LEANEKALB
The Calf-Skin Leica:
A Lesser Luxus

by Harold M. Merklinger

Figure 1: Leica I (A) No. 40330. Note the smooth body covering.

Figure 2: Top view of Leica No. 40330.

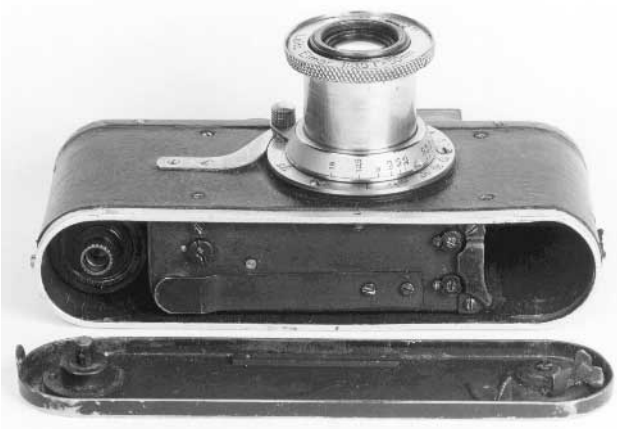

Figure 3: A bottom view of this 1930 camera.

A quick glance at the camera in Figure 1 will tell you that it's a relatively common Leica I (A) with fixed Elmar lens. It's condition is perhaps only average. A closer look will show that there's something amiss with the vulcanite—it's too smooth. If you could see and touch this camera you would observe that the body covering is not only smooth, it's brown, it's soft and it's very delicate. The covering is brown calf's leather.

Perhaps the vulcanite all cracked off and someone covered the body with leather instead? I suppose that's not impossible, but if that was done it was done a long time ago. The leather looks genuinely old: it has about the same appearance as the case for the binoculars my dad used during WWII. But unlike the hard old leather of the binoculars case, this Leica's leather feels warm and supple. The leather is damaged in a few places. In the figure you can see that a tiny bit of the leather is missing just below the wind knob, on the right-hand end of the body. On the left side there is a larger piece missing, as well as a small strip that has been scraped free of the aluminum body. The strip is surprisingly flexible. But it also feels as though it might tear easily. One could remove the remaining leather from the body with one's thumb nail, I suspect.

Figures 2 and 3 show top and bottom views of the camera.

Careful reading of any of the comprehensive Leica books (Jim Lager's efforts, Denis Laney's or Van Hasbroeck) will tell you that there were reputed to be some 180 Leica Is made with coloured calf-skin leather. The code word was "Leanekalb". Jim Lager's "Leica Illustrated Guide" (Vol. I), page 15, or his more recent "Leica An Illustrated History Volume I — Cameras" page 27, illustrates a page from a 1931 catalogue describing the "The Leica Camera de Luxe". The major part of the text describes the better-known Leica with "...all the metal parts (in) dull gilt, the body...covered with lizard skin (coloured green, blue, red, or brown)..." The last paragraph on the page states: "In addition, we supply the black enamelled Leica camera model covered with coloured calf-leather. The case of this model is also made of coloured calf-leather, either in the form shown above (fig. 7) or as a bag with bow-clips."

Theo Kisselback, in his article "Oskar Barnack and the Development of the Leica" in the 15th Edition of *The Leica Manual* published by Morgan & Morgan in 1973, states: "Two special versions of the Leica Model A (or I) were introduced in October, 1929: at a small extra charge,

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the camera could be ordered with a dyed calf covering in place of the conventional black vulcanized rubber one. This optional leather covering was available in a choice of four colours: green, blue, red or brown. But customers did not seen to care for these refinements. The "Luxus Leica" camera, which appeared at the same time, also was more popular at exhibitions than in actual sales."

In private discussions with Jim, he tells me he has never examined one of these cameras. He thinks he might have seen one once a long time ago without appreciating it's significance. Van Hasbroeck describes these cameras as "extremely rare in original condition". Michael Pritchard at Christie's in London says he knows of no recorded sales of this model. There are other Leicas of rarer manufacture, that are yet well known and well studied. Why should the Leanekalb be almost unknown?

