

From Russia — with love?

By Ian M. Johnston

THE VODKA

A few days ago I washed and polished two tractors, two ride-on lawnmowers and the old Talbot. While never neglecting the old Talbot (perish the thought) I confess to having for some time disregarded the cosmetic requirements of the tractors and lawnmowers. As a consequence, a considerable degree of elbow grease was required to remove the several months build up of dirt and putridity.

I realise the foregoing can hardly be construed as earth shattering information. However, it is by way of providing an acceptable explanation why late that afternoon, following my unaccustomed burst of athleticism, I could have been observed reclining on the back patio nursing a vodka and orange.

Now, not being a chap noted for my mental dexterity, the vodka must have stimulated the functional activity of my grey cells for I found myself pondering the question, why is it that Russia produces the best vodka?

This train of thought meandered around for a while until my tractor blinkered mind took control and posed the ultimate Russian question. Why was the design of the



The Belarus T40 A, released in the late 1970s, featured a four cylinder air cooled diesel of 4150 cc. It was a product of the Vladimer Tractor Works. Although unwieldy in design it certainly was rugged. Note the individual front wheel suspension. (IJM archives)

initial Soviet tractors that came to Australia in the 1960s so antiquated, considering by that time Russia had pioneered space exploration with the launch of Sputnik on October 4 1957?

Suddenly and delightfully, here was a topic for an article!

MY FIRST SIGHTING

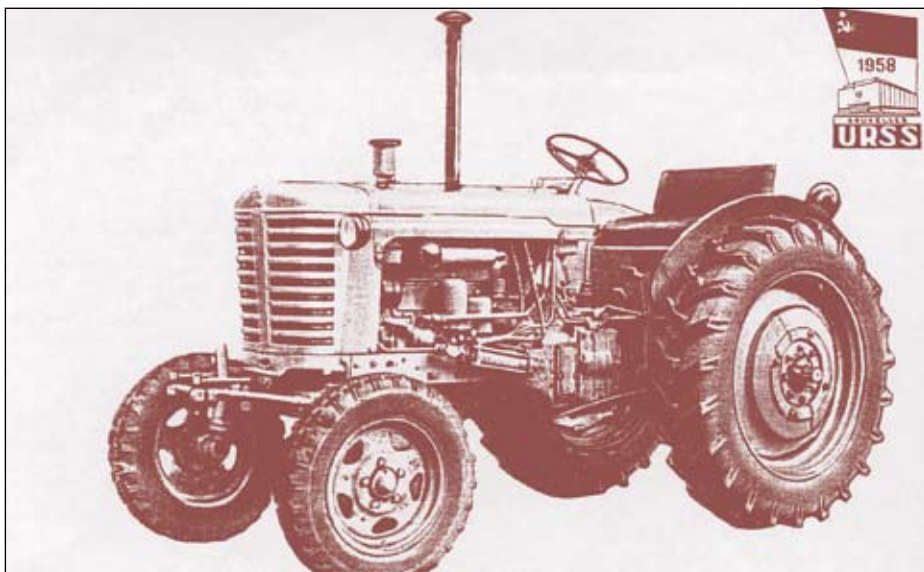
Light years ago, 1969 I think it was, during the period when I had the dubious distinction of being General Manager of Cumberland Tractors Pty Ltd, the phone on my desk jangled into action. I recall it was a Friday morning and, following a particularly stressful week, I had been pleasantly contemplating a weekend afloat on Pittwater.

“Arnold Glass here Ian. Just wondering if you have a few moments to walk across the road? There’s something I’d like to show you.”

The Cumberland Tractor premises were on the northern side of the Parramatta Road at Auburn (Sydney). Directly opposite, on the original site of The Sydney Meat Works, Arnold Glass had created his vast Capitol Motors complex.

Glad of the diversion, I took my life into my hands and dodged across the mayhem of Parramatta Road and into the glitter of Arnold’s showroom. He awaited me, standing beside a line of half a dozen of the strangest tractors I had ever encountered! This was my first sighting of Belarus tractors.

