimo met some new friends from the United States who were living in West Berlin at the time, and he made his first trip to the United States in 1974. He spent some time in California and northern Idaho and found out that California was the best market for fancy sports cars.

"We started importing Ferrari, Porsche and Mercedes sports vehicles to the U.S.," he said. "The big problem came with the new safety standards and the Environmental Protection Agency. In 1975 we

opened a place in Manhattan Beach, Calif., to convert all these cars to meet the new safety and environmental standards. This worked several years very successfully; even Dean Martin's Jaguar Panther was handled there.

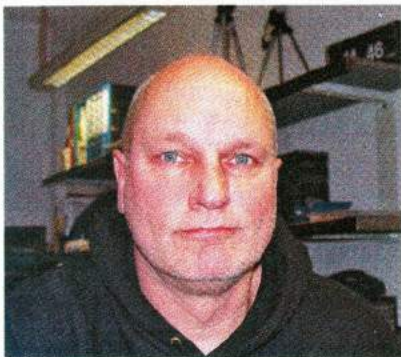
"That was the time when we also came in touch with automatic transmissions. American customers were already used to cars with automatic transmissions, and we could not find many cars in Europe with them. So we started to convert vehicles from standard to automatic transmissions."

At that time there was not much information available about automatic transmissions in Germany, so Dimo obtained repair manuals and as much technical information as possible from sources in the United States.

continues page 6



This section of the warehouse holds GM parts.



Christian Boettcher is responsible for computer administration, communication and international contacts and maintains ATB's Web site.



Marion Doepping is the office manager and takes care of accounting.



Tim Schulz checks JATCO parts.

"In 1976 a taxi driver came to our shop and saw that we were working on a Mercedes, converting it from manual to automatic transmission," Dimo recalled. "He told us that he had some problems with his transmission and Mercedes wanted to sell him a new transmis-

sion for 4,000 German Marks (a lot of money at these times!). We checked the car and found out that the vacuum line was disconnected. After a minor repair job his transmission was working perfectly again. The word among the taxi drivers spread very fast and after only three to four weeks we had more than 5,000 cab drivers as potential customers. Most of the cabs in West Berlin (95% Mercedes) were equipped with automatic transmissions. We opened up our own transmission department and it was busy 24 hours a day. We developed good business relations with many aftermarket transmission-parts suppliers from the United States, and the transmission business was growing fast."

In 1980 the import business into the U.S. became difficult because all carmakers already were producing their models for the U.S. market in the factories, and the additional demand became much smaller. ATB stopped the import activities and concentrated more and more on the transmission business in Germany.

"In 1982 we moved into a new place right in the city of West Berlin and the business developed well," Dimo said. "We employed seven or eight mechanics already, and our parts department grew every month, the stock on transmissions became bigger, and the place started to become too small.

"Up to 1990 we had no real competition in the area. At the beginning of the '90s several new transmission shops were opened

(mainly former mechanics of ours who started their own little businesses), and step by step there developed some competition in this market, too. But competition can have positive sides, because it gives you the push to be better than the others. And many of the new shops became our customers because we already had the good supply sources for parts, the best know-how and longest experience in the business. Having built up a huge stock of parts and transmissions, we noticed that our place became too small for further development and we started to look for a new, bigger place. In 1996 we moved to a new building in an industrial area, which we equipped only for transmission business."

The main building on the 50,000-square-foot property has floor space of 16,000 square feet on each of two levels, providing a usable area of more than 30,000 square feet, and there's an extra storage building with 10,000 square feet of space. The main building has two working areas with a total of 10,000 square feet, 10 hydraulic lifts and 24 work benches.

The second floor of the building is partially storage, where ATB can offer every single part for 58 different automatic-transmission types. "We keep in stock at all times 600 to 800 rebuilt and new transmissions and 5,000 to 6,000 torque converters," Dimo said. "Additionally, we stock about 3,000 used trans-

continues page 8



Chief mechanic Thavaneethan Selvadurai, better known as Thava, is responsible for all the work in the shop and takes care of most diagnostic jobs and customer contacts.



Jarek Wojowice cleans transmission parts.

