

PERSONALITY PROFILE:

Ralph E. Shattück

BY JOHN ROMERO



Ralph Shattück, behind his desk, shows off a favored Luger carbine.

Ralph Shattück might have been anything in the world except the No. 1 expert on German Lugers.

He studied speech therapy in college, pursued dramatics and theatre arts, bossed a railroad maintenance outfit in the Army, sold steel and later peddled brake cables. And most of that time he was short on bucks.

He is of German descent but never made a trip to Germany until 1973. And after building a respectable Luger collection in the 50's he sold all but one gun — and started over.

How did Shattück become the foremost Luger expert? Just give the credit to perseverance — the kind every good salesman has.

"My first boss at Republic Steel told me something I still remember," Shattück said. "He claimed a good salesman is a good teacher and a good social worker — but he's always a bundle of nerves. I find that to be true."

Shattück seems to be moving even when he's sitting still. His eyes dart around. He waves his hands in expansive gestures. He talks in short, pithy sentences. And he laughs a lot.

Although ratings are difficult, Shattück probably ranks as the No. 1 Luger collector and authority in the world. He is quick to praise other experts, however, particularly Dick Diebold and Hank Vissar of Holland, Randall Gibson of Texas and Bernie Lafferty of Connecticut.

"There are a lot of hidden collectors," Shattück mused. "A lot of the people who helped me used to buy Lugers for five and ten dollars and put them up in the attic and didn't even know what they were. Now they're bringing them out again.

"The man who taught me a lot about Lugers was Harold Cockshot from Cleveland. He really helped me. I think the biggest honor I've ever had was when he started to ask me the questions."

Shattück recently accepted a position as vice president of Norton Armament, a new company located in Mt. Clemens, Michigan, near Shattück's home in Birmingham. The company manufactures a stainless steel automatic pistol called the TP-70 — a gun which Shattück calls "the finest automatic ever made in the United States."

