

The Golden Leicas from An Ex-Soviet War Hero

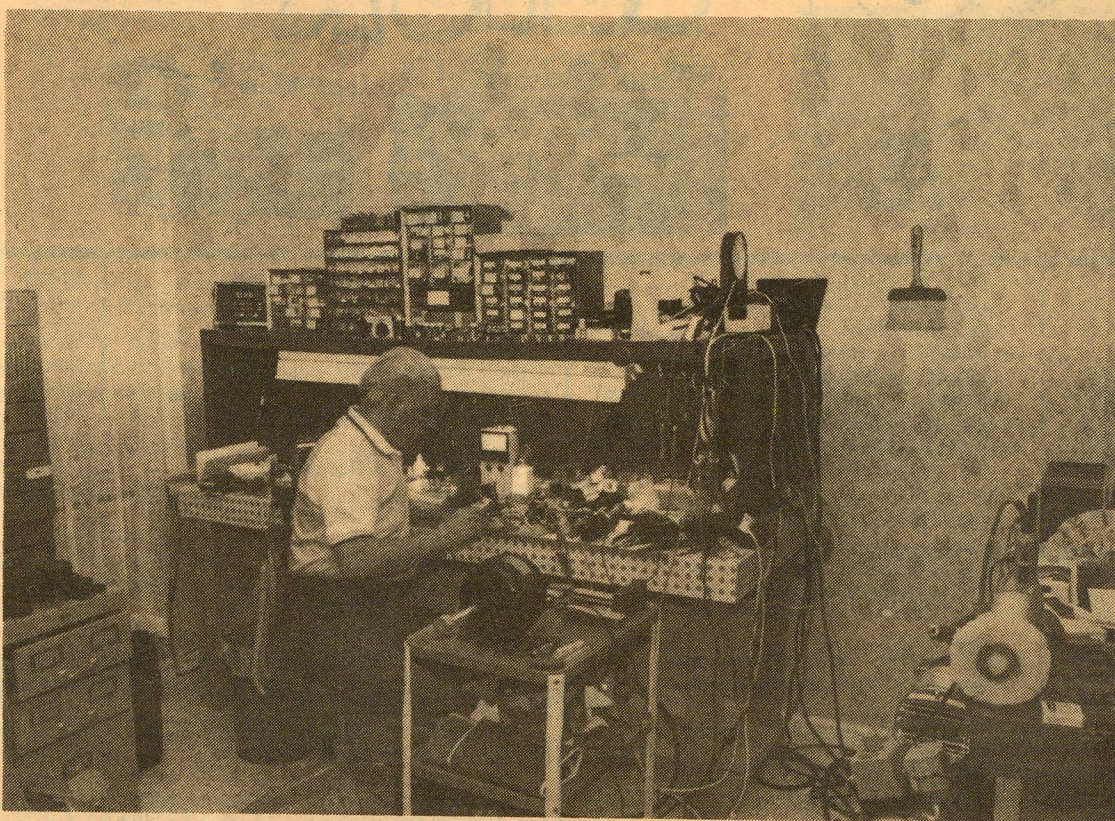
by George Gilbert

An ex-Soviet soldier named Isaak Maizenberg has started a new American life. His presence adds an exciting dimension to creative camera maintenance and repair here.

At age eighteen, every Soviet boy is automatically drafted for two to three years of military service. In 1940, Isaak left his Kiev high school to join the service. Thus, when in June 1941 the Nazis attacked Russia, the Ukraine and its food was a prime target. A German blitzkrieg aimed south. Isaak, by then a radio operator, was wounded four times at various fronts, but his most memorable wartime experience was not on the battlefields but at a surprise, brief tour of diplomatic duty. This brought him, as a communications expert, to the famed 1943 Teheran meeting of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Joseph Stalin, and Winston Churchill.

The Germans defeated, Isaak was invalided out of the army.

In 1946, he returned to his much-loved Kiev to find that, during the German occupation, twenty-nine of his family had been rounded up and, as Jews, marched out to a nearby ravine where they joined the 60,000 slain at the Ukrainian Holocaust site, now known as Babi Yar. The young woman who shortly became his wife had her own family horror story; fifty of her



cousins, aunts, uncles, and others had met their fate at Babi Yar, while her soldier father died at one of the military fronts.

The retreating, captured, or dead Germans gave up booty previously unknown to the ordinary Russian, such as a Leica, a Contax, an Exakta, a Rollei, a Super Ikonta, and others. One by one, these cameras began to trickle into the Soviet General Service Center, where Russian families brought malfunctioning typewriters, vacuum cleaners, or toasters. Cameras were also repaired and sent to the bench

of onetime amateur photographer and now the only camera repairman in all of Kiev, Isaak Maizenberg. Starting in 1946, by scavenging from one to repair another, he learned all about German cameras.

