

OKAVA ENTERPRISE – THE GOLDEN DAYS OF SAFETY RAZOR BLADES

By Leonid Rozov (rozovl@yahoo.com)

Okava Enterprise was created by Ovsey Klotsman - a self-made man who has built razor blade businesses in five countries around the globe: Poland, pre-1948 Palestine/Israel, Lithuania, Egypt, and Ireland. During WWII his most successful business - OKAVA blade factory in Palestine- produced up to 5 million blades a month and distributed them in the Middle Eastern countries. Below is the synopsis of his business activity which spans from ca. 1930 until his death in 1967.



OVSEY KLOTSMAN

Picture taken ca.1941 in Alexandria, Egypt.

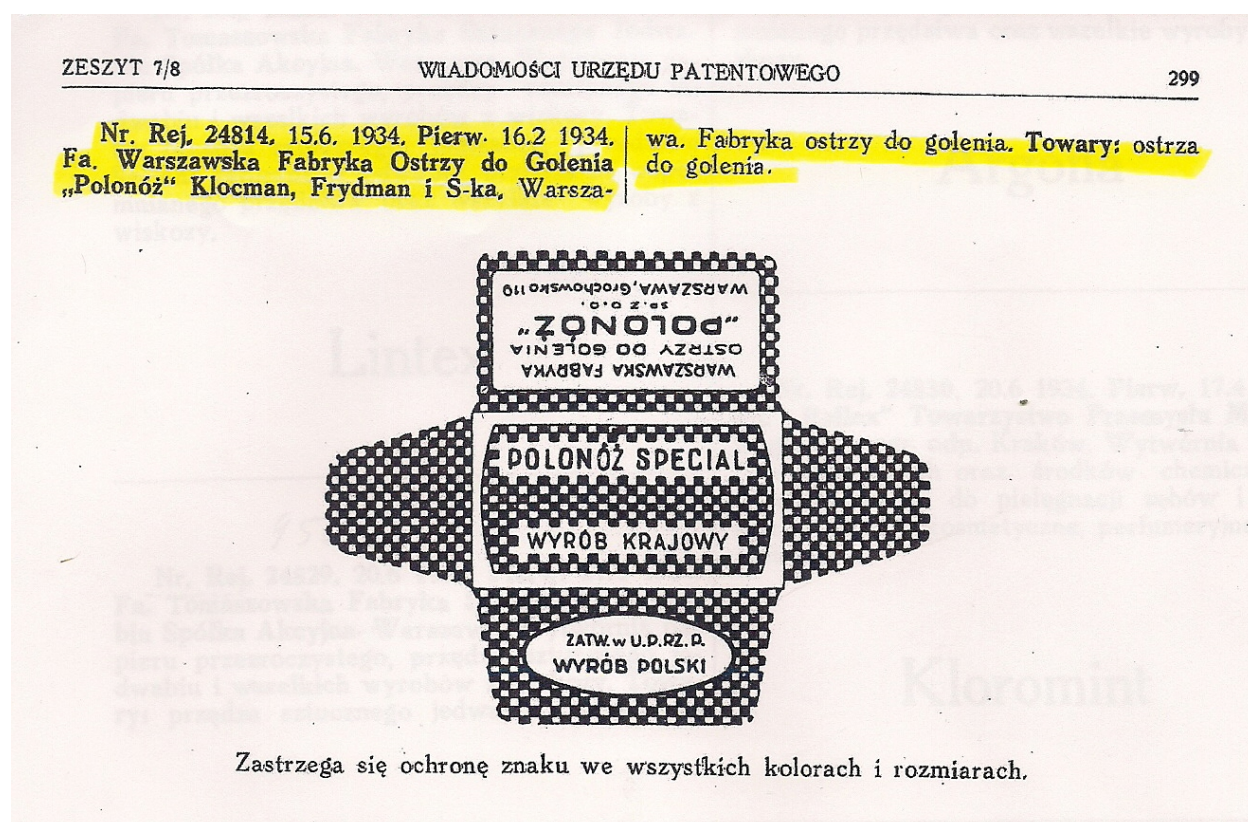


ELSE KLOTSMAN (nee SCHMITZ)

Picture taken ca.1941 in Alexandria, Egypt.