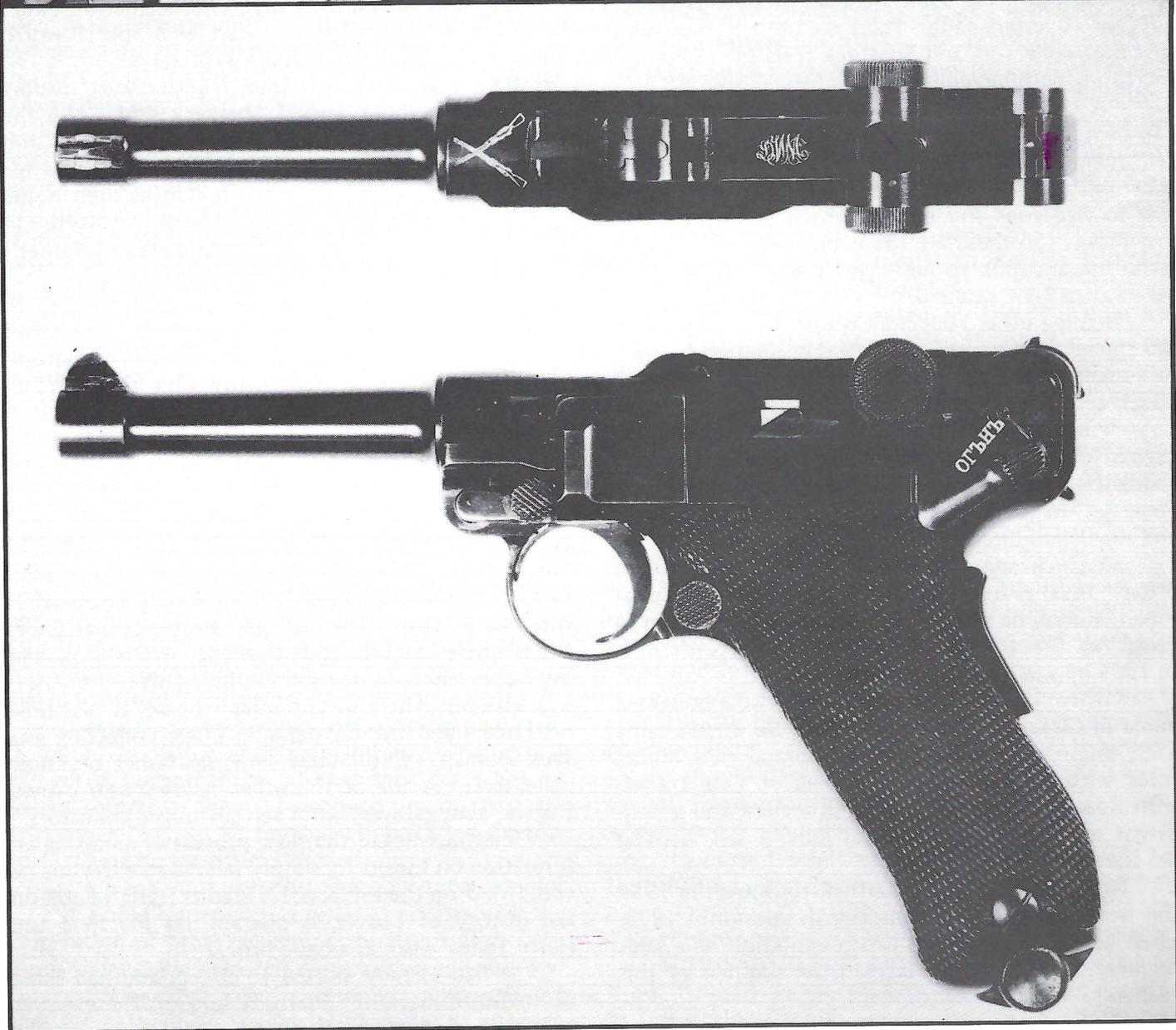
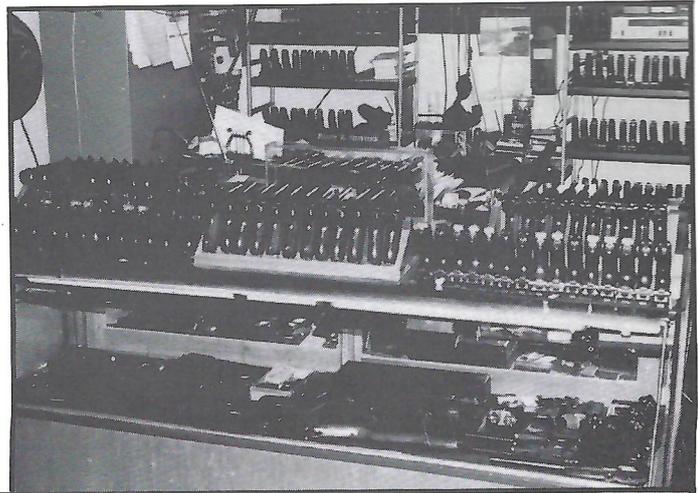
His new job is like a dream come true to Shattück. "It's what I've always wanted," he said. "After working 25 years for someone else, building the best Luger collection in the world and working 40 to 48 hours a week I'm now as happy as a cat with a bowl of cream."

Shattück admits he will be working longer hours on his new job than in the past — and that relaxing will be just as tough.

"I can never sit down and relax when I come home at night," Shattück said. "My relaxation is kissing my wife, saying hello to the kids, asking what's new — and then going downstairs into my gun shop where I work another six hours, mostly answering mail.



An expanded view of Shattuck's gunroom-office. Lugers, in sequence are shown along with variations and many other fine automatics. In the case, many fine guns are visible.



One of Ralph Shattuck's favorites, the 1906 Russian. A mint condition rare Luger variation.

"My wife knows if I come up early — say 9:30 or 10 o'clock — and sit down to read the paper or watch television I immediately fall asleep. But I could have worked in the gun shop all evening without feeling tired.

"I'm the happiest guy in the world when the phone rings and it's somebody from California or Florida asking me questions about Lugers. I don't care whether I sell them a gun or not. It's the idea of helping them in some way that is fun. People think I'm funny but money is not that important to me. I've told my wife, Nancy, that if I could do nothing other than help other people that would be the greatest joy in the world."

Nancy, Shattuck's "right arm", collects the day's mail, sorts it according to requests and fills orders for lists, tie clasps and other small matters. Shattuck then dictates detailed replies to her, answering the remaining letters.

Shattuck receives a minimum of 10 letters a day from Luger collectors and his mail often runs as high as 30 or 40 letters daily. There are literally thousands of Luger collectors and Shattuck feels the number is increasing with incredible speed.

