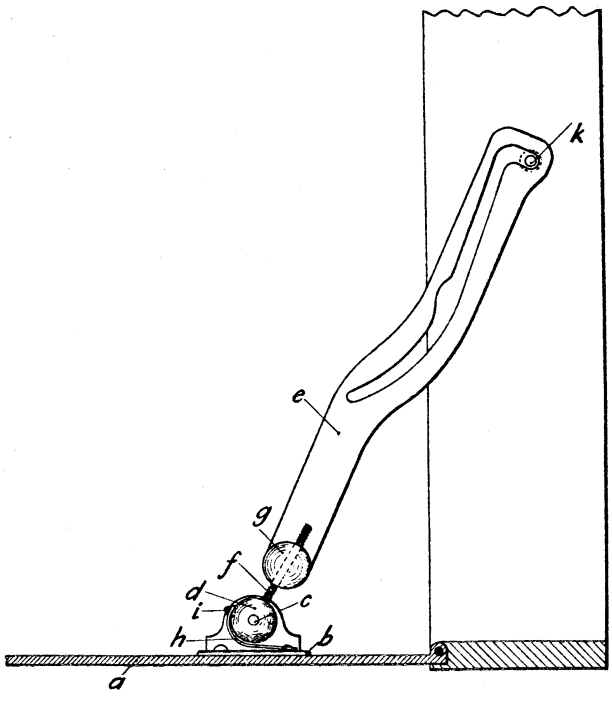
The Photorex; everything about the first Ihagee camera

When Johan Steenbergen started his company in May 1912, his first product was based on his own contribution, the equipment and parts from Ludwig Löschau's bankrupt business. It was the folding plate camera Photorex for 9x12cm plates, a rather popular type at the time. The start was difficult. A year after the start Steenbergen wrote to his mother that Löschau had made non-fitting parts "here", which nearly brought the new company to its knees.

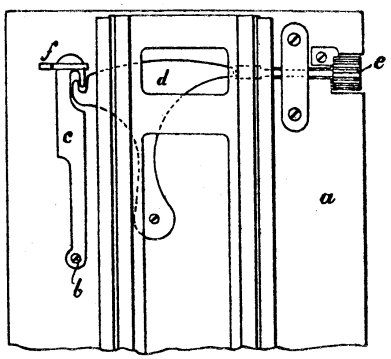
The Three Features

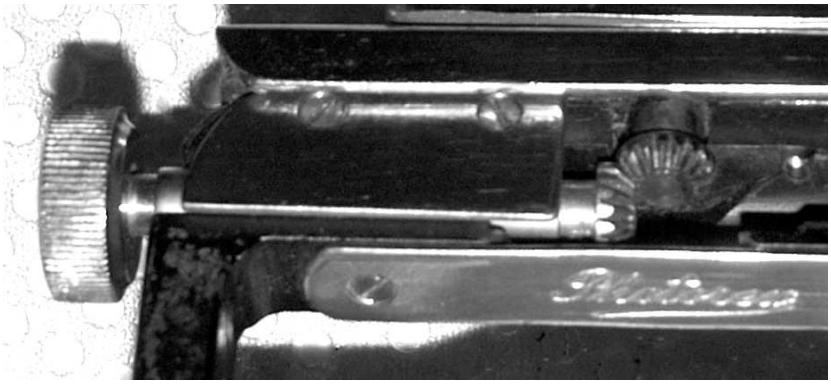
In the first advertisement we know, the Photorex is announced as having three special properties.

1. Complete parallelism of lens and base plate planes because of the patent correction struts.
The pictures show clearly what it meant. The angle between body and bottom plate is adjustable with a little bar and screw on both sides. A little spring forces the plate in the right position. This construction is an invention of the poor Mr. Löschau. See his Reichspatent of January 5th 1911. In the first known Ihagee catalogue of 1914, more cameras – the Pocket Photoklapp 6x9, the Triplex in three sizes and the Patent Quido - have this feature. Clearly production precision soon made this feature superfluous.



2. New infinity stop.
We all think we know this feature very well. When pulling out the knob on the right, the infinity stop is moved aside to make turning out the double extension rail possible. This is what we consider to be Johan Steenbergen's own patent. Only now, when closely looking at the Photorex, other Ihagee cameras and Steenbergen's patent of 1910, I realised that his patented construction is NOT used in the Photorex or in any other Ihagee product. What we find in all cameras is a very simple construction. Knob and infinity stop are connected by a straight bar. The patent however shows a more complicated construction, with a large metal "T" and a hinge.





3. Horizontal lens adjustment with cone sprocket wheels.
The picture is better than a description to explain what is meant here. One could remark that this construction is not remarkable. Technically speaking that is correct, but it seems rather expensive, compared to the at least later usual worm wheel construction. And, really remarkable, the vertical movement IS done with a simple worm wheel.

