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How Uli Maybach is conserving a German luxury brand's legacy

As the 4th generation of the illustrious family, Uli Maybach is promoting innovation through the Maybach Foundation while going the extra mile to build customer connect for this ultra luxury car brand across the world.



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Updated On May 9, 2025 at 08:11 AM IST

Read by:

637 Industry Professionals

Highlights

- Great-grandson of Wilhelm Maybach and grandson of Karl Maybach, Uli carries the iconic surname with grace.
- Believes brand identity is shaped through genuine human connections, not just design and engineering.
- Maybach's second coming under Mercedes-Benz in 2014 redefined it as a modern symbol of ultra-luxury.



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His surname is the famous German ultra luxury car brand but Uli Maybach is anything but pompous. On the other hand, he is super affable and laughs good-naturedly when asked the genesis of his first name.

“Well, it is short for Ulrich and so my full name is Ulrich Wilhelm Schmid-Maybach. But if you are in the United States like I am, it gets a shortcut and nicknamed vei    aybach,” says the great-grandson of Wilhelm Maybach and grandson of Karl Maybach who founded the brand over 100 years ago.

The interview is happening in the elegant Raffles property at Udaipur where the distinguished visitor was part of the recent launch event for the Mercedes-Maybach SL 680 Monogram Series due to debut in India next year.



What is it like to have a surname like Maybach accompanied by the pressure of protecting the legacy of a famous brand? “I do not know and really don’t think about it that much. I am more interested in people’s stories. I think other people are more interesting than I am because I already know everything about myself, more or less,” says Uli Maybach with a twinkle in his eyes.

Understanding the customer

And if that particular person happens to be a car collector, “my understanding of the brand gets bigger and stronger and more multifaceted”. Simply put, “when I understand a customer, I understand myself”.

One of these customers wrote to Uli telling him how he never really drove his prized Maybach anywhere but would only show it to friends while insisting that they put on surgical coverings over their shoes before they stepped inside. This man would spend his whole weekend underneath the Maybach cleaning it with a toothpick!

“Well, here is a customer who cannot afford everything else in the world of luxury except that one thing. His whole life kind of revolves around that car and I get pleasure out of having a dialogue with him about this,” says Uli Maybach.

It was in 1997 when Mercedes-Benz decided to revive the Maybach brand that it had acquired nearly four decades earlier. Olivier Boulay, Design Manager, came out with the concept car at the Tokyo Motor Show. Maybach recollects going over for the unveiling and being kind of inducted as a brand ambassador as that car came out.



Revival of the brand

There was a tumultuous period that followed before Maybach was revived as a sub-brand of the Mercedes-Benz S-class in 2014. What is it about this brand that still manages to create a sense of awe among people?




“Well, I can talk about the many years of history, the humble origins of Wilhelm Maybach and our commitment to maintaining the archive and building a small museum space in the hometown in Germany,” says Uli Maybach.

Is there any plan in place for the next generation of the family to keep the brand legacy going? “I spend a fair amount of time that I enjoy with the family office community of people who have been in a similar situation as I (have),” he responds.

This is enough to learn from them as well as impart lessons on succession planning, choosing advisors, the responsibility of wealth and how one behaves towards a family brand.

Almost spiritual

“How do you even define a family brand? For us, one of the challenges is you have this corporate Maybach brand, and then you also have this family brand as it were which is like it is — a certain, almost a spiritual, portion of it. And so for us to be able to have this really close working cooperation with the automotive brand, there is a lot of discussion that goes back and forth,” continues Maybach.

He recalls the time he was at a family office conference and spoke about his grandfather, Karl Maybach. When he turned about 60 and thereabouts, the doctor told him that he had to do something better for his health. Consequently, Karl Maybach bought some property in the mountains south of Munich,    in the middle of nowhere, more or less in the little village”.

As Uli Maybach narrates, there are pictures of his granddad reading under these beech trees which were already quite large at the time.

“There was a caretaker who was with our family for 60 years. She started to work for my grandfather in 1939 and passed away about 60 years later. She raised us as kids when we were over there and would talk about these trees and the people who had come and gone and all the spirits that lived in that backyard and so forth,” he continues.



Trees under threat

Then came an abrupt twist in the tale. About a year ago, Uli Maybach got a letter from a real estate developer saying that these trees had to go because it was important to access the alley. They were too close to the property line and the developer was going to build some sort of housing project over this.

Maybach shared this message with his attorney who wrote back and asked him not to worry about it. Back in 1939, Uli's grandfather had given those trees a lifetime right of survivorship over any other project in the neighbourhood.

