

# Antonin Vincenc Lebeda, Master Gunmaker

H.H. Thomas

Thank you Mr. President, and greetings members of the Society. I am honored by your presence this morning.

It certainly takes a lot of speakers to keep this organization going. I sometimes have the feeling that if all great speakers were laid end-to-end, it would be a good thing.

My life has been somewhat of a dilemma. I was born with a royal taste but without any royal blood; the closest I could get to royalty was to collect some of their possessions. Fortunately, through the years I have been able to acquire quite a few of them and once I acquire them it is very difficult to get me to part with them.

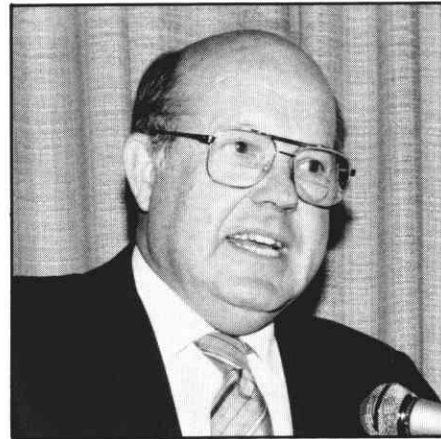
Antonin Vincenc (Vinzent, Vincent) Lebeda was truly a Royal artisan. The records show that he made guns for most of the Royal families of Europe. I have two of his cased sets and one sporting rifle, and I have a few slides of each, so I shall differentiate by referring to one set as round barrel and one set as fluted barrel.

I first became interested in Lebeda about 25 years ago when I purchased a fine cased set in Miami, Florida, that King Carol, then Prince and a gun collector, gave to our Military Attache upon his completion of duty in Romania. About five years later I purchased a nice Lebeda over and under takedown sporting rifle bearing the Royal Crest, at a gun show in Winston Salem, N.C. This past year I purchased my second cased set from a friend's estate in Kettering, Ohio. I had known of this set for several years and I had let the executor know that I was interested in them, when they came up for sale.

The source of my information on this eminent gunmaker is a result of my writing to the Czechoslovak Army Museum in Prague. They graciously replied through their Military and Air Attache in Washington, D.C. I also drew heavily from a very comprehensive article on Mr. Lebeda by Jaroslav Lugs in the *Guns Review* published in London in June, 1964.

I shall run through the slides, then I would like to deal briefly with Mr. Lebeda's biography.

Antonin Vincenc Lebeda was born on the first day of May 1795 at Cernesice near Prague, into a family of farmers. However, at age twelve, Lebeda left the farm for the city of Prague to learn to be a gunsmith. He finished his apprenticeship at age eighteen, then began a tour of different gunmakers in several European countries, and landed his first job with a Vienna gunmaker named Contriner. After seven years of touring and learning, he returned to Prague and took over an established business



of Matyas Brandies, who had died. This shop was located in a Prague suburb at Karlin. Lebeda immediately moved the shop to the center of Prague and within two years had become a Master gunsmith; for his Masters examination he made two sporting rifle locks.

Lebeda was the first Czech gunsmith to be granted a patent for firearms; this was in the year of 1829. On April 16, 1822, in the Church of St. Stephen, Lebeda married Anna Stumpf, daughter of a Prague citizen and fruit merchant. In 1823 and 1824, his two sons, Antonin and Ferdinand, were born; they would later inherit and continue the family gunmaking business.

Near the end of the 18th century, the production of fine luxury guns declined in many European countries, after having reached a very high level in the 16th century. Then early in the 19th century, the high art of fine gunmaking began to flourish again, and such gunmakers as Frantisek Novack of Prague, Matyas Novotny of Litomerice, and Josef Rutte of Ceska Lipa were enjoying a growing reputation. In 1820 all three were awarded bronze medals at the Industrial Exhibition in Prague.

But it was Antonin Vincenc Lebeda who gained world-wide fame. The first royal order Lebeda received was from Prince Kamil Rohan. The prince asked for proof of his ability from the young gunmaker and ordered a gun that would compete with the English makers. Lebeda's finished product was truly a masterpiece in every respect.

Now his problem was how much to ask the prince for it, so he inquired around to see what other gunsmiths were getting for their work. He learned that Jan Kadensky, wife of a local gunsmith, visited various inns selling long guns made by her husband and she was getting 4 to 5 guildens



A poor reproduction of a portrait of Antonin Vinzenz Lebeda

in Viennese currency. Other gunsmiths got 15 to 20 guildens, with the better guns fetching 35 to 40 guildens.