POLAND

Ovsey Klotsman (Polish: Klocman) was born in 1900 in Pinsk, Belarus, Russian Empire*. At the age of 17 he left for Germany to learn the metal processing trade. While in Germany he met Else Schmitz, born in Germany in 1912 who was a blade sharpening specialist and who came to Poland ca.1931 as his employee and then married him in 1932. She is now 99 and lives in Tel-Aviv**. Around 1930 Klotsman founded his first razor blade business – “Warszawska Fabryka Ostrzy do Golenia ‘POLONÓZ’ (Warsaw Razor Blade Factory ‘Polonoz’)”***. The Trade Mark “POLONÓZ” was registered in the Polish Patent and Trade Mark Office (Urzedu Patentowego) on June 15, 1934, registration number 24814.

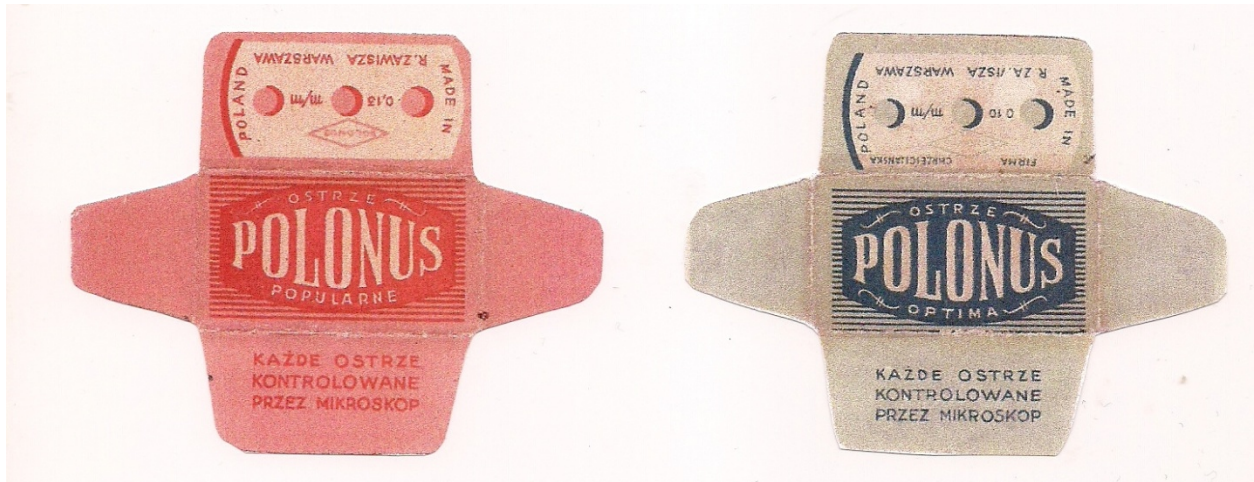


*From 1918 to 1939 Pinsk was a part of an independent Poland

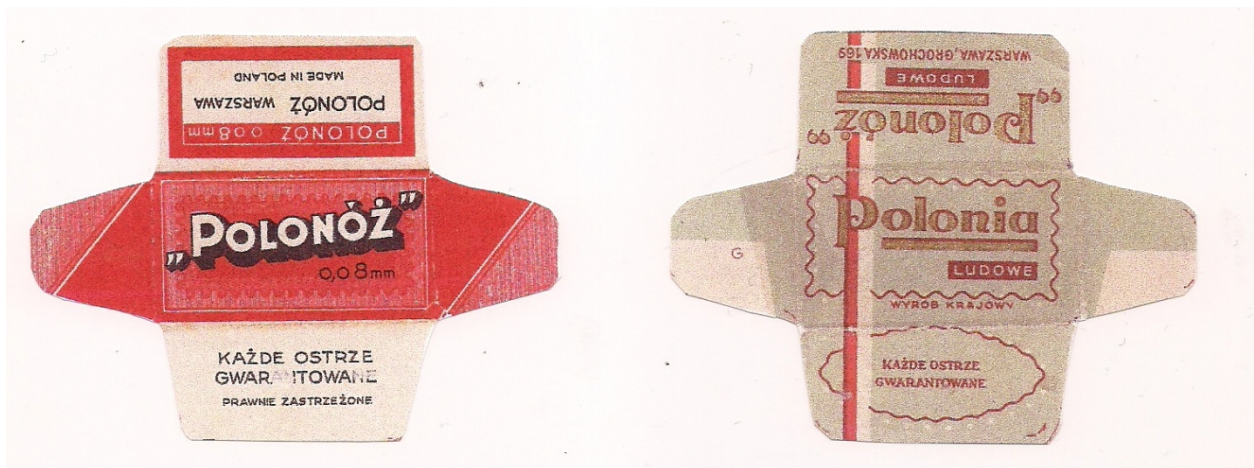
** Private communication by Mrs. Rutti Klotsman, 2010