In postwar Russia, there were no sophisticated tools. Isaak worked with a watchmaker's loupe, a file, or a punch. Then he began to build his own tools - tiny screwdrivers, special drills, threading equipment. Without special training, he had become a master mechanic. His Center encouraged him to help other

repairmen with instruction booklets and meetings. In the next thirty years, he authored eleven books on Soviet cameras and their maintenance problems.

As a result, he was awarded diplomas and certificates and he soon held the highest award in this civilian field, one which entitled him to a 30 percent salary bonus each pay period for life.

In spite of this, Isaak was determined to leave the Soviet Union for a freer life in the United States.

Isaak had little need to speak English as long as he could use his hands to show a leading repair facility how he could strip a camera. The photo repair world in America, short of skilled technicians, welcomed Isaak to a new land and an old profession. He was back again at a workbench with a screwdriver and a file. His wife Ketti joined the staff in the non-invasive cardiology laboratory of a 450-bed hospital.

Three years after his arrival in the U.S., Isaak launched his own repair business. Today he works on cameras shipped to him from all over the United States. Among them are the very models of Leicas and Contaxes which launched his career in 1946.

Two years ago, Isaak and Ketti started some evening projects which would capitalize on his unique expertise. Accustomed to organizing data

for camera people, he wrote the first directory in the English language covering 110 Russian cameras. These he sells to collectors and historians. *The First Complete Guide to 110 Russian Cameras from 1929 to 1984* is a 40-page soft-cover book which illustrates and summarizes the features of dozens of cameras. Most were never seen in America until the recent wave of Russian immigrants brought a few to these shores. (\$10.00 plus postage to Isaak Maizenberg, 6612 N. California Ave., Chicago, IL 60645)

But more excitingly for the collector, he undertook comprehensive Leica restorations at a level previously unknown in the U.S., except for a few isolated instances. While a number of American experts provide superb service in repair and maintenance of pre-war Leica and Contax cameras, Isaak takes such cameras apart down to the last screw. He repairs and replaces and, finally, he restores a worn camera to a like-new appearance of breathtaking finish. Having brought one such camera to this unprecedented level of regained perfection, he took the outer metal parts to a plating service; his first 24K gold Leica was born.

The gold Leica existed historically starting fifty-five years ago when E. Leitz created the Luxus, a model called the Leica de Luxe, at a price double that of the black Leica A, in 1930 and 1931. The Model A was produced in a quantity of fifteen, serialized from 34803 to 34817. A very few others were also produced, according to Leica historian James L. Lager.

The same treatment is given to lenses so that the working camera with all dents removed and all finish restored is the achievement of a photographic fantasy. The Maizenberg gold Leicas and Contaxes were the talk of the 1985 shutterbug ads/Photographic News Fair in Las Vegas. Seated in a walnut presentation case and amid red velvet, the cameras were works of art.

Starting with any screw-mount Leica provided by the client, the body is fully restored and gold plated for \$445; the lens, depending on model, will cost \$145.00 to \$230.00. Gleaming lizard coverings are an additional \$85.00 option.

Isaak's repair business is limited only by the number of hands he can put to work on the bench. He finds it difficult to hire skilled craftsmen.

About The Cover

Collectors Go For The Gold!

By Stan Veit

This month our cover shows a Leica restored to new appearance by Isaak Maizenberg and plated with 24K gold. Starting with any screw-mount Leica, Isaak will repair and replace parts of the camera, then polish it to a breath-taking finish before plating it with 24K gold. Restoring and plating the body costs about \$445, the lens cost is from \$145 to \$230, depending on the particular lens supplied. For an additional \$85 the leather work is replaced with gleaming lizard coverings. The unusual story of

Isaak Maizenberg is told in the article by George Gilbert in this issue.

The Gold Leica on our cover is just a sample of the gold collector cameras starting to appear in shows throughout the country. At the coming American Society of Camera Collectors show held on September 29th in Hollywood, Ca., there will be the largest collection of gold cameras ever seen at one time. They are the collection of Raylike Weisel who has restored and gold plated 20 cameras ranging from a Konica to rare Leicas. Included are Stereo Realist, Minolta, and Contax cameras. Raylike is a television engineer

for Philips TV by profession. He is responsible for the installation of commercial TV studio equipment. Cameras are his hobby and his ability in restoring them is completely self-taught.

At the show the gold cameras will be shown in a special exhibit. Two armed guards will cover the gold treasure trove and several ladies will be on hand to wipe the cameras clean after handling by the viewers.

Will this start a trend among collectors? It is too early to tell, but the display of gold plated cameras certainly is an attention getter wherever they are shown.