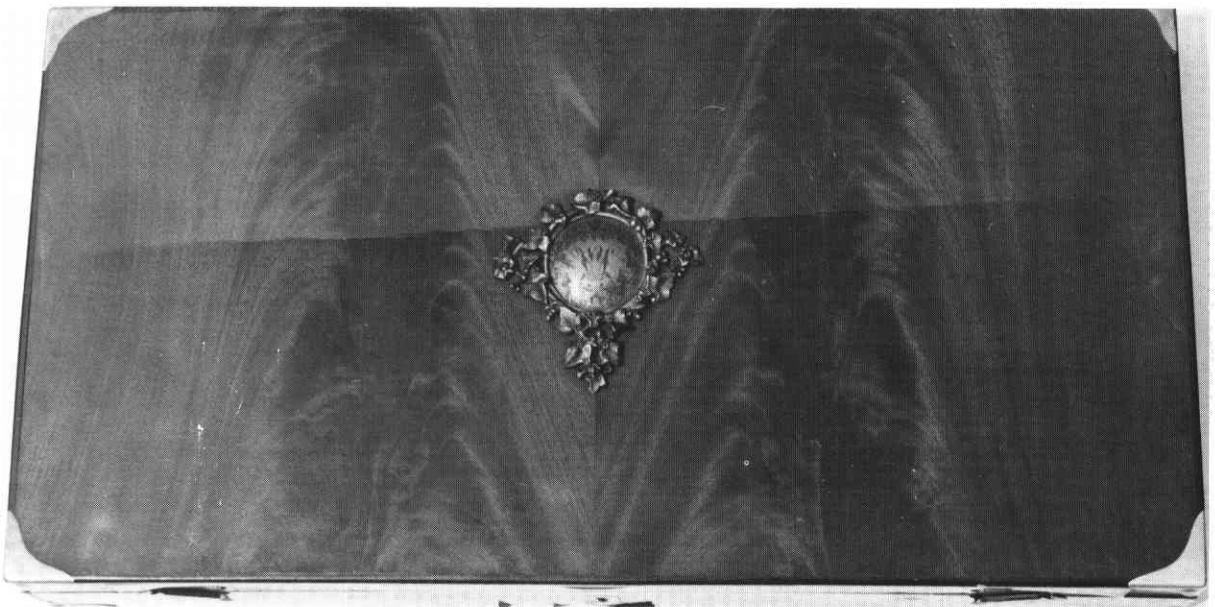
Lebeda knew that his product was superior to his competitors work and was entitled to more than they were getting, so he raised his price 5 guildens. He packed his gun and headed for the Prince's Palace and on the way he remembered that the gunmakers in Vienna were getting

55 guildens for their better guns, so he upped his price to meet theirs. But as he journeyed on he realized that his work was far superior to those marketed in Vienna and he deserved at least 10 guildens more. The price was now 65, but knowing the aristocracy preferred round figures he quickly changed it to 70 guildens.

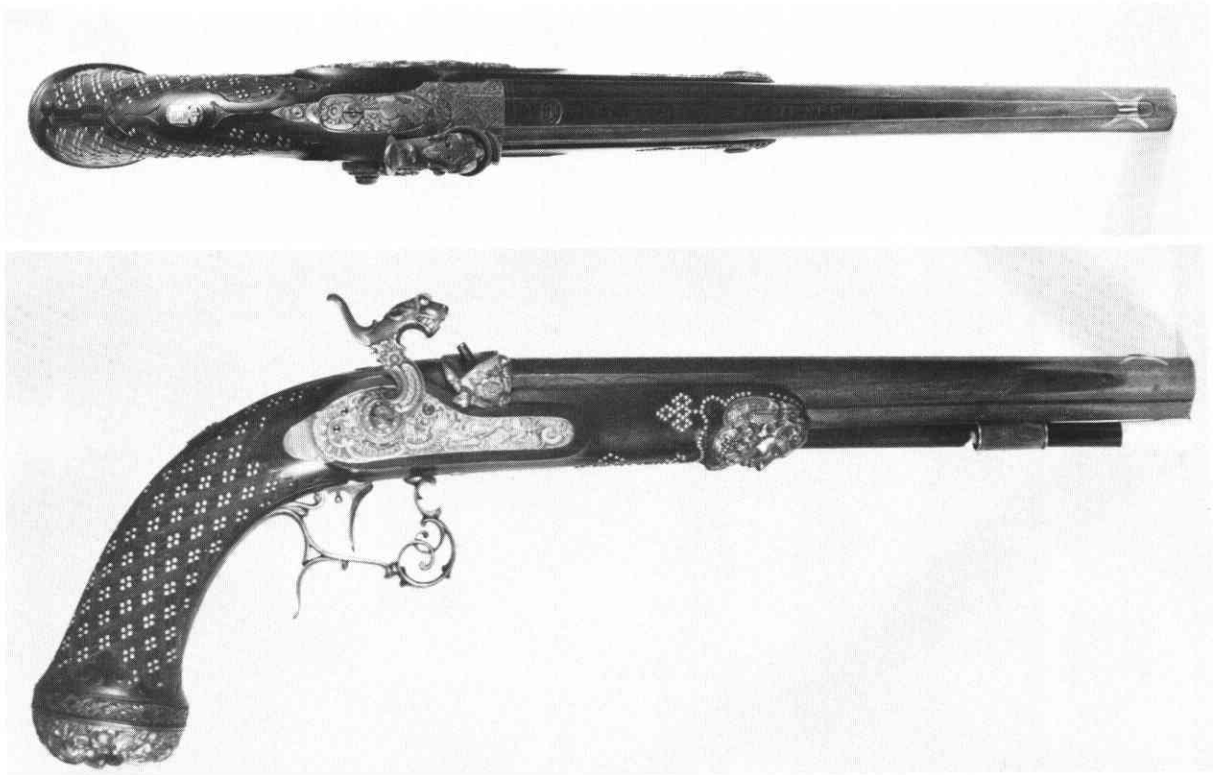
When he arrived at the palace he was told by the Prince's personal chasseur (uniformed footman), that the Prince had a visitor and that he was to wait. Lebeda, being very inquisitive, learned from the chasseur, for a silverling, that the Prince had very recently paid 95 guildens for an English rifle.

