

Almost Unique Collector's Prize, A Russian Luger, Is Enhanced By Strange Circumstances Of Its Presentation By Soviet Premier To American Collector

AT THE MOSCOW ARSENAL orderly room a non-commissioned officer walked briskly to work one morning, removed his pistol belt and red-trimmed tunic, and then sat down at his desk to see what paper work lay before him.

There was a memo. He gazed at it casually; then stiffened in alertness for the memo bore the imprint of a very high personage. At once he rose and quickly shrugged himself back into his jacket, buttoning the high collar and instinctively carrying himself at "attention" as befitted the importance of this occasion. Pausing by a security key rack he removed a certain key, then strode purposefully down a long corridor and out into the storage areas of the Arsenal.

Before a door he stopped, unlocked the heavy old bronze padlock and entered. Snapping on the light, he took a quick look around and then lifted the lid of a yard-long armory chest. From the chest he took a Luger pistol, viewed it briefly, then put it back and took another. At last, satisfied, he turned, locked the door, and carried the Luger back to his desk. He did not know what the gun was for, but he was instructed to have the Arsenal workmen give it a very careful refinish and fit it into a case for presentation.

He was trained not to puzzle over the orders of his superiors. He did not question why the Kremlin had directed that an old model Parabellum marked with the Czar's insignia of crossed rifles be chosen, nor did he pause to consider that the small store room he had just left might have contained

more than a million dollars worth of rare Luger pistols, in terms of American collectors . . .

The foregoing vignette is a fictional reconstruction of the first step in the journey of a Russian Luger to America. However, there is no fiction involved in a letter dated May 10, 1962, from the United States Customhouse in Washington addressed to gun collector Thomas J. Kayser of Minneapolis, Minnesota:

"We are enclosing for your information a copy of a letter received from the Department of State regarding DWM Luger pistol serial No. 898 provided by Soviet Premier Nikita S. Khrushchev for your personal gun collection . . ."

Signed by Deputy Collector in Charge Robert E. Werner, the Customs Bureau informed collector Kayser that he had been assessed a duty of \$25.13; that papers were enclosed for informal entry if he would please sign and return, and that the gun could be sent on to him C.O.D. shipping via Railway Express from Washington. This pistol is the fourth or fifth "crossed rifles" Luger known to collectors in the U.S. To obtain it, Kayser by a simple gesture set into motion events involving heads of state and cabinet members of both nations, and a small Swiss watch . . .

The Russian Lugers originated in Germany. A small field test lot was bought some time after 1906 and before 1914 from Deutsche-Waffen und Munitionsfabriken (DWM). In 9mm caliber with

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By William B. Edwards

THE PREMIER'S PARABELLUM

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PREMIER'S

PARABELLUM

(Continued)

Crossed rifles, readily identifiable Moisin 91s, appear over chamber. Thumb safety marking is in Cyrillic characters.

short 4-inch barrel, this pistol might pass as a common "P. '08" at first glance. But there is no stock lug, often indication of early production, and the grip safety is special, with the marking in Russian instead of the common "Gesichert"—"Made safe," in German.

Atop the receiver ring is the imprint of crossed rifles. These are very clearly the Model 1891 Russian service rifle or "Three Line Nagant". Grips are plain full-checked walnut; the magazine bottom ends are recessed, of walnut.

Original finish was probably the full old-time rust blue with contrasting straw-tempered trigger, safety, grip screws and magazine latch. But the pistol shown, No. 898, has had a custom Soviet "presentation reblue" of good color, though the rifle stamping is a little thin on top. The case, made in Moscow, is American style with a velvet-like cloth lining. There are no accessories or spare clip.

To obtain one of these pistols, literally unknown in the West, had long been an ambition of Tom Kayser. Among his collection of 70 Lugers were Dutch, American, Swiss, South American, military and commercial specimens, but no Russian model. It is thought that among Luger collectors today there are specimens owned only by R. Alexander Montgomery, a Mr. Scott of Pittsburgh and a Mr. Taylor in Houston, and Sam Cummings. To find another Russian Luger would be a prize of first importance; certainly, the crossed rifles Parabellum is the "Paterson" in the field.

Then a moment of history passed, and in its passing, gave Tom Kayser his opportunity. For Kayser is a gun collector by avocation and a watch repairman by profession. And when Soviet Premier Khrushchev visited the United States in 1961, he gave away his wrist-

watch in a gesture of amity, to an American factory worker.