*** Private communication by Mr. Marek Borowski, 2010

Later, Klotsman was sued by another Polish blade producer, Pawel Zawisza, whose factory was also located in Warsaw and manufactured razor blades under the name “POLONUS”. Since the words “POLONÓZ” and “POLONUS” sound similar in Polish, Zawisza claimed that Klotsman violated his trademark rights.



As a result, the brand name “POLONÓZ” was changed to “POLONIA” which means “POLAND” in Latin, but the name of the company, POLONÓZ, remained unchanged.



From 1930 to 1939, Klotsman produced a great variety of razor blades under different names, such as POLONIA SPECIAL, POLONIA FAVORIT, POLONIA EXTRA, POLONIA LUDOWE, RECORD, VICTORIA, TRIUMF, etc.



During the German occupation (1939-1945), the factory was confiscated as Jewish property but continued blade production for local consumption under German management. One of the rare war-time blade wrappers has written on its back flap "Hergestellt im Generalgouvernement" (Manufactured in Generalgouvernement) – the way the Nazis referred to the part of occupied Poland.



The factory buildings, located at 119 and 169 Grochowska Street, were not destroyed during the war and currently house a police station. After WWII during Communist rule, the factory name was changed to “Panstwowa Fabryka Ostrzy do Golenia” (State Razor Blade Factory) and the equipment was moved to the city of Krakow (Southern Poland) where the blade production was continued until the mid-fifties.



All attempts by the Klotsman family to receive compensation for the stolen property have failed.

PRE-1948 PALESTINE/ISRAEL

Around 1934, Klotsman started travelling back and forth between Poland and Palestine, building the OKAVA razor blade factory in Rishon Le Zion. Blade production started in 1936 for domestic consumption and also for exportation to Europe and the countries of the British Empire in Asia and Africa. At peak production during WWII, the factory employed up to 150 workers and produced up to 5 million blades per month – five times greater the pre-war production.

Klotsman's family and a family of his junior partner Michel Friedman escaped from the Nazis in 1940 from Vilna, Lithuania, via Turkey, and arrived in Palestine in August of 1940. They brought several family members with them, all of whom were later employed at the OKAVA factory.

The name of the factory, OKAVA, originates from the initials of its founder **O**vsey **K**lotsman plus the letters **VA** for Warsaw, the Polish capital, where he started his career.



Pictures below show different operations at the OKAVA factory in 1939. They were taken by Matson Photo Service and are available from the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.*



Cutting out safety razor blades

*Private communication by Mr. Idan Friedman, 2011



Sharpening



Packaging by hand

An original bill sent to a local distributor in Iran in 1943 gives an idea of the scope of OKAVA operations during WWII.

No.66.
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THE PALESTINE RAZOR BLADE WORKS, RISHON-LE-ZION

Telegram address: OKAVA, RISHON-LE-ZION
Bankers: ANGLO PALESTINE BANK, Tel-Aviv
ELLERN'S BANK TEL-AVIV
PALESTINE INDUSTRIAL BANK Tel-Aviv
Phone: RISHON-LE-ZION 231

Our Order No. 66

Ref. SG/BK

Your Order No. -

Dated 31.1.43.

Given through -

Mark: - FARAJULLAH
NABRULLAHOFF

Mr.
Ishak Alizadeh,
Serai Rashti,
TEHERAN, IRAN.

