

the camera collector

by Jason Schneider

The Exakta Saga, Part 3. The slow, excruciating demise, complete with lost buttons, cruder chrome, and an attempted "heir-lift" from Berlin.



As I expected, it didn't take the Exaktamaniacs and nitpickers long to begin excoriating me for any misplaced minutiae or lapses of logic contained in the November '79 column

(which begins on page 46). All right, I do apologize for the upside-down photo of the renowned Exakta film-cutting knife in use (page 50), which is being pulled up rather than down as stated in the caption, but to call me to task on my procedure for setting the slow-speed dial is really a bit much! In short, anyone using these scribblings in lieu of an instruction manual had best beware.



Second-most-desirable Exakta 35? I'd say this VX IIb with early 50mm f/2 Pancolar qualifies, and it's certainly a usable bargain at \$125 or thereabouts.

Actually, the nameless nitpicker is technically correct—to set slow speeds on any classic Exakta you're supposed to cock the shutter, set the fast speed dial to B or T, wind the slow speed dial, set the desired slow speed (red numbers for 12-13 sec. delay *plus* slow speed), and *gently* press the shutter release. I advised the hapless multitudes to do all of the above, but to set the slow speed first and *then* wind the slow speed dial—a method which usually works as well but isn't always possible if the spring-powered slow-

Continued on page 10

MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY

THE CAMERA COLLECTOR

Continued from page 8

speed mechanism is completely, or almost completely, wound down. And so, friends, in the interest of consistency and adhering to the official instruction manual (two things which are of paramount importance in operating German machinery), I stand corrected. I will not, however, accede to said nitpicker's description of my mistake as an "egregious error"—anyone who didn't realize that you had to wind the damn thing first if the number couldn't be set probably thought the problem was a dead battery.

Okay, enough sack-cloth and ashes department, let's get back to the glacier-slow downhill trek of the trapezoidal beast from Dresden on its way to ultimate oblivion. You'll doubtless recall that at the end of the last installment, we detailed what mechanical mavens and technological aesthetes regard as the pinnacle of Ihagee's 35mm achievements, the magnificently snazzy VX IIa. This model was replete with every precious doodad and thingamabob the factory could muster, and the surprising thing is, despite the agglomerative nature of its evolution, the whole thing hung together remarkably well in terms of function as well as appearance. Alas, the handwriting was already on the Berlin Wall—as already mentioned late model VX IIa's began to lose some of their aesthetic pizzazz, and so, in 1963, enter the VX IIb.



Last "real" Exakta? Just about. VX 500 has no slow speeds, brings about \$100 with 50mm f/2.8 aus Jena Tessar.

As expected, the changes incorporated therein were hardly earthshaking, but virtually all of them had one aim in mind—to reduce production costs. You would have thought that, tools and dies having long since been amortized, the company could have rested on their laurels or even (shudder) redesigned the Exakta to accept a coupled, through-lens metering system and/or internal auto-diaphragm lenses, but no. What we got was geometric shutter speeds ($\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{8}$ —no $\frac{1}{15}$ — $\frac{1}{30}$, $\frac{1}{60}$ etc.), a revised slow-speed dial with broader, uniform knurling, a film-speed reminder dial built into its top, and, incredibly, no finder-locking

Continued on page 12

MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY

THE CAMERA COLLECTOR

Continued from page 10

button under the nameplate! True, the finder was still held in the proper orientation by spring-loaded hooks which engaged pins on either side of the finder housings, and VX IIB's as a rule don't suffer from finder falloff, but the change was universally decried. Equally unappreciated was the glued on nameplate above the "shield shaped" front plate, and the fact that the satin chrome finish on top and front plates had deteriorated from good to mediocre and coarse grained. Withal, the VX IIB performs quite well, has a quiet slow-speed gear train like its immediate predecessor, and mine has a convenient accessory shoe affixed to its pentaprism. (That makes sense, you skimp on the prism-retaining mechanism so you add a shoe to mount accessories onto it!) I know that Exakta fanatics will want to hang me from the nearest yardarm for the statement I'm about to make, but in spite of its minor flaws, I'd still be forced to nominate the VX IIB as the second most desirable Exakta 35 in terms of actual picture taking.



Through-lens metering VX 1000? Yep, but Examat prism shown is of the infamous transfer-the-setting variety.