When watchmaker Kayser read of the incident in a watch trade journal, it distressed him to think of the Chief of State of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics having to stop and ask someone for the time of day, and he set about remedying the loss. He obtained a Swiss-movement wrist watch, embellished it with some engraving, and sent it to Moscow on May 24, 1961, with a very friendly letter to Mr. Khrushchev:

"I have personally cleaned, oiled and adjusted the watch, in addition to printing your name on the dial," he wrote, "and trust that it will give you many years of service being of the water-resistant, dust-proof, and shock resistant kind with an unbreakable mainspring . . ."

Though Kayser was careful to inform the Premier that the watch was a gift for which he did not expect any payment, he was also careful to say that he was a collector of automatic pistols and lacked a Russian crossed rifles gun in his collection. He sought Premier Khrushchev's help in buying one from the Soviet Government and was quite open about being willing to pay for one. Though he told Khrushchev that he would prefer "not to receive any publicity from this presentation," his name was to become in a few months as well known in certain high diplomatic circles as Col. Abel or Francis Powers!

At first, he began to suppose the whole thing had been lost in the shuffle.

Some minor clerk, perhaps, in the Kremlin, had a new wrist watch that he could not wear (it having the Premier's name on it.) Nearly a year went by. Then a long white envelope arrived bearing the prosaic return address "Washington, D.C." But it contained a brief letter, dated March 22, 1962, from Soviet Embassy counselor Georgi M. Kornienko giving Kayser the latest news via diplomatic pouch from Moscow:

. . . It is with great pleasure that I advise you that a pistol "Luger" 1902-1906, about which you wrote to Chairman Khrushchev, was handed to the U.S. Embassy in Moscow on March 19, 1962 to be forwarded to you. I hope you will get it soon . . .'

Pulse pounding, Kayser typed out a reply. In great excitement he told Kornienko "I was more than overwhelmed by your letter and do not quite know how to express my appreciation for this pistol, which I have desired for my collection for many, many years. This gun I am sure, will be my most highly treasured pistol and will remind me continually of the true friendship of your Honored Premier, Nikita C. Khrushchev; regardless of the many differences between your country and ours . . ."

On March 19, the Luger pistol had been handed to U. S. Embassy Counselor Boris H. Klosson who had been called to the Soviet Foreign Ministry formally to receive it. With the gun was an aide-memoire which remained in U. S. Embassy files that cited Kayser's letter to the Soviet chief and stated:

"It is requested that the 'Luger' pistol of the above-mentioned model be transmitted to Mr. Thomas J. Kayser in the name of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R . . ."

Then followed a really anxious period of waiting. Came April 6 and at last Kayser could stand the suspense no longer. He typed out a quick note to our then-ambassador at Moscow, Mr. Llewellyn Thompson, asking to be told of the date of shipment, how sent, etc. The airmail letter to Moscow must have taken some three days. Barely four days after he dropped the letter in the post office, the Luger was in the U. S.

Project Luger had gone into high gear at once and had come forward by diplomatic mail, special courier from Moscow. Dated April 10, at Washington, a formal letter had been drafted and circulated to all concerned and sent out to Kayser. It bore the signature of Mr.

Nestled in its own private, padded case, the Premier's Parabellum is a sight that would gladden the eye of even the most ardent Luger collector.

chko, was a maddening model of brevity: "Will you please state for what purpose these arms are required?"

He said nothing about whether the arms, bought by Czarist Russia a century ago, were still in existence or could be made available as surplus. All he asked was "Why?" My reply, less than laconic, may have been modern Russia's first official exposure to the phenomenon of the American Gun Collector who slashes away at red tape and Iron curtains as if they were so much gauze.

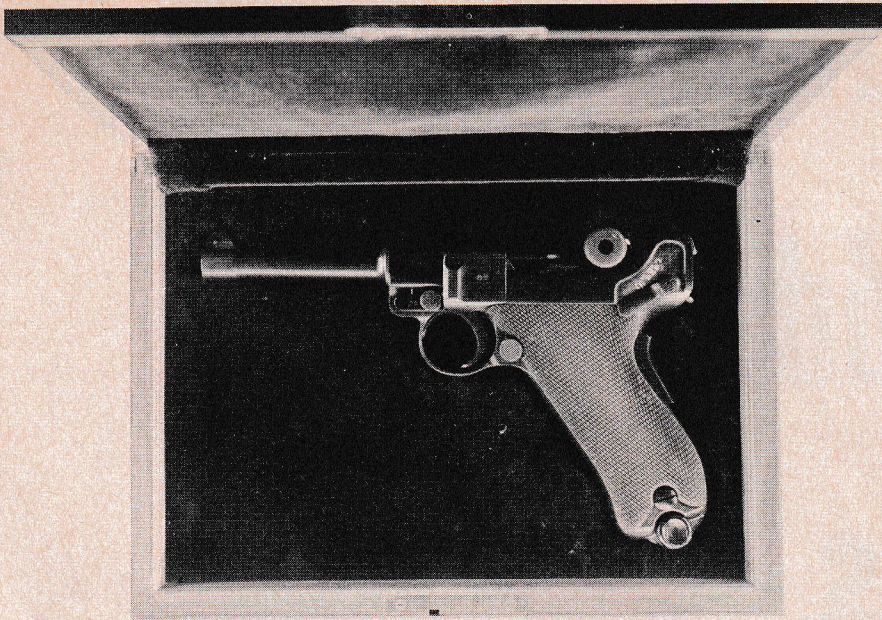
Reposing in Soviet arsenals today must be scads of really interesting collector guns. Sam Colt sold the Czar thousands of 1851 Navies for the Black Sea and Baltic fleets. None has been seen in the West. Berdan I rifles and carbines made in Hartford would also be a strongly demand item. The Russian Army series of rifles and rifle muskets, ca. 1855-60, would be just the ticket for modern black powder shooters.

