

35mm SLRs before World War II

By Don Baldwin



Gomz Sport with
3.5/5cm lens n# 12417

In PW130 Don Baldwin listed the key innovations in 35mm Single Lens Reflex design. Now we begin a series in which he describes some of the landmarks in more detail, starting with what happened in the very early days.

UNTIL FRESH RESEARCH work was carried out after the crash of Communism at the end of the 1980s, most people thought the first 35mm SLR was the Russian Sport, Richard Hummel and others thought not.

The Sport almost certainly existed as a prototype called Gelvetia after its designer A O Gelgar as early as 1934, and should have been first out, but apparently there were problems getting into production and two further

engineers, Messrs Rybnikov and Pimenov were called in. So finally the camera became available in late 1937, about a year after the Kine Exakta.

There is less mystery about the Kine. Its designer Karl Nuchterlein had already changed the SLR world in 1933 with the VP-size Exakta and clearly had been keen to move on towards its logical development, a 35mm SLR. He apparently obtained

special permission from his boss, Johan Steenbergen to work on the 35mm camera, provided development of the (VP) Exakta did not suffer, and prototypes were shown at the Leipzig Spring Fair in 1936. Cameras were still being assembled during the fair and taken there. Two or three of these prototypes wound up in the USA and have since surfaced.

Series production started in August 1936, but these cameras were not released for sale until just before Christmas, by which time the original round image magnifier had been updated to a rectangular one covering the whole screen, not just the centre. Cameras despatched early to the big stores still had round magnifiers, but the new owners could send them back to Ihagee for a free upgrade, so round ones are now quite rare.

The already mentioned Richard Hummel started with Ihagee in 1936 and it is said his first job was to remove round screens from already assembled Kines in preparation for the upgrade. He eventually rose to Chief Constructor in 1955.

Karl Nuchterlein had reached star status as a designer and stole a march on Carl Zeiss who properly regarded themselves as the worlds leading camera manufacturer. He managed to achieve a practical 35mm focussing screen, a large block of glass, ground on the base and with a convex lens above, while Zeiss thought this was impossible and a year earlier had produced the mighty and unwieldy twin lens Contaflex in which an 80mm viewing lens was matched to the 50mm taking lens so



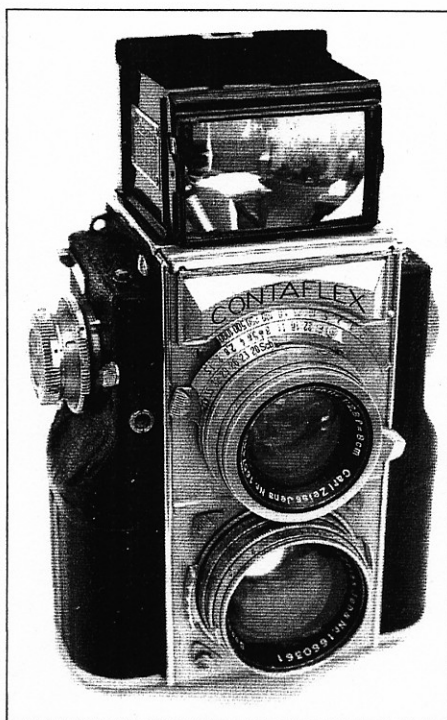
the Exakta # 482602 with Carl Zeiss Jena Tessar 2.8/50mm # 1913839

that a large focussing screen could be achieved.

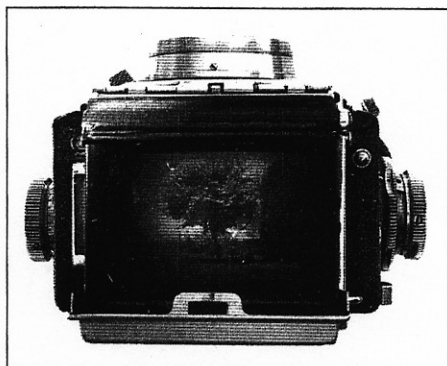
Karl Nuchterlein was looking far ahead and already had taken patents in 1938 on "through the lens" metering systems, one of which Topcon virtually used in 1963, but despite being given "essential worker" status during WW2, he seems to have upset somebody important and got sent to the Eastern front where he was reported missing in April 1945. What a waste!