Goods to be despatched by us directly to
IRAN

Payment: 10.75.- in advance, balance
before delivery.

TIME OF DELIVERY as soon as possible
after our receipt for an export-
licence.

Delivery possibilities under reservation.

Confirmation.

Rishon-le-Zion, 31.1.43.

Dear Sir,

We thank you very much for
your kind indent, which we have
entered in our books, as per condi-
tions mentioned in this confirmation.

Always at your service, we remain,

Dear Sir,

Yours faithfully,

OKAVA LTD.

| QUANTITY ORDERED | DESCRIPTION | PRICE per 1000 blades |
|---------------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| 25.000 | "O.K." | @ LP. 6.250 |
| 5.000 | "SHAMIR" | @ LP. 6.250 |
| 5.000 | "ZAHAV" | @ LP. 6.250 |
| 5.000 | "MAGNET" | @ LP. 6.250 |
| 5.000 | "TOMMY" | @ LP. 6.250 |
| 2.500 | "VICTORY" | @ LP. 6.250 |
| 2.500 | "RISHON" | @ LP. 6.250 |

50.000 Razor blades, first quality
steel, "O.K.", and "MAGNET"
Gillette slot.

Delivery: FOB Tel-Aviv.

All packing, forwarding
and insurance expenses are at
the charge of the buyer.

Goods to be despatched in
wooden cases, each one con-
taining about 50.000 blades
at the rate of 1.500 per case.

Sales subject to strike, lock-out accident, or cause beyond our control. The prices mentioned in this confirmation are without our engagement. We reserve us the right to demand the prices valid on the delivery's day, or to cancel the indent if the buyer refuses to pay the new prices. Place of payment and jurisdiction in case of disputes to be Tel-Aviv.

We reserve our right at any time to cancel this order fully or in part or to postpone delivery thereof in the event that we should, in our absolute discretion, decide that execution of the order on the terms stated herein is or may become impossible by reason of any cause connected with or in any manner however arising out of the present war conditions or for any other reason whatsoever. Order subject to possibility of obtaining an Export Licence from the local Authorities.

The blade production at OKAVA factory may be divided into two periods: Palestine under the British mandate (1936-1947) and the State of Israel (1948-mid-1970). At the present time it is very difficult to determine how many blades and subsequently how many wrappers with all variations were made during these two periods. To illustrate the variety of OKAVA products, some of its wrappers from the author's collection are shown below.

