

The rebirth of Russian watchmaking

A handful of pioneering watchmakers and entrepreneurs are working hard to put the country back on the horological map.

By MARK GORDON

WHEN the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, one of the largest and most innovative watch industries in the world crumbled with it. Just 20 years ago, Russia was home to almost a dozen major watch and clock factories.

At the zenith of its industry, around 1980, Russia was second only to Switzerland in terms of the number and variety of movements produced. Production figures for 1980 showed that the First Moscow Watch Factory alone produced more than 2.5 million watches and the Vostok factory more than 4.5 million watches.

In keeping with the country's socialist ideals, Russian watches and clocks were practical, reliable, easy to repair and inexpensive. They were also state-of-the-art. The list of Russian innovations is long and impressive. Russians were the first to produce wristwatches on modern assembly lines and their movements often incorporated sophisticated features and technologies available elsewhere only later and on much more expensive pieces.

Unfortunately, the two decades following the Soviet collapse have not been kind to Russia's watch industry. In quick succession, one factory after another has been forced to close its doors. Only two Soviet-era factories, Vostok and Pensa, remain in continuous production, and the prospects for their survival are tenuous at best.

But the future for Russian watch production is not all bleak. A small group of pioneering watchmakers and entrepreneurs in Russia are working hard to put Russia back on the horological map. And they are succeeding.

Businessman Graf Jacques von Polier - the descendent of a colourful French officer who came to Russia with Napoleon, but stayed on after the French retreat - leads a group of investors who are resuscitating the famous Raketa factory in the suburbs of Saint Petersburg.

Once written off as dead, this iconic facility has been modernised by Mr von Polier with the help of Swiss consultants, and it is once again humming with the production of good-quality mechanical watches. Sporting retro-style Soviet dials, they retail from \$300 to \$1,000.

Aleksandr Makarov has gone a different route. His company, Maktime, acquired production equipment from the defunct Poljot and Slava factories and is one of the last companies in Russia still producing movements, including the famous 3133 chronograph calibre and its several variations. Maktime watches are sold primarily in Russia, but they are available from several sellers on the Internet. Their cost, when they can be found, ranges from \$350 to \$500.

Perhaps most ambitious of all the resuscitators is Valentin Volodko, whose company Volmax is striking out boldly to carve a niche for itself in the international market. Volmax began life as a splinter company formed when the First Moscow Watch Factory (Poljot) was liquidated in the years just after 2000. Using Russian-sourced movements and parts, the company produces Aviator and Sturmanskie watches in a modern factory tucked away in the former premises of the First Moscow Watch Factory.

Disappointed with the availability and quality of Russian-made parts, and fearing for the future viability of Russian watch manufacturing, Mr Volodko took the pioneering step about three years ago of establishing a Swiss manufacturing company, Buran SA. By combining high-quality Swiss movements and case components with striking Russian designs and manufacturing know-how, Mr Volodko has created Russia's first truly multinational watch company. Buran watches retail from about \$850 to \$5,000.

In contrast to the factory approach, a new breed of individual artisans has emerged in post-Soviet Russia who see themselves more as artists than industrialists. Two companies that stand out are Namfleg and Tsedro. Ilya Gelfman is the entrepreneurial soul who animates Saint Petersburg-based Namfleg, a company specialising in boldly designed luxury timepieces issued in very small editions. The Aurora, for example, features a vintage Soviet-era calibre 1802 hand-wind movement embedded in an ornate case made from steel recovered from the sunken hull of the famous Russian naval cruiser of the same name. Limited to 1,900 pieces, it retails for about \$7,000.

Founded in 2005, Tsedro Moscow produces high-end, classically styled luxury mechanical watches, many skeletonised, made from precious metals, complex alloys and precious stones. The watches utilise top-quality Russian and Swiss components and typically retail for between \$15,000 and \$50,000.

Unmatched complications

Most dazzling of all the talented new watchmakers is Konstantin Chaykin. His sophisticated clocks and watches are helping to redefine the concept of horological complication.

A 35-year-old Saint Petersburg native, Chaykin was originally a graduate of his home city's Telecommunication College. He became interested in clocks and watches only about 10 years ago when he helped to start a wholesale watch business. He was obviously a quick study.

In less than a decade, Chaykin has designed and manufactured an impressive string of worldclass timepieces incorporating sophisticated tourbillons and grand complications. Milestone creations include the world's first fully transparent watch, a miniature tourbillon clock measuring only 84 mm by 134 mm, and a Decalogue Jewish Time wristwatch that measures time in Hebrew helek and regaim units. (In the Jewish calendar, a day is divided into 24 hours of equal duration. Each hour is divided into 1,080 helek and each helek is divided into 76 rega.)

'My work is a combination of emotions, ideas and history. I love what I do,' Chaykin told me recently. 'My experience and level of theoretical knowledge allow me to improve and perfect a new watch or clock model and transform it into a real work of art. That is my goal for every timepiece.'

Chaykin's most recent and most impressive creations are his Muslim astronomical clocks. His hand-wind Hijri clock, for example, employs the tourbillon as a seconds hand and incorporates separate scales for months of the Muslim calendar, retrograde days of the Muslim calendar, hours and minutes, secular months, secular days of the week, and lunar phases. It features a 10-day power reserve, 18,000 wph, 15 jewels, eight mini rolling bearings and 380 handmade pieces. It is accurate to plus or minus 15 seconds a day. Chaykin's timepieces, which cost between \$7,000 and \$60,000, have put Russian watchmakers back on the horological map. To ensure that they stay there as the future unfolds, Chaykin is now training a new generation of young Russian watchmakers at his Saint Petersburg factory. It is a rigorous, old-fashioned apprenticeship combined with the latest precision technologies.

While an old era has passed for the Russian watch and clock industry, a new and even brighter era is now dawning. The world has not heard the last from Russia's watchmakers. Singaporean Mark Gordon is a strategic marketing consultant who has assembled one of the world's largest collections of Soviet-era Russian clocks and watches

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