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PETER HOFER: Gunmaker

Classic long guns built in the Ferlach tradition

By Tom Turpin

It has been a tradition in Europe for centuries to locate like industries in close proximity to each other. Presumably, the reason for this custom was functional—to co-locate needed skills, raw materials and the like. A wonderful example of this practice is in the gunmaking field. Germany located its gun industries in or near Suhl; Italy in Brescia/Gardone; Spain in the Basque country around Eibar; and Austria in Ferlach, to name a few examples. Although modern transportation networks have abrogated the need to co-locate somewhat, many still do it anyway.

Austria is an excellent example. Firearms have been crafted in the town of Ferlach since the 16th century. Many of the finest gunmakers in all of Europe are located there. Some would even say that the absolute best makers are to be found in Ferlach. The names of Berovník, Fanzoj, Hambrusch,

Hauptmann, Juch, Michelitsch, to name but a few, all turn out exquisite firearms. In recent years, the name of Hofer, much like cream in milk, has gradually risen to the top of the Ferlach artisans. At age 43—a relative youngster when compared to many Austrian makers—Peter Hofer has built an enviable reputation

among his peers. He graduated from the Ferlach Gunsmiths College in 1979. He attained the distinguished title "Büchenschmied" (Master Gunsmith) when he was but 20 years old. He quickly acquired a reputation of virtuosity with combination guns, an Austrian specialty. One, a five-barreled

model, created quite a stir in gunmaking circles. It featured three 20 bore barrels and two 9.3x74R barrels and was fired with two triggers.

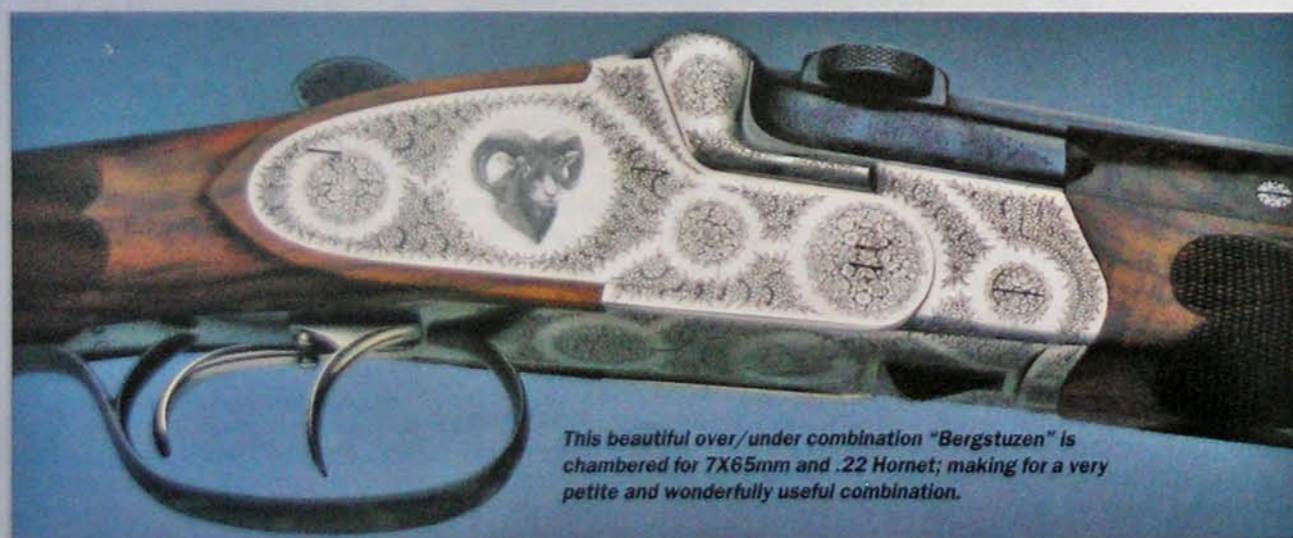
In 1986, he started his own business and has been going strong since then. Today, his operation is located at Kirchgasse 24, not far from the center of

Ferlach. Hofer has built his lofty reputation around his obsession with perfection. Each and every firearm leaving his shop is as close to perfect in every detail as is humanly possible to achieve. There are no shortcuts taken and that same attention to detail is as lavished on parts that will never be seen as it is on conspic-