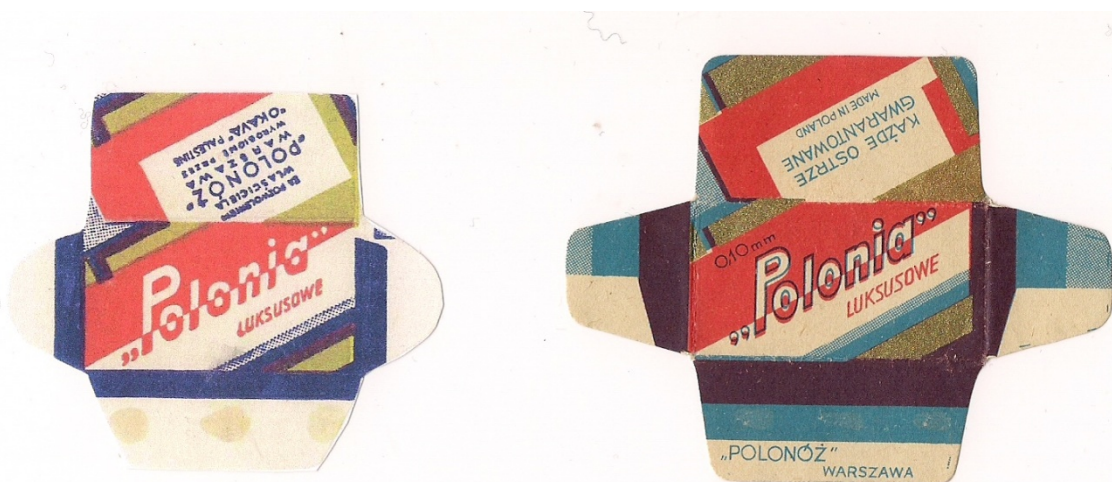
PALESTINE, 1936-1947







It is worth mentioning that Klotsman was trying to cater to his Jewish-Polish customers, who on the eve of WWII were able to move to Palestine. Thus, the OKAVA factory packaged some of its blades in wrappers with the old country design “Polonia Luksusowe”. On its upper back flap there is a copyright disclaimer in Polish which translates as: “Made with the permission from the owner of “POLONÓZ”, Warsaw. Produced by “OKAVA”, Palestine”. For comparison, the original “Polonia Luksusowe” blade made in the mid-1930s in Warsaw is also shown below.



ISRAEL, 1948 - mid-1970

One of the most popular razor blade brands of OKAVA Enterprise that was sold all over the world is EDDISON STAINLESS. It is interesting to note that EDDISON is an abbreviation composed of Ovsey Klotsman's children names – **Eddie***, which stands for his son's first name and **Son**, which stands for the first three letters of his older daughter's name, Sonia**.



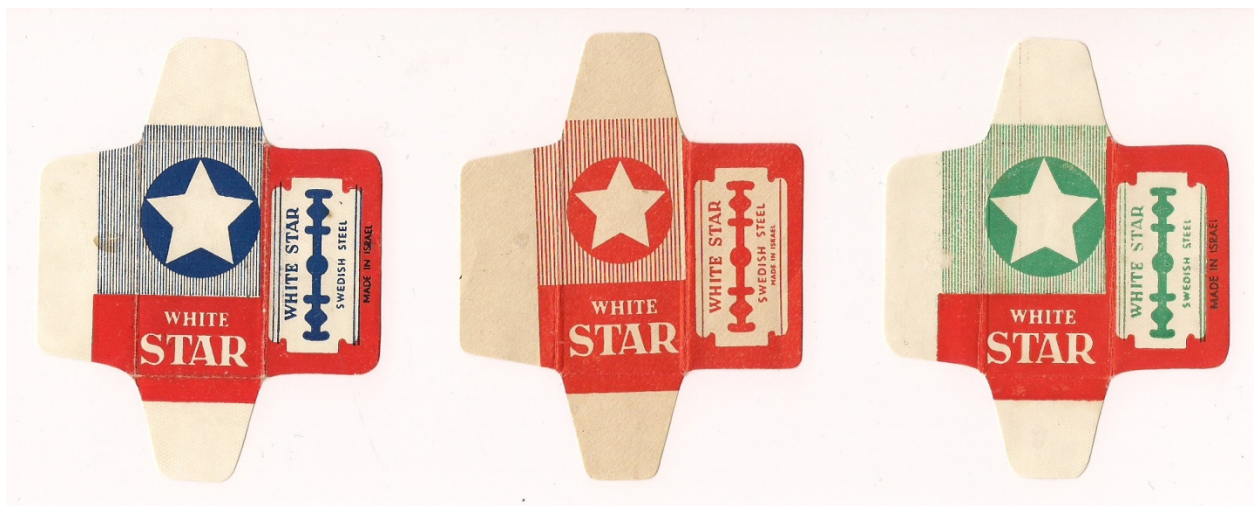
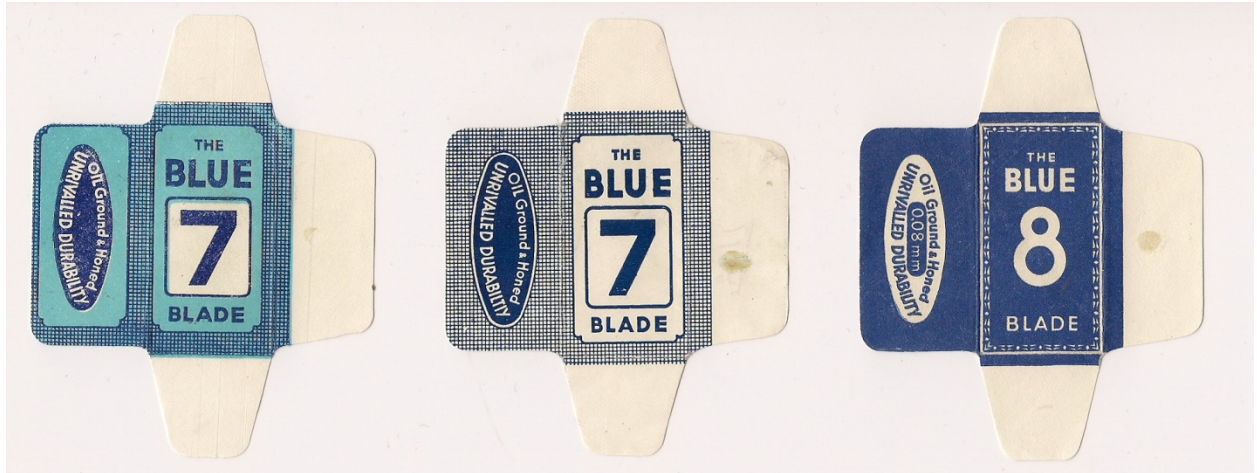
Below a wide variety of different OKAVA razor blades is shown. However, there is no doubt that much more exists in other blade collections from all over the world.

