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Raketa - a handmade piece of Russian history on the wrist

“Who comes too late is punished by life”

said Mikhail Gorbachev in East Germany in 1989, pointing his finger at his Raketa watch. Many people may not even have noticed that it was a Raketa, but the enthusiast sees it and also understands its symbolic. Raketa, the Petrodvorets watch factory was founded in Saint Petersburg by Emperor Peter the Great. It has survived pretty much all events of Russian history. The Czars, the Communists, Yelstin, Putin, Medvedev and now Putin again. And what might make it even more interesting, they all had a Raketa on their wrists!



The factory of Peter the Great

as the famous Fabergé eggs. But there was also a lot of lacquer art, porcelain, textile art and painting in Russia. The capital for all of this marvellous arts was of course Saint Petersburg. This may also have to do with the fact that this was the Imperial home port. One of the first major projects after the founding was diamonds cut. Later in 1762 they will be proudly placed in Imperial crown. More than a hundred years later, the second major project came. The pieces of marble were cut for St Isaac's Cathedral in St Petersburg to create mosaic floor in antique style. Shortly thereafter in 1895 the first steps were taken in the watch shop, beautiful pocket watches were made for the Talberg brand. About 30 years later, two other major projects came into the picture: the sign for Lenin's Mausoleum made in 1929 and the stars of the Kremlin - perhaps the largest project in history. In 1934 it was seen by everyone in the world: on television, newspaper or perhaps also in live. The stars were made of ruby. And it was precisely this type of stone, ruby, that led to further steps in watchmaking. In 1938 Petrodvorets started making small precise rubies for watch movements. Everyone who has ever taken apart a mechanical watch knows well those little red stones that can be found everywhere in the movement. It will not be long before the Second World War starts and the factory will be owned by the state (Russia had been a Communist state for several years). It will be used to produce components in military measuring instruments, such as altimeters and speedometers for aircrafts. In 1945, when the Second World War ended, the Kremlin commissioned the production of wrist watches named Pobeda (the Russian word for victory). This of course to celebrate the victory.



The era of affordable but decent watches

A new era has arrived for the Petrodvorets watch factory. After a long history of manufacturing luxury goods now Petrodvorets had to match communist standards. Watches had to be made in such a way that everyone could afford them. But the quality had to be still high. From now on, products from the Petrodvorets watch factory would also be used with some regularity for political statements about successes that the Soviet Union would achieve. Of course the Pobeda watch was a good first example of that.

16 years later in 1961 there was a second success to celebrate and this time one for the Petrodvorets watch factory itself! The Pobeda

banner of labour" and in 1980 they produced official watches for the Olympic Games. The last piece of fame the watch factory received was most likely Mikhail Gorbachev, who pointed to his watch in his statement in East Germany in 1989.



Remaining a treasure in the watchmaking world

their factory, Raketa makes all components, cases, crowns etc. in-house and then assembles it into complete watches. The only thing they buy is the straps, this has remained unchanged to this day.

After a long period of silence, there was movement in 2009. Jacques von Polier, a grandson of Russian immigrants who fled the Bolsheviks, and David Henderson Stewart (former adviser to banker Sergei Pugachyov), decided together to buy the Petrodvorets watch factory and to reorganize it. They saw in this beautiful watch factory potential, they saw that the old glory the factory had before the Soviet era could come back. The idea was a Russian brand that would be at the level of Hermès or Chanel, something in luxury that Russia could be proud of. Work was done on training for watchmakers, production improvement, higher quality, more beautiful but without losing the DNA of the brand. The Pobeda brand was also taken out again. This time to bring a somewhat cheaper, but still very high quality line of Quartz watches on the market. Another very important development was the accessibility. The interesting opportunity was created for anyone who wants to visit the production place. You can see step by step the production process, supplemented by a beautiful museum where the old pieces can once again be admired.



