

Zenith 143-6: The Yugoslavian

Boško Milekić ([@time_archives](#))



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¹ Image by author of his watch, a Zenith 143-6 from the 1950s, on a modern [Forstner](#) bracelet.

The etymology of the word enthusiasm, from the ancient Greek, is to be so inspired that one is possessed by a god. [Allen Farmelo](#), in [episode #29 of his Beyond the Dial podcast](#), makes the argument that enthusiasm is the pinnacle of horological experience. Below true enthusiasm, Allen argues, is intellectual curiosity and its fulfilment, and below that is material satisfaction, also known as plain old consumption. The essence of this experiential paradigm is that the act of collecting watches is often driven by an intellectual curiosity which, in the best case, leads to moments of enthusiasm and pure bliss.

When it comes to watches, it is not necessary to collect to experience enthusiasm. This is an important idea because it implies that, contrary to what may be Prima-Facie on many internet watch forums, watch collectors are not “above” mere enthusiasts when it comes to their ability to experience and describe the kind of joy and bliss that accompanies handling, wearing, and owning a time piece. You don’t need a collection to love a watch, you can get away with just one watch, the right one for you. You don’t even need to know much about how it was made to love and appreciate it, whether you merely handle it once, or own and wear it daily.

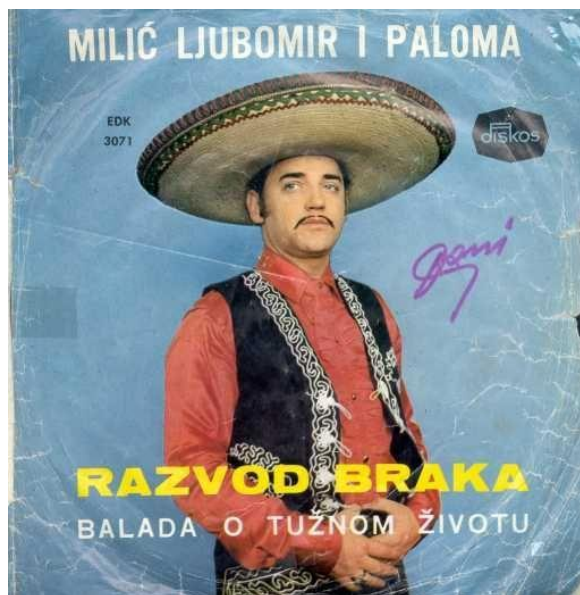
The Zenith 143-6 chronograph from the mid-50s inspires me to think about its first owner and the bond they had with the watch. I imagine the enthusiasm they felt for it and the connection they had through many years of daily wear, through good and difficult times alike. When I wear the watch and catch its ageing dial in the sunlight, I’m transported back to childhood memories of the Adriatic coast of the former Yugoslavia. My memories are vivid, down to the villas, castles, bridges, sea shells, and friendly waiters. And they’re forever linked to a watch that I know has spent most of its life in the same part of the world, making it unique in my personal collection.

Zenith 143-6: A Brief History

This Zenith chronograph was among some 2,000 pieces produced by Excelsior Park in January 1954, during a chilly winter in Jura. The batch of watches that it was a part of was sent to Zenith and shipped to the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). Although Zenith has records of the batch², the buyer’s identity, *officially*, remains a mystery. To grasp the significance of the purchase, we need to delve into the historical context.

SFRY, which included present-day Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia, was a socialist federation led by the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, and its head, Marshal Josip Broz Tito. The country was situated on the Adriatic coast, with Italy to the west, Austria and Hungary to the north, Bulgaria and Romania to the east, and Albania and Greece to the south. After WWII, the new Communist government aligned with the Eastern Bloc, but adopted a neutral stance following the 1948 Tito-Stalin split. Eventually, SFRY shifted towards market-based socialism, colloquially known as “cigar socialism”. Due to the politburo at that time, Soviet media was banned for a while, Tito opting to instead import Mexican popular dramas, thereby birthing amusing social phenomena such as the popularisation of [Yu-Mex](#) (folk music in Serbo-Croatian in the musical style of mexican mariachi bands).

² The author would like to thank Syrte on OmegaForums for being the first, to his knowledge, to [publicly share information on Zenith’s records regarding the 143-6](#).



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Tito was a renowned and larger than life figure in the SFRY era, often depicted smoking cigars and mingling with world leaders and celebrities. His funeral, which took place on May 8th 1980, attracted many statesmen, including Jimmy Carter, Fidel Castro, Helmut Schmidt, Leonid Brezhnev, Margaret Thatcher, and Yasser Arafat – to name a few.