Very soon Lebeda was led into the presence of the Prince. He introduced himself and presented the gun. The Prince carefully examined it and appreciated it highly, "What is your price?" he asked. "Ninety guildens," Lebeda answered. "What! Ninety guildens for a Prague rifle?" the Prince retorted. However, Lebeda did not lose his presence of mind and answered, "His Grace ordered a gun that could compete with the English. I have made one that is better and ask 5 guildens less for it." "Well we shall see," said the Prince, "tomorrow we go shooting." The shooting was so successful that it produced several orders from the Prince's guests, including Prince Kinsky and Count Clam-Callas. Soon afterward Lebeda had to hire more workers.<sup>1</sup>

Lebeda realized very early that gunsmithing was not a matter of low prices so much as it was of good solid workmanship, so he decided to pay top wages and expect good workmanship. Lebeda's word was his bond. He checked every part, tried all the guns, and managed the firm himself. His guns became very popular at home as well as abroad and in 1831 Lebeda was employing 18 workers.



Case lid for Lebeda pair with round Kuckenreuter barrels



Top and side of a round barrel Lebeda

One time while Lebeda was lying in bed with an injury, he amused himself by cutting lock patterns out of playing cards. He later produced a special percussion lock according to his pattern book, called a Kastenschlass or Prague lock, for which he received a patent in 1829, and in 1830 he was granted a new patent for an improved lock.

Lebeda described his improvements as follows:

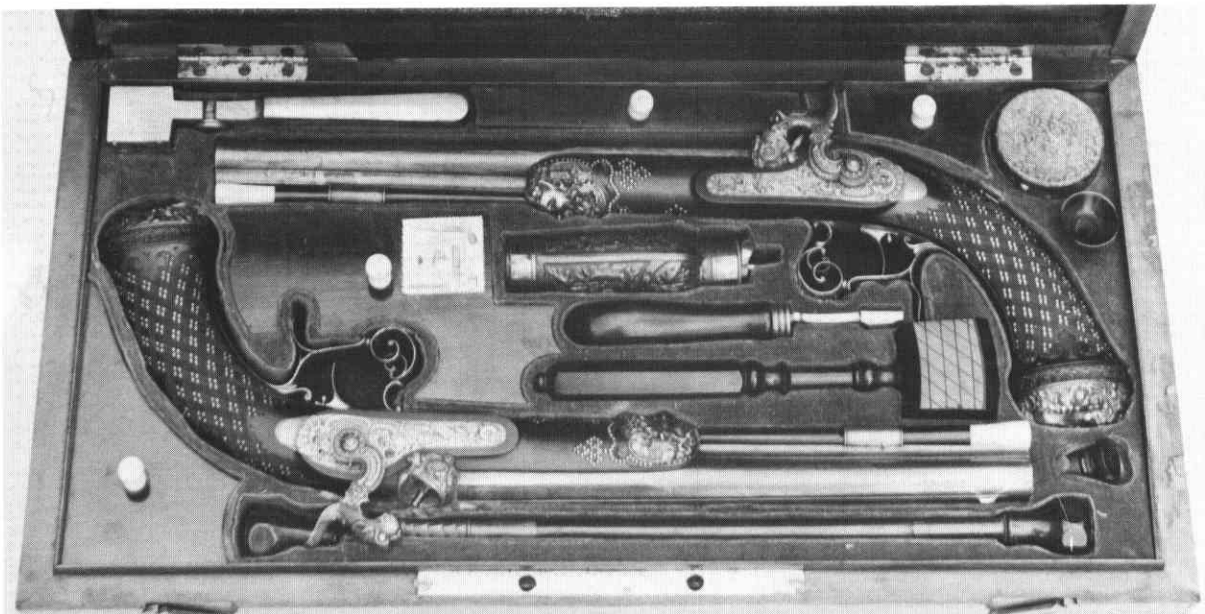
1. The whole mechanism is held together by means of only two screws; a single one of which is sufficient to secure safe functioning.