It has paid off and many Russians are proud of their age-old watch factory in the beautiful city of Saint Petersburg. Meanwhile 3 own stores have been opened in Russia, 2 in Saint Petersburg and 1 in Moscow. In addition, a number of sale points arise in Russia and since a few years also one in Paris! The watches are also sold very well over the internet. As David Henderson told me during the last BaselWorld (the leading watch and jewellery fair), most watches go to the United States of America. He said it with a big smile on his face. This is perhaps the best prove that the watch factory wants to have nothing to do with politics today. All they want is to make beautiful watches that still remain somewhat affordable. The plans for the coming year after the success on the Russian market are to get more sales points outside Russia. There is now enough confidence to stand between the Swiss and German brands.

If we look at the products we see very special watches for a relatively good price. For example, a guilloche is applied to almost all movements. This is a traditional process whereby the metal is lightly scratched in a very precise way to create very beautiful motif. In addition, there is a watch that runs anti-clockwise. A technique that no other watch brand has ever shown. It is a beautiful symbol that we do not always have to swim with the current, but going against it can produce something beautiful. This watch proves it once again.

The Raketa Polar Watch

A new exiting limited edition is released by Raketa which is a re-edition of a watch they did 50 years ago. This watch is the Soviet Polar Watch for which Raketa was asked to design it in 1969. The watch was meant for the 16th Soviet Antarctic Expedition and had to perform a lot more besides being robust. Since at this freezing continent there is daylight 24/7, the watch had to be able to show the explorers whether it was day or night. Therefor it needed a special 24 hour movement of course which is a complicated matter. The Raketa designers came up with a very unusual design since the bezel was extremely thin and the horns had an inverted triangular shape. It was a complicated 4 pieces case with a very special construction to hold the glass. The dial indicated a 24 hour time scale and represented the two poles. The design was officially approved and signed on December 10, 1969 by V.M. Rogachev the second person in command of the Soviet Antarctic Expedition. It also got an official seal from the USSR Arctic and Antarctic Institute. The first watch produced in 1970 was finished in time for departure by boat from St. Petersburg (Leningrad in those days). The polar explorers reached Antarctica in time for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the discovery of the continent by Russian Polar Explorers in 1820. One of mankind's greatest achievements.



The development of the new Raketa 24-hour manual movement No. "2623" was finalized, but unfortunately not quite in time to be fitted in the first series of Raketa Polar watches. The first Polar watch cases were therefore assembled in 1970 with the manual movement "Russia" in which the 24-hour complication had been added specially for this project. The "Russia" calibre (nicknamed "Baltika") was the movement produced by the Raketa Watch Factory until it gradually switched to the now famous Raketa movement (between 1968-70). The next production series of the Raketa Polar Watch were then fitted with the now famous Raketa 24-hour manual movement "2623". Since that time, the Raketa Watch Factory has become very famous for its mechanisms making the hour hand turn in 24 hours (instead of the usual 12 hours). It's use was later extended to Soviet submariners and cosmonauts, professions also working in extreme conditions where a 24-hour watch is needed to help them distinguish day from night. Ludmilla Y. Voinik was part of the Soviet team of engineers who developed the 24 hour complication in 1968-69. 50 years later, she is still working at the Raketa Watch Factory, heading the "construction bureau" in charge of re-launching the production of 200 manual movements "2623" specially for the limited re-edition of this Raketa Polar watch. Indeed, the production of Raketa manual movements was discontinued in 2014 when all Raketa watches switched to Raketa Automat movements.

And now Raketa has launched the re-edition of this special watch. The watch can be pre-ordered already on the website and was launched in April 2020. It is obviously a limited edition and is limited to just 200 pieces.



Raketa was and is always in time

Raketa, the Petrodvorets watch factory is certainly worth to keep following in the coming years. Mikhail Gorbachev might have said as he pointed at his Raketa watch; "Who comes too late, is punished by life," but at Raketa they were most certainly not too late. They were just in time!