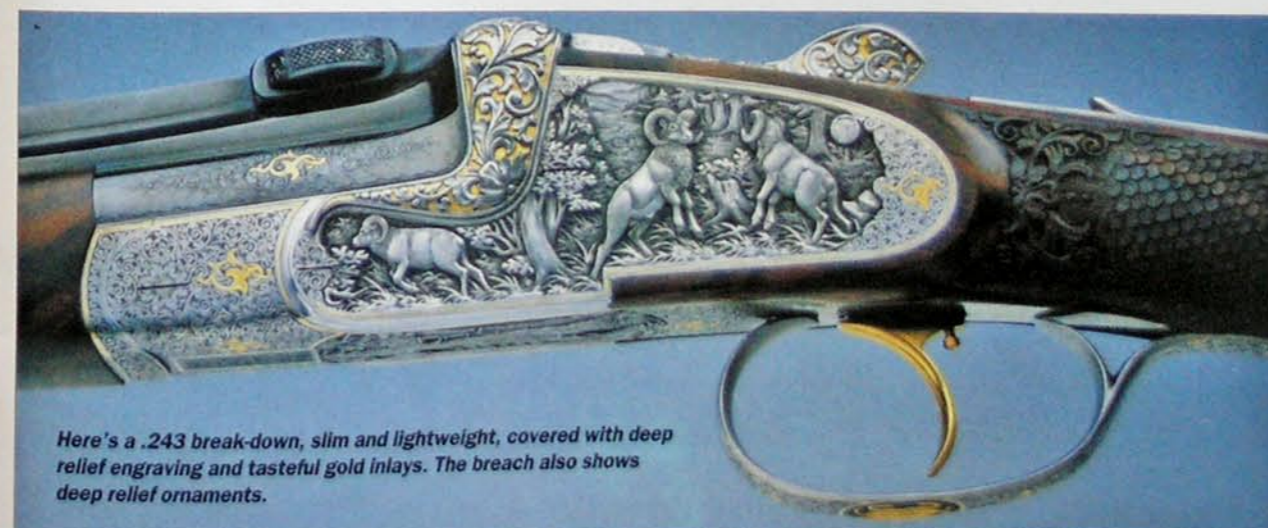
uously obvious ones. In that respect, Hofer is much like David Miller, arguably America's best custom maker. Miller and his associate, Curt Crum, spend untold hours attending to every detail of their rifles. I once watched Crum spend several hours designing and fabricating a jig to insure



A .470 NE double rifle engraved with a rhinoceros scene on the right side of the receiver, a buffalo on the left and an elephant underneath the lock. The relief work is finished with a special shading technique. The luxury leather case contains all the tools and fittings, each built by hand employing the same walnut used for the stock.



This beautiful over/under combination "Bergstuzen" is chambered for 7X65mm and .22 Hornet; making for a very petite and wonderfully useful combination.



Here's a .243 break-down, slim and lightweight, covered with deep relief engraving and tasteful gold inlays. The breach also shows deep relief ornaments.

PETER HOFER: Gunmaker

that "L" and "R" could be stamped in the exact center of a stock crossbolt. Since the crossbolt would be basically permanently covered with a cap on each side, only the gunmaker would ever know that the left and right side markings were not off-center.

Hofer is cut from the same cloth. Both Hofer and Miller have been criticized for devoting so much time to such details which, of course, is ultimately reflected in the final price for their products. Even though the point is debatable, neither Miller nor, presumably, Hofer care about the castigation. They will continue to build their firearms ultimately to suit themselves.

Naturally, each is delighted when the customer is pleased with his new firearm. Neither though would lessen the way they each build a firearm...just to satisfy a customer. Their in-house orders would imply that there are at least enough aficionados out there that agree with their philosophy to keep them busy for a long time.

Herr Hofer has assembled a team of ten artisans that agree with his perfectionist approach to building fine firearms. The four masters in the team are each capable of executing all aspects of creating a masterpiece. Even so, each has developed his own specialty and generally concentrates on his chosen forte.

All aspects of the construction of his firearms, with the exception of making the barrels and doing the engraving, are executed in-house. Any materials needed from outside his shop are delivered in rough, unfinished form and all fitting and finishing is done under Hofer's control.

Generally, at any given time there are about 30 guns being crafted in Hofer's shop. That represents about six years of work as usually no more than five are completed in a given year. On many of the more ornate commissions, the engraving alone can take a couple years or more. All Hofer guns, even the most basic that he creates, feature some engraving.

Unusual for Ferlach, Hofer relies very often on bulino style engraving. Austrians have developed a reputation for the heavily chiseled Germanic style patterns. It is rare to find an Austrian- or, for that matter German-made firearm, that has been embellished with the delicate bulino style engraving.