2. The improved lock is supplied with only one spring; the spring operates both cocks of double barrelled guns.

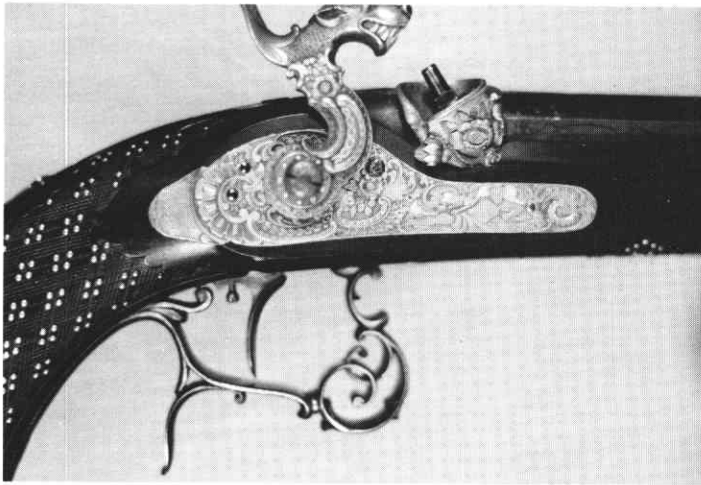
3. The lock contains only four small screws, any of which may become lost or broken without rendering the gun impossible or unsafe to use.

4. The cocks of the lock can be sunk or fastened to the outside.

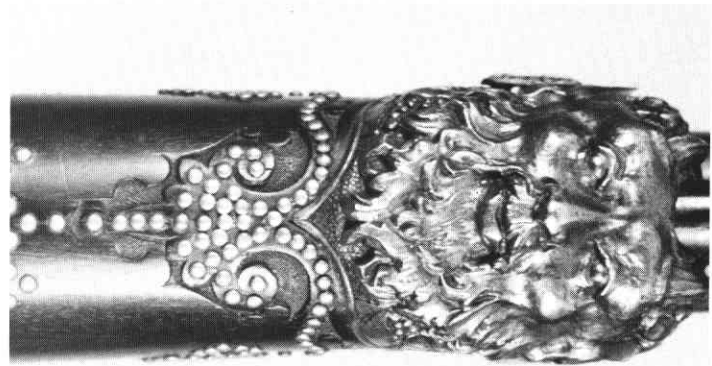
5. The fore-end of the new guns is much simpler and more rugged, and gives it more protection from the injuri-



Round barrel Lebeda's in their case



Lockplate, hammer and trigger guard of a round barrel Lebeda



Fore-end cap of a round barrel Lebeda



Top of hammer and barrel tang of a round barrel Lebeda



Butt cap of a round barrel Lebeda

ous effects of smoke, dampness and recoil.

6. The new, improved design employs a safety feature, which provides ample protection against accidental discharge, without preventing an immediate use of the gun.<sup>2</sup>

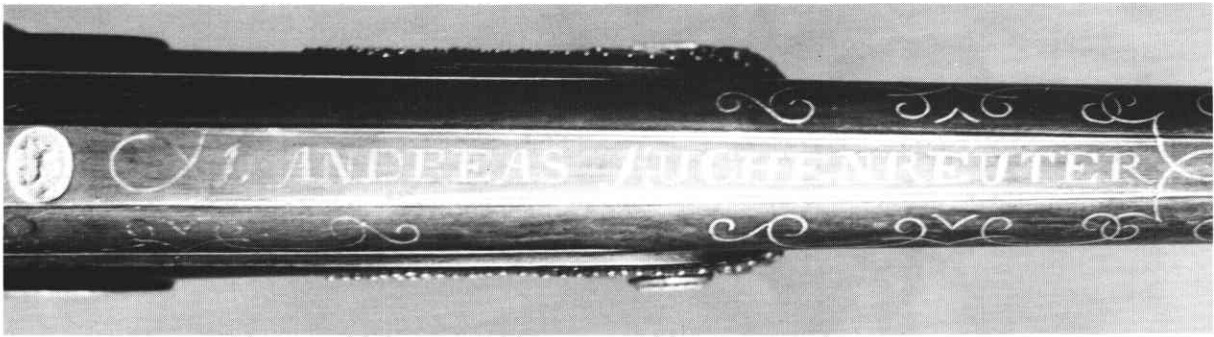
Lebeda's Prague lock became widely used as the so called back action lock used on long guns as well as pistols, and became so popular that it was copied by French, German and English gunsmiths.

Lebeda's shop made a lighter and more convenient stock than those most commonly used in Europe. Lebeda also invented the method of fastening the trigger guard by means of a footplate to the rear, to which a horn grip was attached.

Lebeda arms were outstanding for their incredibly precise mechanism and stocks, unmatched even after the introduction of precision tools. Each part had to be produced under the master's direct supervision.

