

ERNST WILDI
Some Personal Comments

A short work History

Born August 17. 1923 in Aarau, in the German part of Switzerland. After finishing High School in 1939 at the age of 16, I started a 3 year apprenticeship in lens manufacturing at Kern and Company, a recognized manufacturer of high quality binoculars, surveying instruments and lenses for Bolex Movie cameras. I continued to work there until 1947 when leaving for the USA with the hope of possibly being able to go into professional photography or film production ---my two favorite hobbies.

While my hopes did not materialize, Eastman Kodak in Rochester NY, probably realizing my thorough knowledge and expertise of lens manufacturing. offered me a job in their optical department and I worked there until 1949 when the Swiss company Paillard,- the manufacturer of Bolex movie cameras and Hermes typewriters, opened a USA Sales and service office in New York and offered me the position as a technical representative. In 1957, Paillard USA was awarded the USA distributorship for the Hasselblad medium format cameras made in Sweden which gave me the opportunity to also promote Hasselblad and still photography to amateur and professional photographers.

My work at Kern in Aarau

Most of the time that I spent at Kern in Aarau was during world war 2. (1939- 1945) when Mr. Deutsch, a very friendly German who became a Swiss citizen was in charge of the optical department and Mr. Steinmann was the president of Kern. Dr. Lotmar was the optical designer. (I hope the names are correct)

All these gentlemen seemed to be aware of my interest to advance professionally and helped me in every possible way. Dr. Lotmar invited me to his house to teach me how to design lenses,- how to calculate where the light rays of different colors going through different parts of the lens end up behind the lens to form the image. Mr. Steinmann took me out of the optical manufacturing department and moved me to the final testing department where all the lenses and instruments were checked before leaving the factory. I now was no longer an "Arbeiter" with an hourly salary but became a "Angestellter" with a monthly salary. Mr. Steinmann also gave me the opportunity to go to Zurich one day a week to take courses in surveying at the ETH.

Considering future possibilities

While the management at Kern offered me wonderful opportunities, I was still looking for future studying possibilities and seriously considered to study at the top optical school in Germany. This school no longer existed at the end of the war so I started considering possibilities in other countries and eventually narrowed it down to the USA hoping to have the opportunity there to go professionally into my favorite fields, photography or film making. These possibilities did not seem to open up so I ended up at the optical department of Eastman Kodak in Rochester. Fortunately while working there I communicated with Mr. Steinmann in Aarau informing him of my work in a new optical manufacturing process where low quality lenses could be ground and polished in minutes instead of hours. My communication with Mr. Steinmann resulted in my life's most important turning point.

The most important happening in my Life

"While living in Rochester I belonged to a gymnastic club as I did in Aarau. After most evening training sessions, we enjoyed a beer which brought our return home to about midnight. When coming home around midnight after such a session, I had a message on the telephone from Mr. Steinmann suggesting to call him at a hotel in Rochester. I did so (waking him up) and he asked me whether I could come to the hotel right now, which I did. At the hotel he told me that he was in New York because Paillard opened their own office and showroom in New York and he was there for the official opening. He also told me that the management of Paillard USA in New York felt that the company needed an optical expert who can discuss lenses in a professional manner with photographers and he felt that I would be perfect for this job and that I might be interested in working for this Swiss company. Needless to say that I was and got the job.

I go into all these details because it was Mr. Steinmann who gave me the opportunity to go into photography, what I was hoping for, and it was this change in my activity that made me stay in the USA. My contact with Mr. Steinmann really changed my entire future life and was the beginning of all my future activities in the United States and eventually in many other countries.

Considered a Bolex expert, Paillard USA encouraged me to write for photographic magazines, to write a book, "the Bolex Guide to 16mm Movie Making," and to lecture about successful filmmaking with Bolex cameras and Kern lenses in all the major cities in the United States.

My Involvement with Hasselblad

I was very happy when Paillard USA took on the USA distributorship for Hasselblad in 1957 because Hasselblad was always my dream camera that I unfortunately could not afford. After a few years, the Hasselblad people in Goteborg, Sweden, probably aware of my Hasselblad photography and my knowledge of photography and cameras in general, felt that lectures on Hasselblad photography could help camera sales in the USA. I started to do such lectures in the United States where my schedule also included a two day photographic training program for the American astronauts. I constantly improved the visuals and the comments in my lectures with the result that Hasselblad felt that such lectures might also help the camera sales in other countries. Over the next few years, they arranged such lectures in 50 different countries on five continents, including one for the Hasselblad distributor in Biel, Switzerland and one or two in six different cities in China with each being attended by an audience of 500 to 1000 photographers.