*Eddie – born in 1940, Vilna, Lithuania; now lives in Kenya.

** Sonia – born in 1934, Warsaw, Poland; now lives in Tel-Aviv.







After WWII OKAVA resumed its import to Europe. For example, a very informative and beautifully printed catalog of the blades made and distributed in Italy *“Catalogo Delle Lamette da Barba, Prodotte o Commercializzate in Italy”* (2011) lists 11 different Okava blades sold in this country ca.1960.

It should be noted that OKAVA was the most productive and modern in terms of equipment factory among other blade manufacturers in Palestine and Israel. An article “Local Blades Instead of Foreign” in Palestine Post (now The Jerusalem Post) on January 14, 1938 states:

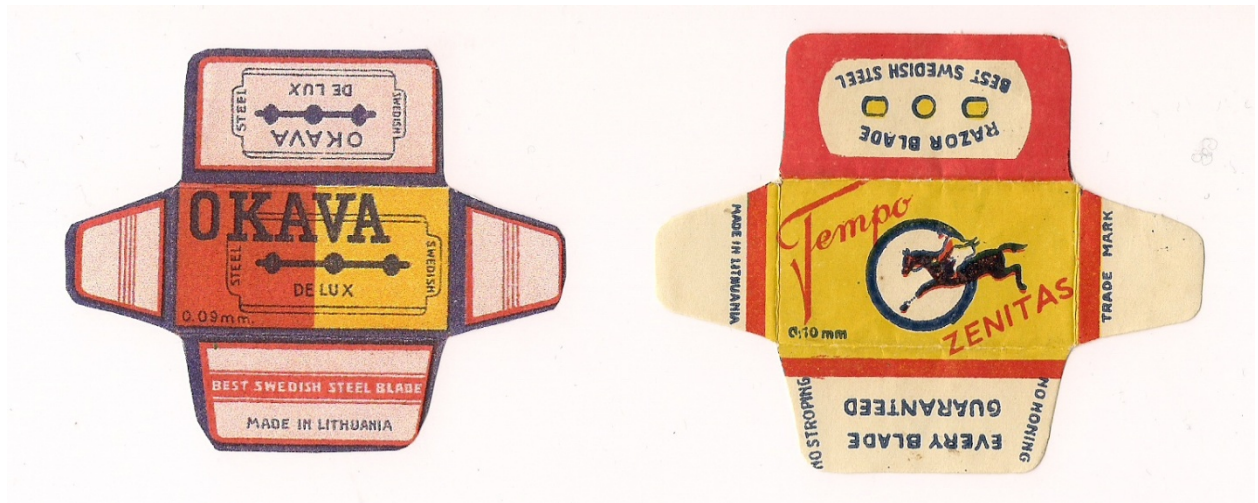
“During the first ten months of 1937 local manufacturers of razor blades have for the first time been successful in supplanting foreign blades hitherto imported. While in 1936 and 1935 about 3.2 and 4 million safety razor blades, respectively, were imported into Palestine, these imports decreased during the first ten months of 1937 to less than two million.