Lebeda had pattern books containing all the arms produced in his shop for 68 years, from May, 1820, to May, 1888, when the firm ceased to exist. The whole collection represents a small library. Each gun was given its own number and page in the pattern book, the parts were fully described, with the name of the worker and his wages. The book also contained the name of the purchaser and the date delivered, as well as sketches of carvings and etchings glued to the pages.

This arrangement proved invaluable, as Lebeda guaranteed all his work and products. If a disgruntled customer brought in a gun for repair under the guarantee, Lebeda could readily tell if the material was defective and who the worker was. Sometimes a customer purchased guns with interchangeable barrels and later had actions and stocks made to fit these elsewhere, and years later if these guns were brought in for repair Lebeda could tell by his own



Kuchenreuter name in gold on a round barrel Lebeda

stamps and numbers which parts were covered by the guarantee.

Lebeda did not like to use foreign barrels, so in 1831 he petitioned the Government for the privilege of building a barrel factory in Bohemia. Finally Lebeda succeeded and opened a forge at Burgstein; however, in a few months it was closed because there was no authorized proof house. So again the rough forged iron barrels were imported from France and Belgium; iron from Syria and steel from England.

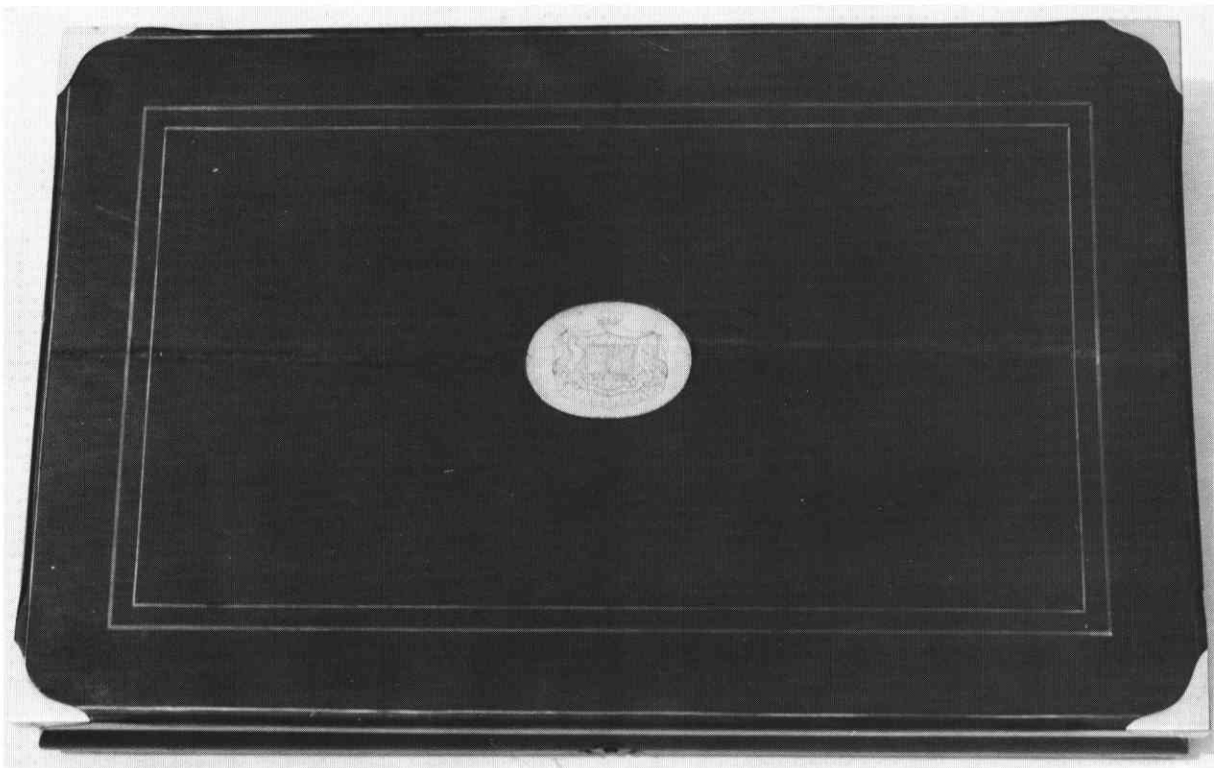
In 1835 Lebeda received the privilege of calling his gun shop a factory and was allowed to use the sign of the Imperial Eagle. A few years later in 1841 on the 3rd of September, the regional government in Prague issued a decree making Lebeda's establishment a privileged provincial factory which employed between forty and fifty specialized workers, including six engravers. Lebeda produced famous cased duelling pistols containing com-

plete sets of loading and cleaning equipment, as well as all types of hunting and sporting arms, such as a pair owned by our own Jack DuBlon of Milwaukee for which he won the silver medal at the 1984 NRA convention in Milwaukee.