I have three suggestions concerning the apparent rarity of these cameras; the first has already been alluded to. The calf-leather seems to be quite delicate. A camera in daily recent use would probably be in tatters, and quite unsightly. It's owner would probably have the camera recovered, or sent somewhere for the standard vulcanite treatment. The casual inheritor of a calf-skin Leica would probably place little value or significance upon it—it doesn't even say "Leica". It would certainly not attract the same attention as a gold-plated camera! The average Leica collector would probably say "The owner's obviously done a patch, replacing the vulcanite with a scrap of leather." And a typical dealer would probably grunt "It's not listed in McKeown's guide; can't be genuine."

Second, many early Leicas were converted to later models. Given the delicate nature of the covering as cited above, I suspect Leitz would have recommended that a converted camera should have the standard vulcanite-covered body.

The third reason is that this example, at least, has a fatal flaw. I obviously can't claim that all such cameras had this flaw, but the fact that this one does, hints that others may have had it too. The problem, you see, is that the lens mount is fitted on top of the leather. The leather is one of the components affecting the critical lens-to-film distance. The lens was obviously carefully shimmed at the factory; I'm sure the camera left the assembly line with lens in perfect alignment. But the shims are seated on the leather. Temperature, humidity, pressure on the lens, and tightening of the three lens mounting screws would have affected focus. I suspect that lens mounts had a penchant for loosening as the leather shrank; and tightening the screws would only have made matters worse. These cameras were probably quite unreliable in the focus department. Their owners would either have discarded the cameras in despair, or, complaining to Leitz about the problem, have had them fixed by replacing the body shell with the standard item.

Figure 4 shows the camera with lens removed. About one-third of one of the fiber shims remains stuck to the leather, but elsewhere you may observe the depression in the leather made by the lens mount.

Does the serial number match with factory records? Yes, according to Jim Lager, Leica No. 40330 is accompanied in production lists by the notation "mit Kalbleder".

Is this Leica genuine? If someone 'forged' this camera, he didn't do it for money. I've traced the ownership of the camera back three stages: the prices paid were less than a day's wages. The camera was, by all accounts, extremely dirty. Two of the recent owners claim to have spent considerable time cleaning it. And there's still lots of evidence of the green gunk that forms over the years where leather meets brass. For what it's worth, where the leather is torn away from the aluminum body, it appears that there was a red-coloured treatment of the aluminum. Or perhaps a red cement was used. I can't comment on the significance of this. And oh yes, the shutter curtains were painted long ago with glossy black paint.

Not quite so pretty as when it was new, but still with a warm touch of luxury, this is indeed a "Lesser Luxus".

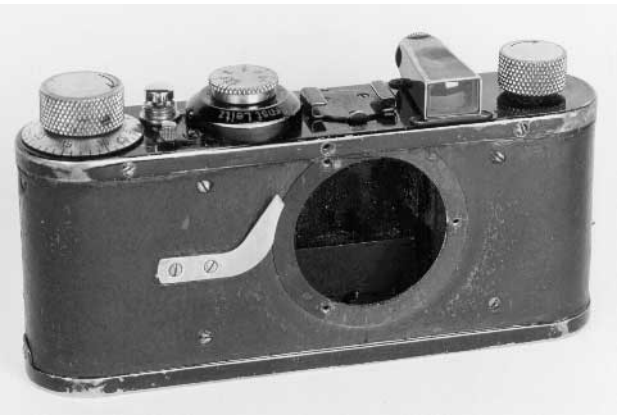

Figure 4: With lens removed, one may observe about the lens opening, from about 12 O'clock to about 7 O'clock, a depression made in the leather by the lens mount. A piece of one of the original fiber shims remains stuck to the leather on the side of the opening nearest the infinity catch.