The last models that can accurately be termed classic Exaktas were the VX 1000 and its stripped down stablemate the VX 500, which was actually the last Exakta to be fully assembled in the Ihagee factory (the last East German Exakta, the 1971 to 1974 Exakta RTL 1000, was actually produced in the Pentacon factory). The VX 1000 featured (what else?) revised knurling on the slow-speed dial, ASA settings up to 3200 but no film-type indicator on the film-speed index (the film-type reminder migrated to the back-opening lug on the bottom), a black fast-speed dial with numerals in silver, and a more modern looking, shorter throw (hooray, only 200° or so) film-wind lever with coaxial frame counter sans spring-loaded, geared setting knob. Also lost in the shuffle were the Exakta's unique back locking arrangement (the VX 1000 and VX 500 have a conventional spring-loaded, pull-down catch. Perhaps the

Continued on page 16

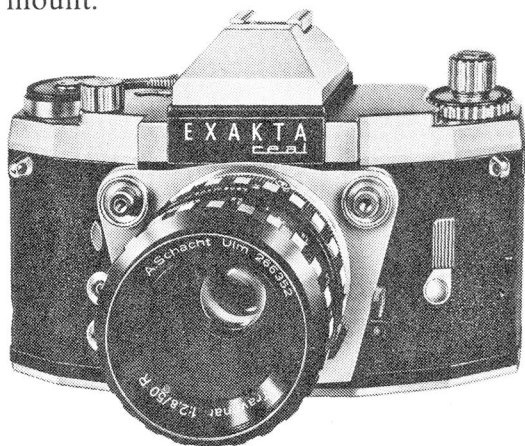
MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY

THE CAMERA COLLECTOR

Continued from page 12

most amazing thing about these last two "genuine" Exaktas was the re-emergence of the finder-locking catch beneath the nameplate. Evidently so many Exakta owners bitched and moaned about its absence on the VX IIB that it was eventually reinstated.

Now if this were any other camera but the Exakta, that would be the end of the tale—birth, procreation, and death—but this Volkswagen of SLR-dom was destined to act out a lingering demise that is, to some, almost as fascinating as its golden age. Frankly, I must admit that the Exakta RTL 1000 for all its internal auto-diaphragm action and semi-coupled through-len CdS metering turns me off sufficiently that I can't bear writing about it even if you could bear reading about it. Exaktas in name only were Ihagee West's Exakta Twin TL (which is really a Japanese Cosina down to its Copal Square shutter and Exaktar lenses) and the "Petri-fied" Exakta FE 2000 (whose 55mm f/1.7 Exaktar lens screwed into a Praktica-type 42mm screw-thread mount.



A real Real down to its 50mm f/2.8 Schacht Travenar lens, this is rarest Exakta model.

But, to conclude these festivities on an equally quixotic and infinitely more Germanic note, here, in brief, is the story of rarest of all 35mm Exaktas, the Exakta Real (which monicker probably was intended to denote "genuine" rather than "royal," as in Spanish). Apparently none too pleased at the course of the Exakta's development on the wrong side of the Iron Curtain and determined to make a couple of Deutschmarks in the process, one Johan Steenbergen, a Dutchman who was one of the principal founders of the original Ihagee factory in Dresden before the war, bought up the essentially worthless shares of a group of the original stockholders in that company with the notion of wresting the proud Exakta name from these bolshevik upstarts. That was back in 1959, and for four years the new—er, old—company produced nothing but fancy lawsuits on both sides of the Atlantic, which demanded financial compensation from the Exakta factory as well as Exakta importers, for use of the name. After protracted litigation,

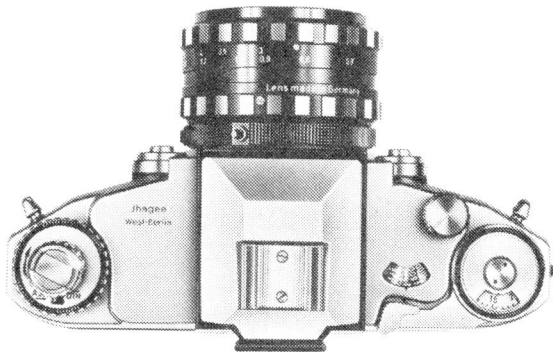
Continued on page 86

MODERN PHOTOGRAPHY

THE CAMERA COLLECTOR

Continued from page 16

the East German Ihagee Factory retained most international rights and were able to label their cameras Exaktas in all countries except West Germany, where they lost the case in what has been called a “rigged tribunal.” Dresden Exaktas destined for the Bundesrepublik were henceforth dubbed Elbaflexes (after the Elbe river, I presume) while in the U.S., the courts decided the issue along Solomonic lines, with both Ihagee, Dresden and Ihagee West (Berlin) obtaining equal rights to the name. Considering the diminishing luster of the Exakta monicker, one wonders whether these battles were worth the trouble.