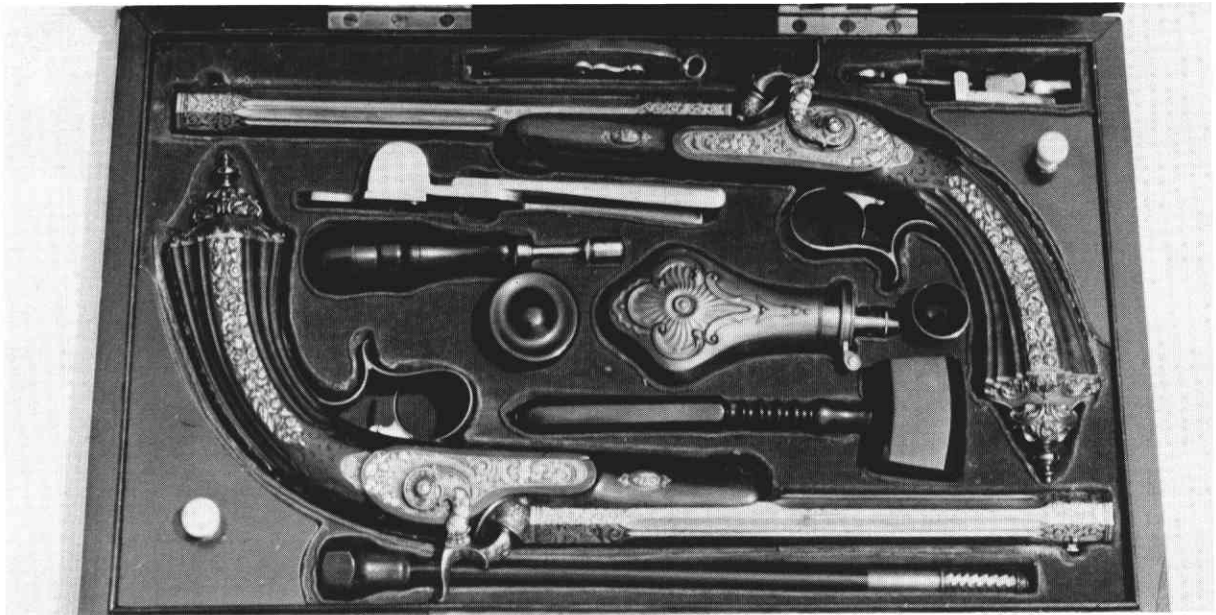
In the course of his travels, especially in Vienna, Lebeda learned to appreciate the aesthetic and artistic side of gunmaking. He established his own art studio for his activities as an arms producer. It was hard to find accomplished artists, so he employed talented young engravers and trained them to his liking.

Artists responsible for some of the decorative designs found on Lebeda's firearms were famous painters such as Navratil and Maines. Among the highly skilled engravers were such names as Schiller, Porkony, Nahlovsky, Turek, and brothers Vilen and August Kinzel and the famous L. Kottner.

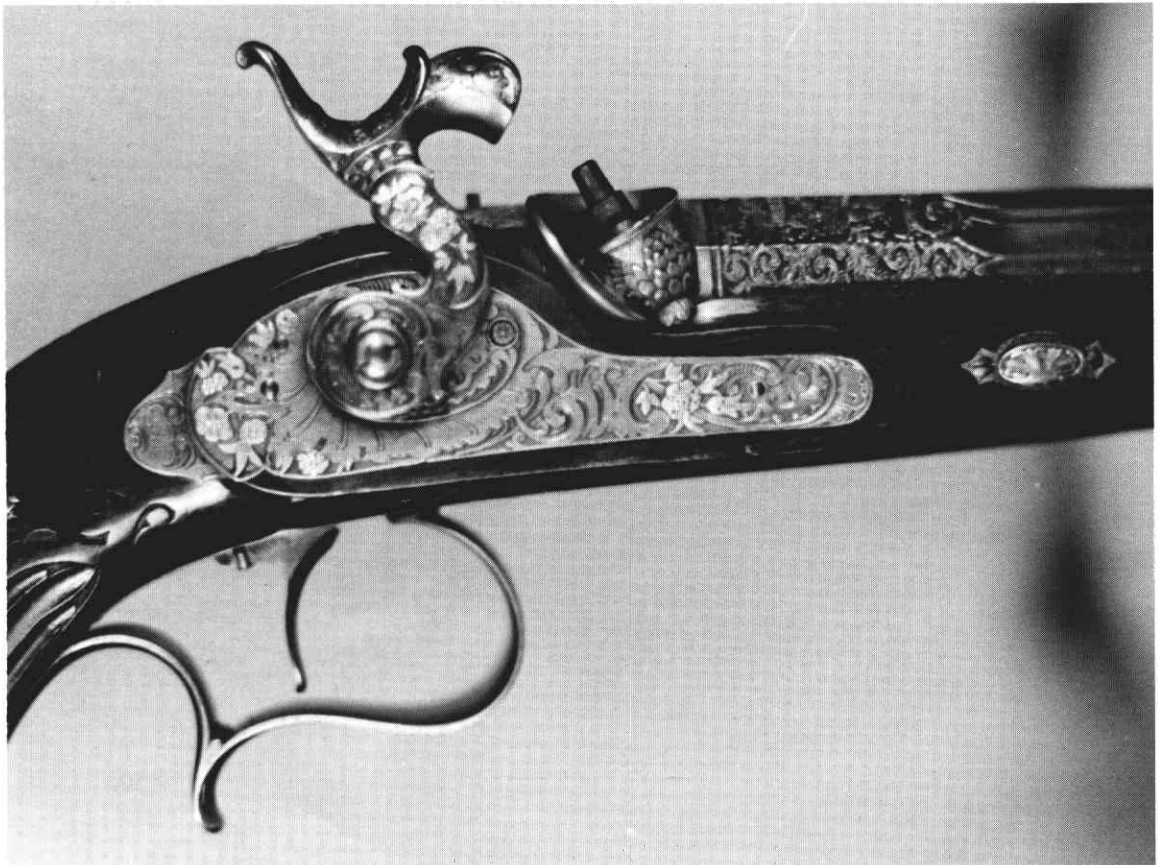
In 1829 Prague held an Industrial Exhibition in the



