Dr. Robert Adler

Dr. Robert Adler accomplished things that the rest of us just dream. He chose a career because it fascinated him–and ended up changing the lifestyle habits of a nation. Trained as an engineer, Dr. Adler lead the team that invented the first practical wireless TV remote control.

A native of Austria, Dr. Adler received his PhD in Physics from the University of Vienna in 1937. Just before the German annexation in 1939, Dr. Adler fled Austria for England, and then on to Chicago. In 1941--six days before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Dr. Adler got a job with the Zenith Corporation. All production switched from the consumer market to the war effort, and he found himself working on very technical projects involving radio transmitters and receivers.

With the end of the war, Zenith turned its attention back to more commercial matters, and especially to the latest home appliance, the television. Zenith's founder and President, Commander E.F. McDonald, Jr., liked the TV programs, but he hated the commercials.

He told Dr. Adler and his engineers to figure out a way to turn the sound off during breaks without getting up off the couch, a "blab-off," they called it. The first one was dubbed "the Lazy Bones". It was wired to the set and people complained of tripping over the wire. The second they called the "Flashmatic", because it depended on four photocells to turn the sound up or down, but it could only work in a dark room. The third one used high-frequency sound or ultrasonics, and that was the charm. With the click of a button, a tiny little hammer on an aluminum rod hit an ultrasonic bell. The sound would go off or on, the channel would change, or the TV itself would go on or off.

Dr. Adler and his team of young researchers invented the ultrasonic remote control in 1955. It hit the market in 1956–and the rest, shall we say, is history.

Through the years, Dr. Adler's work has been awarded 180 patents and, in 1997, a national Emmy Award for pioneering developments in remote control technologies. He spends his time travelling and skiing, and noting the changes and improvements infrared technologies have brought to his original work. But he believes that is the best part of practical research–coming up with one invention in a chain of them that makes an incredibly complicated device into something practical and affordable. And that, to him, is the most fascinating part of all.