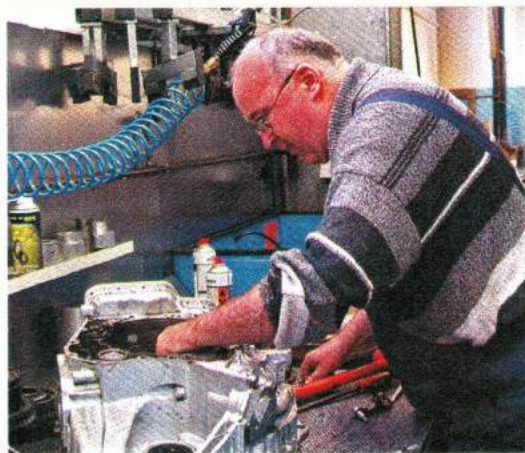


Ramanethan Rameshkuvar (called Rami) fits a K1 drum.

missions and transmission cores for all actual vehicles.

"In the past 10 years we have decreased the work on manual transmissions so they make no more than 5% of the total business at the moment. Every month we rebuild some 30 transmissions for customers who come to our shop with their cars and an average of 30 to 35 transmissions for other shops, dealers and private customers who send their transmissions to us."

ATB's warranty on all rebuilt transmissions is 12 months with no mileage limit. Seventy-five percent of its customers are from Germany, but the company sells transmissions and parts to customers in Austria, Netherlands, Finland, Norway, Poland, Ukraine, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Portugal, Spain and in more-distant countries including the U.S. and China (Hong Kong).



Martin Klopp works on a JATCO F506 transmission.

Audi-Volkswagen including ZF transmissions accounts for 45% of the business, followed by Mercedes, BMW, European GM and European Ford. The volume of Japanese transmissions is growing because many carmakers are increasing their use of transmissions from JATCO and Aisin Warner. ATB also works on all American transmissions.

Employees in the shop include five transmission rebuilders, three mechanics who take care of removing and reinstalling transmissions, and two helpers. ATB has five different diagnostic tools so it can scan every car that arrives at the shop.

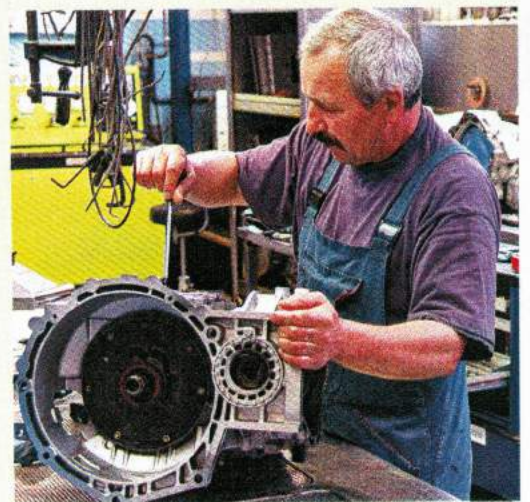
A valve-body testing machine enables the company to test all electronically controlled valve bodies after repair and before they go back into the transmission, and ATB's custom-made dynamometer is able to test all rear-wheel-drive, front-wheel-drive and four-wheel-drive transmissions on a test rig.

"In the area of Berlin we use a nearby towing service to bring cars to our place, but we also offer long-distance towing with our own vehicles," Dimo noted. "Two cars are available to be rented to customers for small charges during the repair of their transmissions.

"Because of the vast stock of rebuilt transmissions and parts, we are in the position to repair most transmissions from 1960 to 2007 within two to three days, and this really is the strength of our business. Parts ordered by transmission shops are sent out the same day by parcel services or other freight forwarders."

ATB does some advertising in the local press and has the obligatory ad in the yellow pages, but 50% of its customers come from the Internet.

"Warranty cases are handled quickly and without complications, and in difficult cases we offer the customer a replacement car free of charge. Comebacks are the worst part of the business and



Josef Koval works on a VW01M transmission.



Dimo prepares to dyno-test a transmission.

we try to solve the cases so the customers are convinced of the quality of our service."

To help maintain productivity, the company continues to improve working conditions, the equipment and the skill of its employees, Dimo said. "We do not want to make the business bigger but try to make it better. By visiting all important shows which concern our work and presenting our company, we keep good business relations with all companies in this industry."

Many people say to Dimo, "You are 65 already; why don't you retire?"

"Well," he answers, "I am retired; transmission business is my hobby now. Many customers know me more than 30 years, and they will be disappointed when they come to the place and I am not here." **TD**