"A collector can be a guy with one gun or he can own 275 like I do," Shattuck said. "But I always tell them although they may never get to my stature they shouldn't worry about it. I tell them to own one to five guns and be very proud of them. I was just lucky. So these are the people who call me and write me and talk to me. The letters come from as far away as New Zealand."

Helping other collectors is just a variation of an old theme for Shattuck, who was headed for a career in speech therapy when he entered Western Reserve University.

"I had looked forward to working with handicapped children," Shattuck said, "but I had second thoughts about it and didn't finish up at Western Reserve. In fact, I only stayed about three months and then went directly into the Army."

Shattuck spent two years in the Army as an officer in the transportation corps. Stationed at Pusan, Korea, he worked on maintaining the Pusan to Seoul rail line for which his outfit was responsible. In 1954 he was honorably discharged.

"When I was in the service my wife bought a home in Cleveland," Shattuck said. "So when I came back there was my wife in this brand new home, stuck with the mortgage up to here, so I took a job with Republic Steel. I worked as a clerk and a millwright and some other general jobs — just learning the steel business."

Republic Steel sent Shattuck to Detroit in 1957 and he worked for the company in sales until 1970, when he joined American Chain and Cable as a sales engineer. He left American in the summer of this year to join Norton Armament.

With American, Shattuck sold brake cables and throttle cables to Chrysler Corporation, General

Motors Truck and Coach and American Motors. When you pull the parking brake or step on the accelerator of a vehicle made by one of those three companies you are yanking or stomping on Mr. Shattuck's former work.

"If they don't work," said one of Shattuck's friends, "they're going to recall Ralph."

"I was raised in a family that appreciated shot-guns," Shattuck said. "My father owned his own skeet club and was the Ohio champion in skeet for many years. So I was always interested in guns on that basis. In addition, my grandfather was chief of police of Cleveland and so I was raised in an atmosphere of law enforcement and guns."

Shattuck made his first "deal" at the age of 13. He had found an old, rusty .44 Colt Frontier while rummaging in his grandfather's trunk and received permission from his father to display the gun on a wall in his room.

A neighbor about Shattuck's age offered to trade a new .45 for the old piece. Shattuck looked at his ancient Colt, heavy with rust, and decided to swap. The new .45 turned out to be an NRA Special worth about \$15. The .44 was in the \$100 range.

"So I decided right then I better start reading and learning about guns," Shattuck said. "By the time I was 18 or 19 I was going to gun shows and picking up little Owl Head revolvers. They sold for about four or five dollars. I would bring them home and have a sale once a month. I used to advertise in the paper and spread the guns out on my father's ping pong table."

Somewhere in this period Shattuck decided to collect automatics — and in that field the Luger caught his interest because of its many variations.

"There were a great many Colt collectors in those days," Shattuck said, "and that's another reason why I chose Lugers for my specialty. I'm kind of like a bulldog. I like to start something new. I thought Lugers offered more opportunity and they certainly offered more variations in the automatic line than Colts."

"They were much tougher to come buy than Colts but that offered a challenge. What challenge is there to go down to a local gun store and find something immediately? The challenge is to look and hunt and really dig for something. This is the way it was with me. There was nothing in books at that time on Lugers and the big name in Luger collecting was Jack Dunlap. I still think he's the father of Luger collectors. A lot of the other fellows who owned Lugers were gatherers, not serious Luger collectors."

Shattuck began the slow process of amassing information on Lugers by simply talking to everyone he could find on the subject. He credits Datig's book on the history of Lugers as opening up the field and Harry Jones' work as a basic primer.

"I had already started to collect and had some of this information," Shattuck said. "These books helped me immensely and I still advise beginning collectors to read them if possible."

When Shattuck entered college he kept collecting Lugers. He describes himself as "a hustler."

"I would buy those five dollar guns and sell them for seven," Shattuck said. "You realize enough two dollar bills and they help. They turn into more Lugers. But remember, a Luger would cost me \$20 to \$30 in those days. The same Luger now costs \$300.