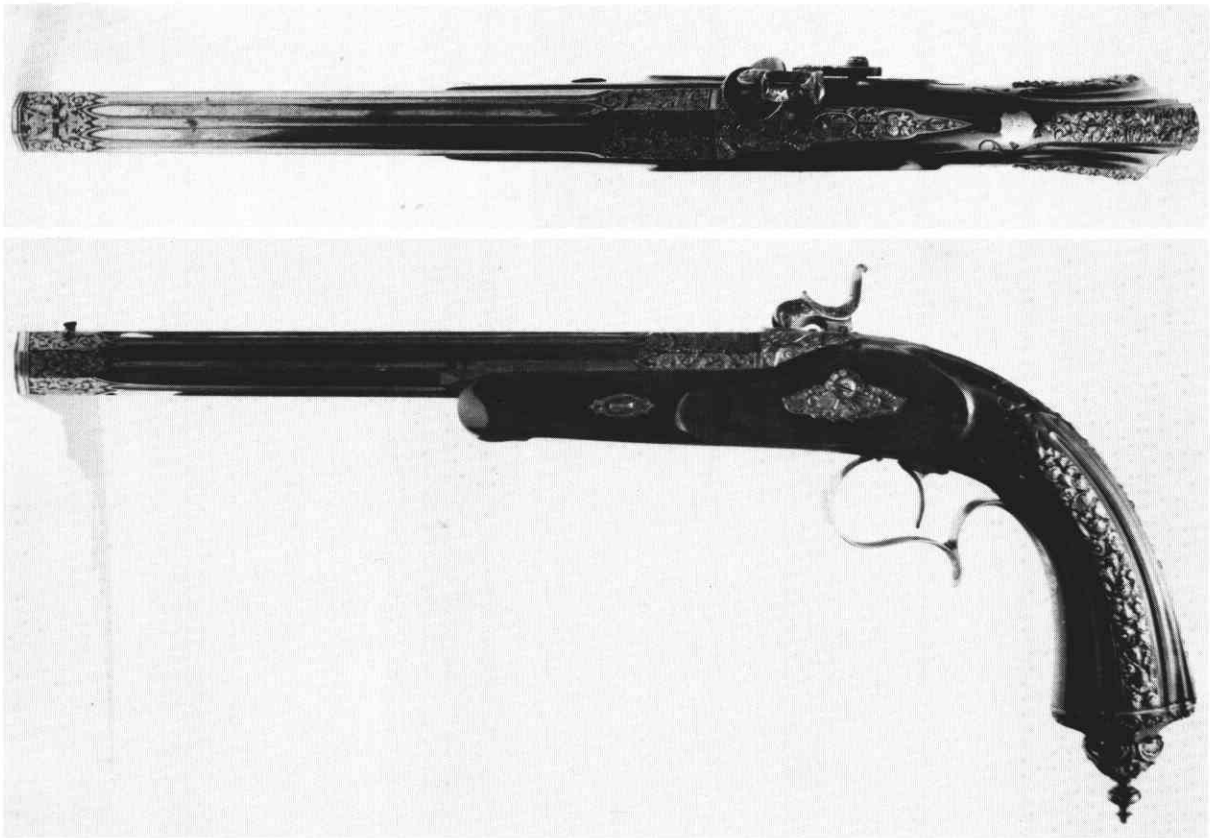
Case lid for Lebeda pair with fluted barrels



Lebeda pair with gold filled fluted barrels in their case



Breech area of a fluted barrel Lebeda



Top and left side of a fluted barrel Lebeda

palace of Count Ledebur. Several degrees of awards were made with medals being the highest; however the standard was set so high that it was very difficult to attain one of these. A silver medal was presented only when one had acquired a very high degree of skill and had made some essential contribution to industry, and the product had to form a substantial part of the country's commerce. Lebeda's guns gained him one of these cherished silver

