

Russian watches from Germany

The roots of the German watch brand 'Poljot International' go back to a mass product watch factory in Soviet Moscow. The current success of the company, however, is inseparably linked with German quality and the ambitious Russian engineer Alexander Shorokhov.

In the 1930s the 'First State Watch Factory' was founded in Moscow, producing hundreds of thousands of watches each year. Not until 1961, when Juri Gagarin, a Russian air force officer became the first man to fly into space, did the name of the factory change. From then on the watches were renamed 'Poljot' (flight). When the Iron Curtain started to vanish at the end of the 1980s and the Soviet Army left their barracks in Eastern Germany, the German flea markets were flooded by piles of Russian uniforms and military medals, even weapons could be found, and above all, Russian watches at ridiculously low prices. One could easily buy a normal three-hand watch at a converted price of some 18 Euros or a chronograph for roughly 25 Euros. The low prices weren't because these watches were of poor quality, most of their movements were made on tooling machines that the Swiss watch brands had exported to the Soviet Union in the late 1970s, when the production of mechanical watch movements nearly collapsed in Switzerland following the Far East quartz watch invasion.

Born in 1960, Alexander Shorokhov studied architecture and design at Moscow's University of Transport, finishing his studies with an engineering diploma. After his studies, Shorokhov worked as an architect for a big construction firm and later became Managing Director of the company.

In 1991 the young engineer was sent to Germany by the former Russian President, Michail Gorbachov, together with a small group of leading Russian managers. The order from the Ministry of Economy was to become familiar with the regulations of free markets and to develop new concepts, which could potentially be put to use in Russia.

Alexander Shorokhov, who stayed in Germany, instead of going back to Russia, seems to like challenges. Even though the sale of Russian watches in Germany had slumped because of the thousands of flea market bargains, Shorokhov was not deterred, and in 1992 he established 'Poljot-V GmbH', an import and distribution company for Russian watches.

Shorokhov's conception was to make the watches, which were suffering from the stigma of being cheap and poor quality, more valuable again in the eyes of consumers. He set out to change the way retailers were thinking, and to achieve this target, he and his employees not only concentrated on product development themselves, but they also took care of the assembling and the quality control of the watches.

Alexander Shorokhov stayed in close contact with the Poljot watch factory in Moscow, but he wanted to become more independent, as he was no longer importing ready-to-sell watches anymore, but only movement parts. The components were re-worked, polished, decorated and assembled to movements, which had to undergo strong accuracy controls. Even more importance was given to the design of the dials and cases, which had to be changed considerably to give the watches a contemporary look

and to make them more suitable to the taste of people in Germany and other western countries.

In 1996 Shorokhov developed a new collection for the 'First State Watch Factory' consisting of watches that differentiated considerably from the watches found on the flea markets.

In 1995 his company, that had changed its name to 'Poljot-International', became a member of the 'Verband der deutschen Uhrenindustrie' (German watch industry association) resulting in 'Poljot-International' becoming a German watch brand.

Alexander Shorokhov, however, would disagree. "If you look at the Russian writer Turgenjew, who wrote several of his plays in Germany, or to the German Einstein, who developed many of his theories in the USA, the work of these people remains related to their homelands. I think in my case we can consider the watches to be Russian, but with the addition of a 'Made in Germany' label," he explains.

Today the production of the watches takes place in Alzenau near Frankfurt/Main and it is from here that they are exported to more than 35 countries. Besides 'Poljot International', two other brands of watches are made in an old house in this small town: 'CCCP' (after the Russian abbreviation of the Soviet Union) and 'Alexander Shorokhov'.

'Alexander Shorokhov' watches are equipped with specially decorated movements and show a specific design. The names of the three model families underline the close relationship that Shorokhov still has with Russia. Although his success occurred in Germany, "Russia is more than just a country," he says. "It is a feeling of life". That is why the watches are named after famous Russian writers or composers. One model is named after Fjodor Dostoevsky's most famous novel 'The Gambler', with a dial looking like a roulette table. A fine alarm wristwatch is named after Peter Tchaikovsky while an elegant skeleton watch bears the name of Leo Tolstoj. The mistrust of the retailers vanished years ago, after they realised that Alexander Shorokhov and the 14 people who are presently working for him, are doing an excellent job. The 'Poljot' watches are well positioned in the lower mid price level, while the brand 'Alexander Shorokhov' is sold at a higher price.

Russian is the internal business language in the company's building in Alzenau and all products cannot hide their love for Russia. Even if they are 'Made in Germany'.



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