*On the other hand, exports from Palestine in 1936 were nil and in the above period of 1937 amounted to 124,000 blades. The decrease in imports and the rise in exports are accounted for by the production of **OKAVA of Rishon le Zion**. The productive capacity of this plant exceeds the requirement of the local market. The Company is now beginning to export to South Africa, Australia, various European countries and especially to Rumania, where a quota has already been granted to OKAVA blades.”*

LITHUANIA

Little is known about Klotsman’s business activity in Lithuania. Only two blades made in this country by him are known to blade collectors:

- 1) Okava DeLuxe. 0.09 mm
- 2) Tempo Zenitas, which is almost identical to Okava Favourite made in Palestine before WWII (see above).



EGYPT

A razor blade factory in Alexandria, Egypt, was established by Klotsman in the 1940s. It was run by Klotsman's brother-in-law Edmund Schmitz. Production lasted until 1956, when the factory was confiscated by the Egyptian military rulers. Several representative examples of the blades made in Alexandria are shown below.



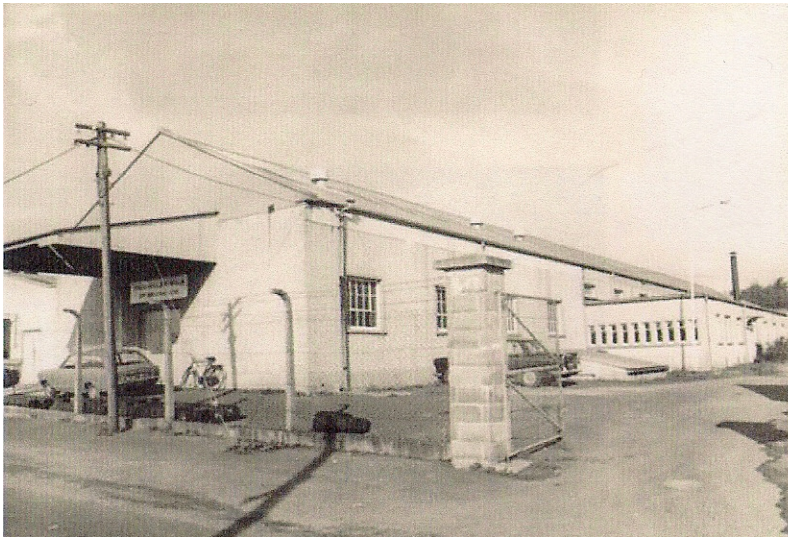


IRELAND

The Carlow Razor Blade Factory owned by Steel Products Ltd. was purchased about 1956 by Klotsman Enterprise. One of its employees, Dan Carbery, remembers in his memoir published on Carlow County Virtual Museum Web site:

“Mr.Klotsman needed a supply of steel band to make the blades and decided to set up a factory to produce this material. ...Large bands of steel were imported. These were heated to temper them in a furnace and then put through cold rolling machines until the required thickness was achieved. Having cut them to the necessary width the steel was ready for making blades. The factory not only