Naming problems

A few months after the start of the company, it had to announce that the Patent Office did not allow the use of the name Photorex. It is said that the German emperor himself had forbidden names with "rex" (Latin for king) in it. There must be a German publication somewhere, telling this in so many words, but until now I haven't found that text. The advertisement of February 1913 announces the new (and not very original) name Photoklapp, and expresses the hope that "our honourable customers will show the same interest in our product under the new name". This Photoklapp doesn't appear in the 1914 catalogue. For a long time I thought that the Photoklapp "Patent Quido" (1914) was just another name for the Photorex. Only now, by studying the catalogue more carefully, I realised that the Quido is different. It looks nearly the same but it is square! It is possible to put the plate holder on the back horizontally or vertically. The same effect is reached by turning the camera 90 degrees of course, but the argument is that, once the camera is on a tripod, turning the plate holder is easier than turning the whole camera.

Dresden, im Februar 1913

P. P.

Der bei der Gründung unserer Gesellschaft angemeldete Name

PHOTOREX

ist uns vom Patentamt nicht erteilt worden.

Wir bringen unsere Präzisions-Kamera - Fabrikate nunmehr unter dem Namen

PHOTOKLAPP

in den Handel und bitten unsere geehrten Abnehmer, unserem Fabrikat unter der neuen Bezeichnung das gleiche Interesse entgegen zu bringen.

Hochachtungsvoll

Industrie- u. Handelsgesellschaft m. b. H.
Kamerafabrik m. Kraftbetrieb
DRESDEN-A. 5
Marcolini - Straße 8

BERLIN WIEN

MOSKAU KOPENHAGEN

Other features

a Spring to open the camera
Usually a camera of this type is somewhat difficult to open. One has to press the right button and then use a fingernail to pull the base plate out. The Photorex has a special feature to avoid this awkward procedure. The picture shows the special spring that is compressed when the camera is closed, and pushes it open when the opening button is depressed. Nice but never seen again in Ihagee cameras.

b Special spring for the brilliant view-finder
Another feature that has probably made the Photorex more expensive than necessary is the large spring to keep the rotatable view-finder in position. The weak financial position of Ihagee after the first year must have eliminated this construction as well.

c Lock and text of the ground glass view-finder
The ground glass view-finder is identical to many others on Ihagee camera, except for two things. The lock is a sideways shifting little bar, different from the later rotating levers. The plate that has to be pulled out to reach the ground glass carries the impressed text Gesetzl. gesch., for Gesetzlich geschützt, or protected by law. Don't ask me what is protected and against what. The construction looks the same as in nearly all ground glass view-finders.

d Lens type "Bifröst"

Before I started preparing this article, I never gave this lens name a second thought. But a quick search on internet revealed a most interesting background. Bifröst in the Germanic mythology is the name of the rain bow, i.e. the dangerously wobbling bridge between Midgard, our world, and Asgard, the afterworld. For guilt-ridden people, the bridge wobbled so strongly that they fell off into Niffenheim, the fog world. Does this mean something for the Photorex? Let me know your thoughts. My lens has serial number 1033, quite near the camera serial number 1027.

e Lens text
The lens carries the text Jhagee Kamerawerk, Dresden Doppel Anastigmat ”Bifröst” 1:6,8 135mm. This contains three remarkables. First, we must realise that the name “IHAGEE” was introduced October 27th 1913, so this camera must be from later. But the advertisement about the name change is from February 1913, so the camera must be from before that date. This is impossible in our universe. Solution? I don’t know. The second surprise is the fact that the focal length is not written as 13,5cm. I thought that the switch from cm to mm was made much later. But there it is. The third is that this same? lens has an aperture of 5,5 on the Patent Quido in the 1914 catalogue.

f Normal handle connectors
Not special but quite normal and recognizable are the connectors of the carrier handle on both sides of the body. They look exactly the same as on many other Ihagee cameras.

g American shutter
The shutter is made by Bausch & Lomb Optical Cy, Rochester USA. Knowing practically nothing about other Dresden camera factories of the early 19th century, I can’t say if this is unusual, but a German made shutter would have surprised me less.

h Sledge and base plate correspondence
The heavy brass double extension rail can be turned out and off completely. The underside has the number 16 on it. The base plate also carries the number 16, near the camera body, so the rail and base plate clearly belong together.

i The type name plate
Not new to many of you I suppose, but is has to be mentioned: this camera model has its name written on it, on a nickel plate to be precise. The Photorex, the Paff and the Corona are the exceptions. All other Ihagee non-Exaktas had no visible name. In the catalogues they seem to have names on them, but that was easily done in the drawings. There is no round Ihagee Kamerawerk nameplate, nor a place where it might have been connected.

Value?

Is this camera valuable? McKeown’s Price Guide 2005-2006 gives a value of $ 100-150. I don’t think that is realistic. I never heard of anybody having the same camera, so it must be very rare. I wouldn’t sell it for ten times the McKeown estimate.

Finally: a question

On the right side of the base, this camera has a little white plate with the text “H.Linse” and the infinity sign. This is not unusual on this kind of bellows cameras, Ihagee or otherwise. The question to you is: What does it mean and what is its purpose?

My conclusion is that the Photorex doesn’t have any unusual photographic features, but many features that have made it too expensive to produce. Even the small hooks to support the bellows look costly. The near-bankruptcy of 1914 must have teached Johan Steenbergen a lot about design and production efficiency.