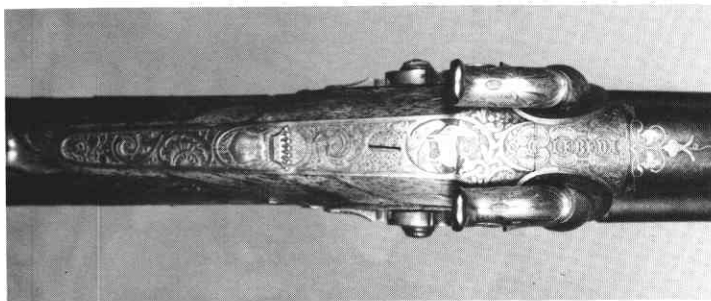
medals.

Lebeda's fame soon spread and the Master from Prague was competing with the best French and English gunmakers. Later years brought him many honors and he received orders from Sweden, Russia, Spain, Asia and America. Good wages stimulated the employees to produce superior workmanship.

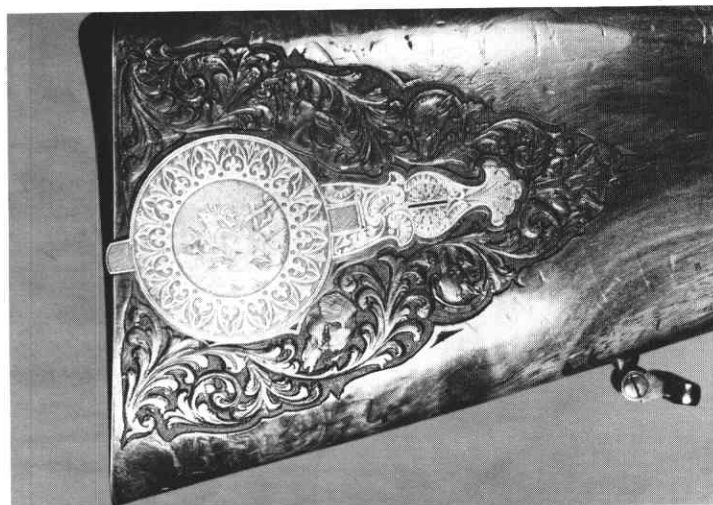
Later certain foreign gunmakers attempted to meet



Lockplate of a fluted barrel Lebeda



Top of a sporting rifle action



Butts and cap box of a sporting rifle



Czechoslovak stamp commmerating A.V. Lebeda

Lebeda's competition by copying his guns and using his name on the copies. They also put their name on Lebeda guns and sold them for their own. This is evident from the following story:

Henry, Duke of Bordeaux (Count of Chambord, grandson of Henry the X) called on Lebeda one day and took with him a pair of cased dueling pistols, asking that they be cleaned, sighted and the proper charge of powder specified. He said he had purchased them in France, a product of a French firm.

Lebeda looked at the guns very carefully for a while, then he said, "these pistols are very accurate and I can tell you at once the powder charge, as these pistols are my own make. The Paris firm has replaced my name with their own. If we dismantle the guns, we shall find A.L. under the cock. The Duke let him do this and was surprised when he saw that he had been deceived."<sup>3</sup>

Lebeda's customers included the Aristocracy. He was perhaps the only gunmaker who was supplier to nearly all the Sovereigns of his time: the Czar of Russia, the King of Sweden, the King of Hanover, the Duke of Braunschweig and others were his regular customers.

The Emperor Franz Joseph once visited Prague where he participated in a festival held at Shooters Island, where many Counts and Ministers were present. Lebeda's friend Prince Schwarzenberg introduced the Master gunsmith to the young Emperor, who received him kindly and ordered twelve double barrel shotguns, six double rifles and three over and under shotguns.<sup>4</sup>

Lebeda finished these in 1850 and it was the last work he undertook. The emperor awarded the Master gunsmith a magnificent ring and the title of Court supplier. The Aristocracy dealt with him as one of their own. Lebeda was an outstanding marksman and maintained a shooting range in his own garden.

In the year 1850 Lebeda fell ill and passed the firm to his eldest son Antonin; he died on July 2nd 1857 and was buried in the Olsany Necropolis.

His famous firm ceased to exist in 1888 due to a severe depression, but he is not forgotten in his native land: the last illustration is of a commemorative Czechoslovak stamp, issued in 1969, honoring him and his guns.

His guns are now scattered over museums and private collections around the world, including the collection of H.H. Thomas, and they have made Antonin Vinzenc Lebeda immortal.

Thank you.

1, 2, 3, 4, - Jaroslav Lugs, *Gun Review*, June, 1964. Other photos and slides for this talk were taken by Clyde Burke of Lexington, Kentucky.