The only other pre WW2 camera and only just as well, is the KW Praktiflex. In late 1938 a sort of swap took place between Benno Thorsch, boss of Kamerawerkstätten Guthe and Thorsch, essentially a Swiss company operating in Dresden, and the ex-German Charles Noble, owner of a photo copy and print company in Chicago, USA. Mr Noble had made trips to a spa in the modern day Czech Republic for his pancreatitis, and this may have helped his decision to return to Germany.

Mr Thorsch went the opposite way as he had Jewish family and wanted out of Germany in 1938. Charles Noble immediately insisted on the speeding up of a design by in-house designer Alois Hohoisel and the Praktiflex became the third series production



Carl Zeiss Jena Contaflex # Z42901 with Sonnar 1.5/5cm # 1660361 taking lens and Sucher-Objective 2.8/8cm # 1657440 viewing lens.



Big screen on the Contaflex!

35mm SLR in late Summer 1939, too late for import into the UK - but some reached the USA before they entered the fray.

So much for the history, what of the cameras. Various theories exist as to why the Kine Exakta needs the left hand to wind and fire, but we will probably never know the mind of the designer. The range of shutter speeds was not surpassed until the 1960s and the basic design survived until 1971. However what started as a difficult camera to use became gradually more "user friendly". It was necessary to line up and focus the picture, then manually stop down the lens before re-viewing a dim image and firing the shutter, inconvenient and slow compared with a good rangefinder camera. Some genius (who?) invented pre-select lenses in the early 1950s, so no need to take one's eye from the screen, and another genius, often credited to Staudinger (1932 patent), but probably developed from gun sights and periscopes, came up with pentaprisms giving erect and right way round eye level viewing, first used in cameras in 1948/9. Other developments such as retrofocus wide angle lenses, fully automatic aperture control and instant return mirrors eventually gave us the familiar and ubiquitous 35mm SLR of the 1960s and onwards.

The Sport, made in Russia and not apparently exported, turned out to be a dead end, but had a Contax type bayonet lens mount for which no alternative lens is known, a vertical metal bladed shutter and cassettes of 40 32x24 mm negatives.

The Praktiflex perhaps turned out to be the most influential design of the three, its otherwise uninspired later development giving us the M42 mount along with the Contax S. The layout became a universal standard, eventually followed by all major manufacturers, right hand wind, fire and speed dial, left hand re-wind with reflex box in between. No slow shutter speeds were possible as the mir-



ror was raised by a string attached to the long shutter release button and it returned as soon as the finger came off the button. Not an instant return mirror, but an economical and simple system. These were made throughout WW2 and used by the military, special ones with coloured bodies and leather were made for bigwigs of various sorts, including Gestapo bosses.

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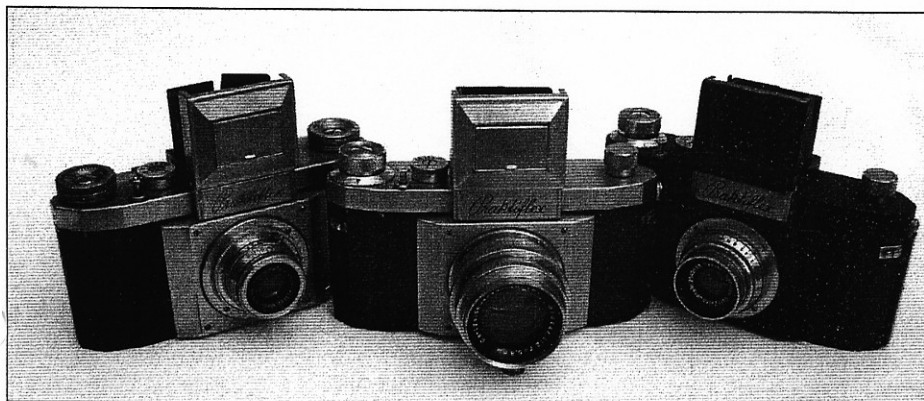
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Above: The Kine Exakta is familiar to many, and immediately joined the Leica, Contax, Rolleiflex and Robot as top cameras of the period.

Left: KW Praktiflex # 1709 with Ludwig Victor 3.5/5cm # 493482

Below: Praktiflex # 1709 alongside red & chrome # 4410 with CZJ Biotar 2/5.8cm # 2585191 and grey & brown (Gestapo colours?) # 5029 with CZJ Tessar 3.5/5cm # 2542613



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