So "this man sat in that backyard" and thought about what he was doing here. Karl Maybach was going to preserve those trees so that their rights superseded the development rights in the area. "And we have taken care of these trees and this is kind of a DNA story that has nothing to do with cars and vehicles," says Maybach.

On the contrary, it has something to do with the mind that developed these cars. "What does that mean in terms of foresight? When you ask me about succession and what the next generation is going to do, I need to sit here under a tree and think," he adds.

Thinking ahead

That, in turn, is worth thinking about especially in a family environment where “you are responsible for something like this and you need to think more in terms of 50 years rather than just next year”.

For someone who has spent virtually his entire life in the US, Maybach reveals how his surname constantly poses pronunciation challenges to Americans though this hardly matters by the end of the day.

As much as it is a legacy brand that has its origins in Germany, American history has also had Bernard Maybeck, the San Francisco-based architect who died in 1957 and whose surname becomes an easier reference point at least from the viewpoint of pronunciation.

“So I am not going to argue with people about how to pronounce, and they may as well just localise the pronunciation. For Americans, it is so much easier to help them out with something they already know,” grins Maybach.



Pronunciation challenges

And this is not something that is just confined to the US. In India, he adds, the name of his great-grandfather, Wilhelm, is sometimes mispronounced as William which is not entirely surprising.

“It is so much easier to say William. And if I think back to even one of the board members at Mercedes, when we first launched the Maybach in New York, they were struggling with Maybach and maybe they did not really know how to (pronounce the word),” he recollects.

A long time resident of San Francisco, Maybach commutes between the US and Germany as part of his responsibilities as President of the Maybach Foundation which mentors the next generation of innovators. His parents moved here many decades earlier and started a family in San Francisco.

This is where Uli Maybach was born and raised even while he maintains a dual citizenship today. In business school, he specialised in “basically German” business practices as well which helped him immensely.

Magic of Silicon Valley

Would things have been different had he been in Europe all his life? “Oh, I definitely think so. I mean, just look at the innovation playing field right now. The ideas and innovations coming out of Silicon Valley are unsurpassed around the world. I feel very, very fortunate to be there. I would equate it almost to being in Germany 100 years ago when the internal combustion engine was developed,” he says.

There is no question, continues Maybach, that he considers himself very lucky to be exposed to all this innovative thinking. “You know, the number of brilliant Indian engineers in the Valley, why are they all there? Some of your very best people here from India, they go to the Valley to run startup companies. There is no other place I would rather be in,” he reiterates.

The trips to Germany include visits to cities like Berlin and checking out tech startups. However, the thinking there is quite different in terms of carrying “a little bit” of a coupon-clipper mentality. In the US, people are willing to take a chance, strike pay dirt with one successful innovation and then hit it out of the park. The appetite for risk-taking is clearly greater.

The Maybach siblings

Uli Maybach has three siblings: two sisters and a brother. The brother, Chris, is a filmmaker as well as a winemaker who is "exceptional at both". He has had his films win "awards of regard" at the Cannes Film Festival in France and Sundance Film Festival in the US.

Chris also handles the Maybach Family Vineyards which is a family wine project. "And he has probably had as many as a hundred Parker points in wines. So it is a coveted collector wine that he makes," he says.

Of Uli Maybach's two sisters, one is a photographer who has worked for numerous different outlets and spent five years in Harappa shooting archaeological digs in that area.

"So they had digs up there that her job was to photograph what they were excavating until it got too hot in the kitchen and it was not safe up there to go anymore," he says. The other sister is a sculptor who is into ceramics work and focuses more on "sort of the Caribbean and Cuba area".

Father, daughter bonding

Uli Maybach is up every morning at 5 and his little daughter, who is all of three-and-a-half years old, insists on getting up with him at this hour.

“We hang out for an hour to talk and she actually makes me a cappuccino she insists on doing. She knows how to run the machine, gets a chair, pushes it over there while I assist her a little bit. And then she gets to drink some of the foamed milk and I get to drink my coffee with the foam,” he laughs.

Father and daughter then talk about the day, about how she slept and so on. “And I have a German au pair because I would like to have the German cultural thinking inculcated in my childhood relationship,” says Maybach as the interview draws to a close.

It is a pleasant surprise to meet him again the following day at Udaipur airport and chat casually before the departure announcement interrupts the conversation. Watching him leave with a cup of masala tea, it is evident that Uli Maybach is a man who is comfortable in his own skin.