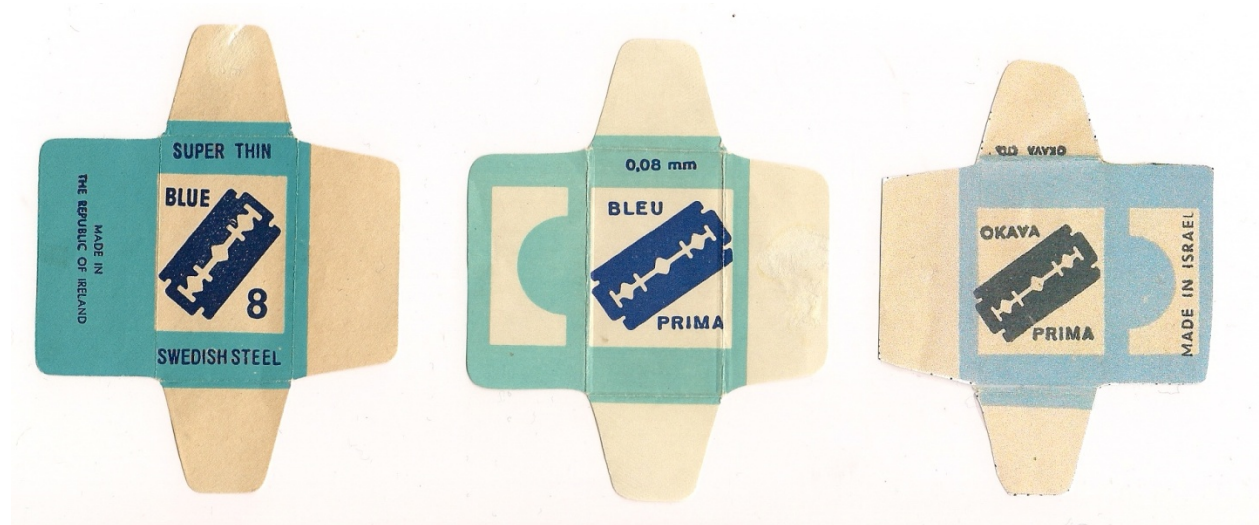
supplied their own blade factory but exported the prepared steel to many parts of the world”.



Cold Rolling Mills. Photo Dan Carbery

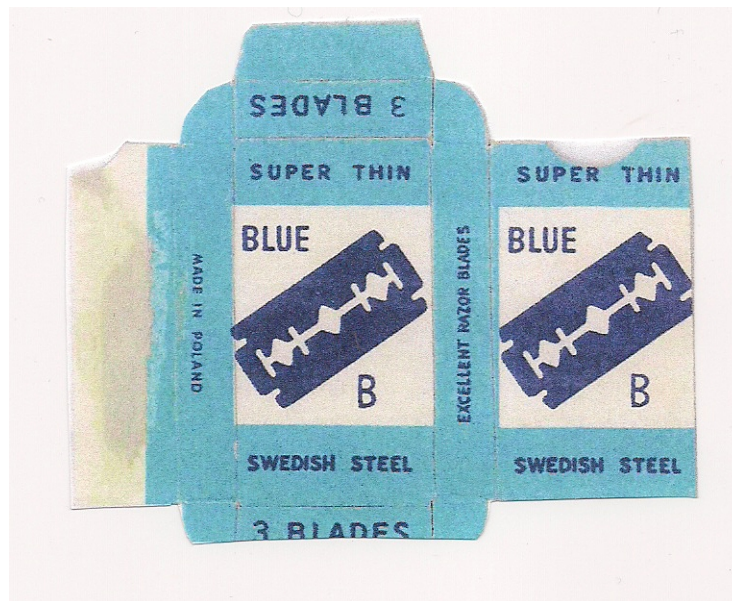
Several dozen different razor blade brands were made by the Carlow Factory. The design of some of them (OK, The Blue 8, Elka) has a striking similarity with the original blades made by Okava. For illustrative purposes Okava Prima made in Israel, Blue Prima, and Blue 8, both made in Ireland, are shown side by side.

The Carlow Factory was sold after Klotsman death in 1967.





There is an indication that Klotsman was trying to return to the Polish market through his Irish subsidiary. For example, a very rare box of three “Blue B” blades made in Poland looks like “Blue 8” made in Ireland and “Okava Prima” made in Israel. (Unfortunately, the original “Blue B” blades from this box are not available at the present time.)



USA

Klotsman produced no blades in the USA; however, at least one blade wrapper, “The Blue 7”, has on its side flap “Manuf. on mach. Excelco, Newark, USA”. The wrapper design is 100% analogous to “The Blue 7” blades made in Israel.



In 1966, Klotsman was diagnosed with lung cancer and died on July 2, 1967. The OKAVA factory was sold in 1972 to Perma Sharp Co. and ceased to exist by the mid-seventies

The writer of this article hopes that the reader will receive basic appreciation for the life and work of Mr. Ovsey Klotsman. He was a remarkable businessman and a true visionary in the razor blade industry. His entrepreneurship and his ability to adjust his business model to the environment in which he operated was a testament to the success that he achieved.

Acknowledgments:

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