"I got good grades in school but I was never heavy on books. I couldn't stay still. I played football and was the basketball manager. But I always left my weekends open or maybe a few hours at night to hustle around and do something. I was always parlaying something. I recommend this to beginners now. My father wasn't wealthy. I carried three newspaper routes and sold vinegar my grandfather and uncle used to make. I grew tomatoes. I took all the money I earned and parlayed it.

"Right now I'm helping a young guy get started in Luger collecting. He's going to be a Baptist minister. He works at night on the General Motors assembly line and goes to school during the day. He's poor as a churchmouse — and that's funny since he's going to be a minister — but I'm helping him and he's going to make it. He's going to be a great Luger collector."

Shattuck's Luger collecting came to what he describes as a "screeching halt" when he entered the service in the early 1950's. He had a grand total of 50 Lugers at that point — none of them worth a lot of money. By today's prices, however, he owned a small fortune. After his discharge, Shattuck turned to the business of making a living and his collection lay dormant. His study of Lugers, however, continued.

When he finally moved to Michigan in his job with Republic Steel he had to sell 49 of the 50 Lugers to make a deposit on a home.

"I was down to one gun and lots of knowledge," Shattuck said. "After I did that I really started to sweat. I had no money but I continued to read a lot. I didn't make a move in the Luger field again until 1963. I asked the bank for a loan to improve my home and they loaned me \$1,000. I really needed only \$300, so I took the \$700 and said I was no longer going to stand on one Luger."

The \$700 and that famous Shattuck determination was an unbeatable combination. Within 10 years Shattuck owned 275 Lugers.

"I started to go to gun shows," Shattuck said. "I started to switch and trade and buy. You could still get a Luger carbine at that time for \$200. I bought several of them. I swapped one of them for eight other Lugers. So my collection started to grow again. Gung ho from 1963!"

Is a book on Lugers by Shattuck forthcoming?

"I would rather write a series of articles with the cooperation of other collectors," Shattuck said. "My idea is to let *ARMS GAZETTE* publish a collection of Luger articles each year — complete with updated price lists. There is a tremendous amount of information on Lugers coming forth each year. Sometimes I

learn something new each month. Recently I learned there was a Finnish Prison Administration Luger. Nobody knew this until Fred Datig dug it up through his sources in Finland. A series of articles could incorporate new information like this."

Although Shattuck is world famous for his Luger knowledge his first visit to Germany did not occur until December, 1973.

"My grandmother was German," said Shattuck, "and so was my mother. My grandmother though I was dumb because I didn't know how to speak German. I could speak some Spanish — but no German."

Shattuck simply never had the opportunity to travel to Europe until last year. When he did his biggest thrill was visiting the Mauser factory.

"The most important thing a gun collector can have is an understanding wife," said Shattuck thoughtfully. "Nancy understands that my guns are a very important part of my life. She contends with the many hours I spend in gun shops and all those long trips. She's the most important thing to me. She even does my editing. It takes me a day to write an article on Lugers but it takes her four days to edit it, but there isn't a single punctuation mark out of place."

Shattuck's son, Richard, is 13. His daughter, Nancy, is 15. Neither show much interest in Shattuck's guns — and that's okay with Shattuck.

Shattuck fires Lugers constantly at a range near his home. He describes himself as a "fairly decent shot," shooting special Lugers which are not part of his collection. He is tempted to fire his \$10,000 Luger carbine — but only tempted.

The piece was presented to Hiram Maxim by George Luger and has Maxim's name inlaid in gold on the chamber. Shattuck believes it is his best Luger and worth considerably more than the \$10,000 for which it was appraised several years ago.

Shattuck also owns Luger's personal Luger — a gun of considerable worth and a source of pride to Shattuck.

What does the future hold for Shattuck and other Luger collectors?

"It's a never-ending upward spiral," Shattuck said. "I see no end to it. More and more collectors come out of the woodwork every day and there are fewer and fewer guns.

"I don't believe people should think they can't collect today because of high prices. Tomorrow will be even higher. Any individual who wants to collect Lugers should start buying now. And he doesn't have to buy them from me. If he calls me I'll tell him where to get what he wants.

It's never too late to start. I remember I used to turn down Lugers for \$35. I thought that was too much money. The other day I bought one of those \$35 turndowns for \$300. Can you imagine that?"

Shattuck laughed and waved his cigarette, "I think I might decide to give up smoking," he said.

If he does, he will. That's the way things happen with Shattuck.

John Romero