About 1865, tests were run with Sharps, Spencers, Wilson's and other capping and cartridge breech loaders. Where are they? Smith & Wesson .44 "Russian model" revolvers, with spur guards of the "Ordinez pattern" have been seen in the hands of irregular or friendly Iron Curtain troops as far apart as East Germany and North Korea. But the indications of 200,000 made and delivered suggest many more must be in store in some depot "east of the Urals."

Gatling guns, whether Yankee made or "Gorloffs," would be well worth shipping back here, even the electric drive guns said to have been briefly employed in the Korean War. Such goodies as Schwarzlose long-barreled first model automatic pistols, favorites of the Czar's secret police, would thrill many an American gun collector today.

The list may be virtually endless—from the fabled "Hermitage" collections which have been partially sold from time to time, to "original grease" arms chests in forgotten ordnance depots, to ivory stocked flintlock horse pistols beloved of the Boyars in the days of Peter the Great, all are still locked in that fabulous arms collectors storehouse that is Russia.

I have the address already, but does anyone know a source for Swiss watches, clzap?



Robert I. Owen, Officer in Charge, of Soviet Union Affairs of the Department of State. The resounding titles indicate this man was one of the most important persons in Washington below Cabinet level concerned with Soviet matters: the case of the Russian Luger had landed on his desk.

Mr. Owen responded with full courtesy and "to facilitate your receipt of this gift from Mr. Khrushchev" he sent Kayser application forms for a Munitions Import License (State Department Form DSP-38). Though at this time the Munitions Control office of State was having problems deciding if Luger pistols should be imported from Iron Curtain countries, causing some Lugers to be bounced from Czechoslovakia via Finland into the U.S. in subsequent months, there was no hesitation in Mr. Owen's communication:

"I will see that the completed application is processed promptly in the appropriate office of the Department," he wrote about this Luger from the very pivotal figure of Iron-curtain-dom; then, unequivocally, he stated: "When I learn that the license has been granted and forwarded to you, I will see if I can arrange to have the pistol sent C.O.D. and in bond to (you) . . ."

The rest, as they say, is history. The pistol arrived, was cleared through Customs by Kayser personally on Informal Entry papers (Customs Form 5119-A), assessed 27½ per cent of its listed value of \$85 plus specific duty of \$1.75, and the transaction was complete! To the

Soviet premier Kayser sent his heartfelt thanks:

" . . . I am very pleased with this gun and find it difficult to express my sincere appreciation for such an excellent gift. It is my wish to assure you that this will be one of my most highly prized possessions the rest of my life. I certainly never dreamed of receiving such a beautiful gun along with the fitted case, and I thank you sincerely for this.

"I hope that you have received the personalized wrist watch which was sent, and that you are equally well pleased . . ."

The story was fantastic—too good to keep quiet. The word got around. Early in January, 1963, I first heard of the pistol which by then had been acquired by Arkansas automatic pistol collector and noted Mauser student James Belford. "I have the piece for sale for \$xxx.00" he wrote, but was also dicker-ing for a store display gimmick from which he expected to receive \$100 a month rental. Meanwhile, he welcomed the chance to help me get the tangled tale into print. To him I am indebted, for the accompanying photos and copies of original documents. As this is printed, the pistol has changed hands once again

There could be more to the story than just so much. Somewhere in Soviet archives reposes my own inquiry of 1947 or 48 asking to buy Colt-made Berdan rifles and Smith & Wesson "Russian model" revolvers. Their reply, sent by Soviet Embassy counselor N. Saven-