Real's top deck: conventional layout.

Then, at the Photokina exposition of 1963, something remarkable happened. Ihagee West showed an honest-to-gosh working model of the new Exakta Real, a hefty machine that is said to bear

the unmistakable stamp of the Edixa factory's design staff. Although superficially resembling a classic Exakta in its trapezoidal body contours, this slightly larger (5 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 3 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 3 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. with 50mm f/1.9 Schneider Xenon lens), heavier (2 lb., 6 oz. with same optic) beast was brand new from the ground up, and sported a host of desirable mechanical features representing a valid and worthwhile evolution of the basic Exakta concept. It had, alas, no meter, but its right-hand-operated, single-(200°)-stroke wind lever, and conventional top-mounted rewind crank certainly made life easier. Its most obvious departure from standard Exakta practice is the presence of two cable-release-threaded shutter-release buttons, which work with commendable smoothness and permit facile right or left-handed operation. Its internally-flanged lens mount is considerably wider than the standard Exaktas (46mm to be exact), to improve the lot of optical designers and to allow sufficient space for an internal-auto-diaphragm-actuating “roller pin” (it's located directly below the enlarged, 29mm-deep mirror). But an adapter was available to let you mount virtually any Dresden Exakta lens on the Real, and, of course, the lefthand shutter release was properly positioned to engage with the Dresden model's external auto-diaphragm lenses. Directly in front of the Real's film wind lever (which

Continued on page 173

had a coaxial, but non-self-zeroing frame counter that slowly turns from a green to a red background as you near the 36th frame!) there's a large knurled knob which is the shutter-speed dial. Settings from 2 sec. to 1/1000 sec. are read out in a little arcuate window behind this knob, and the dial has the advantage of being non-rotating so settings can be made before or after winding the film. However, the numerals are not evenly spaced, B and T are mysteriously placed in between 1/15 and 1/30 sec., and the last three numerals, 250, 500, and 1000 are too bunched together to be legible.

Quality on the inside

To open the Real's back you pull up on the top-mounted rewind crank, and then turn the outer ring of the film-speed reminder dial below it (shades of the Nikon FM). Inside, you'll find an interior that's very well finished—perhaps a notch or two above the East German Exaktas—with a cloth focal-plane shutter in the middle. Unlike the “classic” Exaktas, the Real loads on the left, takes up on the right, has a large, flat pressure plate with a film tension roller to its left, and double light baffles on its hinged cast alloy back plate. On the front, aside from the aforementioned shutter buttons you'll find a small shutter-lock lever which locks both releases simultaneously, a left-handed self-timer lever, and a small black button to activate it. The small lens-release lever works in a similar manner to the Dresden models, but its mechanism is internal. Finally, surmounting the Real is a removable pentaprism with a permanently affixed accessory shoe that is held in place by two hefty flat springs and slides off the back. And you purists in the audience would appreciate the Real's viewing screen—an utterly unadorned slice of ground glass surmounted with a condenser lens, just like the ones from the Eastern Zone.

How did this all work out in practice, you ask? Very well and not very well at all. The camera itself had a few foibles, like a delicate frame counter mechanism and a guaranteed-to-peel-off leatherlike covering, but by and large it was a very nicely executed, eminently workable design. Regrettably, by the time the original heirs to the Exakta mystique got the camera into production (four years later in 1967!) much of the glamor was gone from the name and production costs had escalated. Indeed, the Real would have had to sell for about twice the price of the East German model, putting it into head-to-head competition with the Japanese SLR onslaught. True, the Real had an instant-return mirror but by then so did the Exakta VX 1000, and Nikon, Top-

Continued on page 178

con, Pentax et al had behind-lens CdS metering built in, and numerous other amenities. Of course, when it comes to being a super-rare production SLR, few can hold a candle to the evanescent Real—precisely how many were made is something of a mystery, but the number was assuredly in the upper hundreds or lower 1000s. Number 00948 pictured herein is the property of Modern's publisher who was lucky enough to be in the right place (Cologne, Germany) at the right time with the right number of D-marks. Today I'd peg this jewel at around \$1000, but this is just a ballpark guesstimate.—THE END