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The Belarus MT3-5J/M manufactured at the giant Minsk Tractor Works, was one of the tractors imported by Arnold Glass. It was powered by an indirect injection diesel engine which developed 45 hp at 1500 rpm. The tractor could be ordered with either a decompressor and electric starter motor, or with an auxiliary petrol fuelled donkey starter. During WWII, 400,000 citizens of Minsk were killed and 80 per cent of all buildings totally destroyed by Nazi forces. Today it is a modern metropolis boasting the world’s largest tractor factory. (IJM archives)



The T150K was an outstanding tractor, but sadly plagued with reliability problems, caused by lack of quality control at the Kharkov Tractor Works. By 1977 the Kharkov plant had produced 1,600,000 tractors ranging between 12 and 75 hp. It is likely that the philosophy of volume eclipsed that of quality, although it should be stated that the design of the tractors was excellent. The engine of the Belarus T150K was a turbocharged V6 diesel of 9150 cc developing 165 hp at 2,100 rpm. (IMJ archives)

<41...CLASSIC TRACTORS

I first met Arnold Glass in 1953 at a time when he owned a diminutive yard located somewhere around Sydney's Campbell Street, from which he sold second hand motor cycles. He convinced me (wisely as it turned out) to invest my meagre savings in a Norton ES2.

But we had both moved on from these early days. In 1969 he was by then a multi-millionaire highly respected motor industry magnate and I was but a humble overworked and underpaid tractor industry executive.

Arnold explained that he had imported this brace of Russian tractors in order to assess their marketing potential. He fully appreciated that they would encounter fierce competition from the many entrenched and respected brands that dominated the already crowded sales arena. Particularly, he acknowledged, from Massey Ferguson, the top selling tractor at that time and for which Cumberland Tractors happened to be Australia's premier dealership.

In short, these Russian machines would have to be good!

And good they were not! In fact, even my first cursory glance told me that Arnold's best plan would be to put them back in their box and consign them back to Russia. I admit it also crossed my mind that Albert G. Sims (the scrappy, who was the founder of that global giant Simsmetal)

was offering a good price per ton for scrap iron.

I kept these unworthy, but possibly sagacious thoughts to myself and felt that courtliness and decorum dictate I go through the charade of carefully inspecting the tractors.

But Arnold Glass had not achieved his considerable eminence without having de-

veloped a razor sharp ability to perceive hesitation and doubt when in the minds of others. He asked me to "Lay it on the line" and speak my mind.

Where to start? I walked around the tractors and urged him to take another long look at them. Although ranging from around 30 to 60 hp (according to my recollection — after all this all happened 40 years ago) they stood tall and gangly, mounted on absurdly narrow rowcrop tyres. Their profile was akin to American tractors of the 1930s such as the Massey Harris Pacemaker or the Oliver 70.

The tractors had either air cooled or water cooled diesel engines but with unbelievably rough cast blocks adorned with odd-ball ancillary equipment. Crude looking inline diesel fuel pumps, unfamiliar electrical equipment, worrying air filtration systems, non-standard threads and bizarre electrical connections everywhere, were all suggestive of a lack of modernistic engineering integrity. Or perhaps, the Bolsheviks had simply been concentrating too much on their vodka!

Three of the tractors were equipped with rear linkage of questionable category but the supporting hydraulics were basic and devoid of depth control, draught sensing, or the other sophistications which Australian farmers took for granted.

