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**TRAVELLED TO ULM IN GERMANY TO SEE
THE HOME OF THE K-80**

BEHIND THE SCENES AT KRIEGHOFF



We all have a tendency to romanticize fine guns and gunmaking, so it is easy to forget that gun factories are places of work, full of wood and metal, noise and machinery, where guns appear not by some black art but through honest sweat and toil. I am reminded of this fact every time I visit one, whether it is the back street workshop that houses the Browning custom shop in Liege or a modern purpose built affair.

The home of H. Krieghoff falls very much into the latter category, an unprepossessing two storey building on an industrial park outside of the city of Ulm in Germany that could, from the outside at least, be home to any kind of light industrial business. Inside is very much a different story, a place where craftsmanship and high technology meet to produce one of the best guns in the world.

In the great scheme of things Krieghoff is not a big company. The Ulm factory and its satellite operation in Suhl, in the former East Germany, produces around 2,000 guns each year and a surprisingly high percentage of these fall outside of our direct sphere of interest, being hunting rifles and drillings – that curious European speciality that combines rifled and smooth bore barrels in the same gun. The K-80 and K-20 lines are around 40% of total output.

BARREL POLISHING.



large quantities of scrap metal makes no sense unless your name is Purdey and you can charge \$100,000 for the finished product. As Mr Harrison of Cogswell and Harrison is reputed to have said 100 years ago “the only important stroke of the file is the final one.”

It will still take around nine hours however to do the basic assembly on a K-80 action, the gun passing along the line of workbenches between the



The Krieghoff company found itself in Ulm following the upheaval of the Second World War. Originally founded in Suhl – the traditional center of German gunmaking – in 1886, the company developed a reputation for high quality rifles under the leadership of Heinrich Krieghoff, the founder’s son. As Germany collapsed in 1945, the family fled the advancing Soviet army, leaving behind the original factory to be looted and later destroyed.

As part of the post-war reconstruction, three famous gunmaking companies, Krieghoff, Walther and Anschutz, were given assistance to start afresh in the historic town of Ulm, which sits on the banks of the River Danube between Stuttgart and Munich. Beginning first with air rifles and later moving into other weapons, including of course the K-32 shotgun that evolved into today’s K-80, the firm prospered, moving to the present site in 1960. The new Krieghoff has grown under the leadership of the grandson of the founder, Heinz Ulrich and his son Dieter, who has been at the forefront

of international development and the establishment of Krieghoff International in Ottsville PA in 1986. The re-establishment of operations in Suhl after the reunification of Germany in 1990 was a hugely symbolic move ‘home’.

On my first visit to Ulm, some five years ago, I was struck by the contrasts to be found there. One door would lead to a workshop in which gunsmiths filed and fettled in time honored fashion; the next would house the most up to date computer controlled milling machines or designers using computer aided techniques to optimize the design of every part of the guns.

That contrast was still evident when I returned recently, although the march of technology has speeded up noticeably. A whole new extension had been added and was already full to bursting with the latest CNC machines. These produce the basic parts to a very high degree of precision, minimizing the work needed on final fitting as the gun is assembled. It is a logic that just about every gunmaker in the world has acknowledged; using expensive skilled labor to remove



(TOP RIGHT) RAW ACTION FORGINGS. (ABOVE) DEEP CONCENTRATION IN THE STOCKING DEPARTMENT.

specialist gunsmiths. This is where the extra – and often indefinable – ‘feel’ is built into a quality gun that can never be reproduced entirely by machines. In fact ‘feel’ is a good term because in watching these craftsmen work you have the impression of all the senses being used to make those final adjustments, with sight, sound and touch combining to judge when everything is ‘just so’.

Actions arrive in the factory as rough forgings, while barrels start life as raw tubes. Shotgun and rifle barrels are treated very differently; the K-80 barrels have hard soldered

ribs, chosen for the higher degree of precision. This allows the use of chemical blacking to give that distinctive deep luster, a process applied in a part of the factory that more resembles a medieval alchemist's kitchen! Rifle barrels are not suitable for hard soldering and are traditionally soft soldered. This would be dissolved by the chemicals so rifle barrels are rust blued in time honored fashion.

Part of me loves it when



(TOP LEFT) DUPLICATING A STOCK. (ABOVE) IT IS HARD TO BELIEVE GLOSSY BLACK BARRELS EMERGE FROM THIS.



technology is unable to solve a problem and there is a classic example in the barrel making process. Barrel tubes do not start perfectly straight, nor is there any guarantee they will be so at the end of all the work that takes place on them. Gunmakers have traditionally used a wheel device to bend barrels straight and there is still no better way. By looking down the bore against the light and throwing shadows along the length, the skilled eye can detect the slightest imperfection. A fine adjustment on the wheel produces the perfect barrel.

Producing stocks from rough blanks is the work of an ingenious duplicating machine. A pattern is inserted alongside the rough blank and the operator follows the lines with a guide. The milling part of the machine removes the excess wood following those lines. This is not

only a quick way to produce standard patterns but a useful way to duplicate a custom stock. Any special requirements for customers are handled in the stock shop where they can fit just about anyone.

All guns are test fired in the onsite indoor range. Shotguns are regulated to a standard point of aim at 35 yards but of course the K-80's famous barrel hanger system allows the customer to fine tune the setting to his or her own requirements.

That leaves just the cosmetics before the gun is finished and ready for despatch. There are four engravers in house and other outworkers available for special commissions and every Krieghoff is hand engraved, including the standard scroll designs. Even a fairly sparse pattern such as this will represent half a day's work. Elaborate full coverage designs or gold inlay can take weeks and add



thousands of dollars to the final cost. The surface finishes are also applied at the factory. Nickel coating is the most popular but a striking 'coin' finish can be specified along with blacking or traditional color hardening, doing it your way is one of the joys of buying a gun like the K-80, even if it does mean a

long wait while it is built for you.

Visit over, there remains only one other essential feature of a visit to Ulm – to retire to a local inn and talk guns over tall glasses of the local wheat beer and steaming plates of venison and noodles. As they say, this is a tough job but someone has to do it!