For those unfamiliar with bulino style engraving, it is executed with a hand

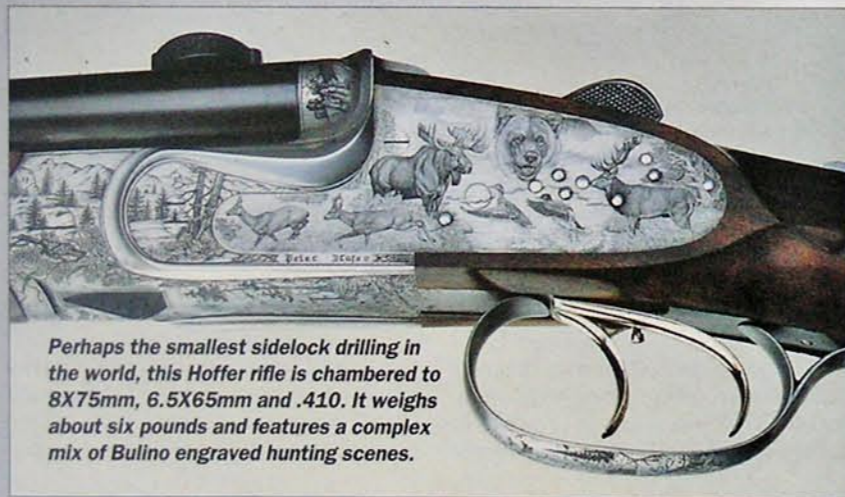
graver and consists of thousands of tiny line cuts in the steel. With minor technical exceptions, the portrait of U.S. Grant on a \$50 bill (or Abe on a \$5 for that matter) is a good example of bulino engraving. The Italians have perfected this style of engraving and two of the finest bulino engravers in the world are Italian. Angelo Galeazzi and Firmo Fracassi have, for many years now, shared that distinction with very few others. Fracassi once embellished a Hofer rifle, a rare event as his work is normally only seen on fine Italian shotguns. Mostly though, Hofer relies on Austrian Barbara Krondorfer to execute his delicate bulino patterns. Her work is exquisite.

Even though somewhat more tractable to contemporary design than many of his Austrian colleagues, Hofer is still greatly influenced by his Ferlach training and the Austrian gunmaking tradition. This is most evident in stock styling and adornment. The traditional schweinsrücken (hogback) comb and Bavarian style cheekpiece are often found on Hofer firearms. So is fish scale carving instead of checkering, along with other

inlays and carvings. Schnabel fore-ends and sharply hooked pistol grips are traditional design features on Tirolean single-shot rifles. Hofer often employs these customary design characteristics.

Personally, I prefer the "classic" styled stock as we define it, on my rifles. I am apt to come down with a serious case of hives at just seeing a Bavarian styled stock. However, I emphasize that this is a matter of personal preference and has nothing what-so-ever to do with quality. Like everything else on a Hofer firearm, the stocks are masterfully executed and only the highest quality walnut is used. Of course, many users and collectors of fine firearms embrace the Tirolean styling and find my preferred stock design boring. I just happen not to be one of them.

I am told that the earliest delivery time upon confirmation of order is about 18 months for the simplest model. I cannot quote a price as that depends upon many factors. It suffices to say, though, that the old saw, "If you have to ask the price, you can't afford it," probably applies. All Hofer guns are made to individual order and the details of desired refinements would deter-



Perhaps the smallest sidelock drilling in the world, this Hofer rifle is chambered to 8X75mm, 6.5X65mm and .410. It weighs about six pounds and features a complex mix of Bulino engraved hunting scenes.



Hofer is also known for fine upland guns. This 12 gauge side-by-side features a single trigger and fine bulino engraving.



This O/U Hoffer drilling is chambered for the .30-06, .222 Remington Magnum and 20 gauge, and features deep relief engraving and tasteful gold inlays.

mine both the cost and the deliver time.

If I had been born with a silver spoon in my mouth or inherited a suitcase full of Microsoft stock, I'd contact Herr Hofer and discuss making me one of his superb single-shot rifles in, perhaps, .257 Roberts caliber. I'd specify his finest walnut for the stock and, depending on how many shares of Microsoft were in the

suitcase, perhaps specify full sidelocks engraved in the bulino style by Frau Krondorfer. About the only thing that we would debate at great length would be the styling of the stock.

For any admirer of Germanic styled firearms, Mecca is surely Suhl, Germany and Ferlach, Austria. These two gun-making centers are not all that far apart

and both could be easily visited on a short European swing. An absolute must for any trip to Ferlach is a visit with Peter Hofer. I guarantee that any lover of fine firearms will come away impressed.

Contact Peter Hofer Jagdwaffen, Dept. GA, Kirchgasse 24, A-9170, Ferlach, Austria; www.hoferwaffen.com; 01143-4227-3683.



For this sidelock three-barrel set, Hofer went to the limit of technological feasibility by reducing the size of all of the gun's working parts. This unique rifle was engraved with extensive Bouttini engraving (7,400 dots/square millimeter) under a 40X stereomicroscope. To protect the rifle and its accessories, a unique oak-and-leather luxury case was built.