At Arnold's bidding, I fired up one of the machines and took it for a wander around the premises. The seat was agreeably comfortable but many of the controls dif-



The ChTZ DET-250m2 was a massively robust dozer produced at the Cheliabinsk Works. The big machine utilised a 330 hp V12 diesel, originally designed for propelling high speed Soviet military tanks. It was but one of a vast range and assortment of track machines exported under the Belarus logo. (IMJ archives)



The Belarus YuMZ-6M/L pictured, was fitted with a 360° slew loader/excavator manufactured at the Agricultural Machinery Works located in the Ukrainian town of Kolomya. This super versatile machine had a lifting capacity of 800 kg when fully extended to 3.9 metres. Interestingly, the English backhoe manufacturer Whitlock Bros of Great Yeldham, produced an almost identical rig, but mounted on a Fordson Major. One example of these English machines was imported into Australia, but proved to be an engineering disaster and was abandoned. In contrast, the Belarus rig worked brilliantly and was sold in large numbers, mainly to Eastern Block countries. (IMJ archives)

difficult or awkward to reach. Depressing the clutch required an extreme effort of physical application that left my leg aching after one application. Selecting a gear was an exercise in concentration, frustration and good guesswork. The steering was seemingly custom designed for the bulging muscles of a Soviet navy. Even climbing on board was a challenge requiring a level of gymnastics to which I was unaccustomed.

It will come as no surprise therefore that Arnold Glass did not pursue his aspiration of becoming a Belarus distributor.

The last time our paths crossed was in 1979 at a dinner party at Gorian Station, Burren Junction (next door to our property Chelmsford) hosted by Jim and Dibby Alker. Arnold was one of the guests and we laughed as we recalled the Belarus experience. Surprisingly he also had recollections from 1953 of the Norton ES2, plus a snorting MG roadster which Margery bought from him in 1972.

BELARUS

'Belarus' was simply a trade identification name introduced in 1961 and applied to all Russian tractors and related equipment exported by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republic trade department V/O Traktorexport. There were literally scores of tractor manufacturing plants in Russia

and in their homeland the tractors were sold under their respective brand names.

The Russian tractor industry was spawned in the early 1900s, but became of age in 1924 when American Fordson Model F tractors were produced under licence in Kirov and traded as Poutilovets. Around the world the Fordson was the top selling tractor and proved to be equally popular in Russia. By 1932, 50,000 Poutilovets had been manufactured at the Kirov plant.

If the Russian tractors of the 1960s and 70s lacked savoir-vivre, their makers certainly impressed the Western World with production figures. By the early 1970s Russian factories were churning out over one million tractors each year. The Soviet Block had suddenly become the world's largest producer of tractors!

The 1978 *Power Farming Annual* carried its first mention of Belarus tractors being imported into Australia by V/O Traktorexport. The MTZ-80 and MTZ-82, the two models announced, were a huge improvement over the units which I had inspected in 1969. They were however still years behind in technical design from any other tractor on the Australian market.

V/O Traktorexport claimed the two tractors had been tested at the University

of Melbourne tractor testing facility. I find this claim perplexing. The highly regarded tractor historian Doctor Graeme R. Quick, in his excellent book *Australian Tractors*, lists all the tractors tested under The Australian Tractor Testing Scheme and there is no mention of any Belarus.

Over the intervening years an expanding range of Belarus tractors has been progressively introduced to Australian farmers, including the giant K701 powered by a massive V12 turbo-charged 300 hp diesel, weighing in at an unballasted 13,027 kg.

But reliability problems persisted to tarnish the reputation of the Russian tractors. It was not until the 1990s that these were largely overcome.

I am certain the Belarus problems stemmed from a lack of quality control exercised by factory management. I have had personal experience of this incompetency exhibited by other Eastern Block tractor manufacturers — plus cars, trucks and earthmoving equipment produced in Socialist factories. Production targets per month was the doctrine of all factory bosses and was vigorously enforced by their political watchdogs. Thankfully these days are long gone.

Today, modern Belarus tractors are produced in state-of-the-art factories and in Australia are held in similar regard to those emanating from other countries.

Er — why is it the Russians make the best vodka? ■

IAN'S MYSTERY TRACTOR QUIZ

QUESTION: Can you identify this tractor?

CLUE: Look at the exhaust stack!

DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY: Easy if you are True Blue.

ANSWER: See page 48.