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³ *Milic Ljubomir and Paloma: Divorce*. Image may be subject to copyrights. Source: [Miha Mazzini](#).

⁴ *The Life Of Josip Broz Tito*. Image may be subject to copyrights. Source: [RadioFreeEurope](#).

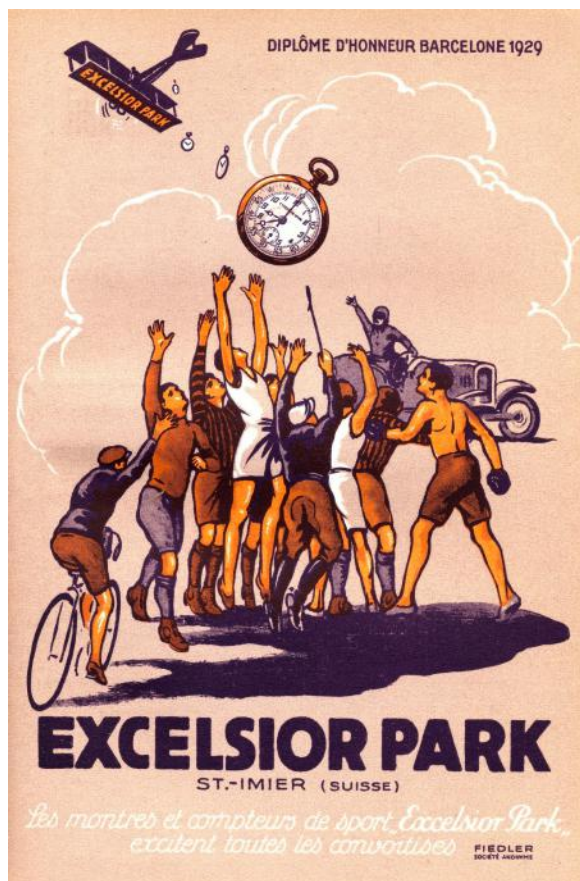
But back to watches. Much like the monarchs that preceded him, Tito was an avid watch collector. He was also known to give out Swiss watches as presents, including to waiters, workers, and members of the military. Examples of his gift watches have appeared in auctions and forums throughout the past decades, with brands ranging from IWC, Doxa, through to Zenith, Patek Philippe, and others. Examples [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

The batch of Zenith 143-6 chronographs of which my watch was one, were awarded by the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) to the army's air force pilots, one of Europe's largest air forces at the time. Though I have not been able to find official documentation from the JNA, it is well known in the ex-Yugoslav watch collecting circles that these chronographs were awarded around 1955, likely for the 10 years following the liberation of the country and the end of the war. And, I've more recently learned, from the grandson of one of the original owners of an example of this Zenith, that some of the 2,000 were offered for purchase to highly ranked officers (his grandfather being one such officer who purchased his). More often than not, the owners of these watches wore them proudly for many years, many to their death beds, and frequently as their only watch. Throughout the past 30 years or so we have slowly started to see an increasing number of examples emerge, most from the territories of the former Yugoslavia.

Excelsior Park: A Brief History

Excelsior Park was, primarily but not exclusively, a movement manufacturer based in Saint-Imier and active from the early 1900s through to the 1980s, at which point it shut down, failing to survive the quartz crisis. The company was a family

business through and through, founded by Henri Jeanneret-Brehm, one of six sons of Jules-Frédéric Jeanneret, all watchmakers. While Henri founded Excelsior Park, one of his brothers co-founded Moeris, while another founded a small brand, Junior, before eventually running Leonidas. Needless to say, the Jeannerets were very much a horological family.



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The Excelsior name was registered by 1902 and initially produced 18 and 19 line chronograph movements, as well as a variety of stop watches and sports chronos. In 1911, Henri purchased the H. Magnenat-LeCoultre factory of Le Sentier with money from Gallet, who was not only a

financier but also a consumer of EP movements for the decades that followed. In today's corporate parlance, we would call that a "strategic partner." It was also around this time, at the suggestion of Gallet, that the word "Park" was added to the name "Excelsior," thereby forming "Excelsior Park" with the goal of making the product more appealing to English speaking markets. Gallet relied on EP for chronograph and stopwatch movements, heavily marketed in the United States, and even in Asia.

In 1918, Henri's sons became involved in the operations of the family business. Robert-Henri took over the day to day management of the company and ran it through to the 1960s, well past his father's death in 1932. Robert-Henri eventually handed over management to his son, Robert-Edmond, who ran it nearly until its closing in 1985. The closing itself was drawn out, as the company had to let go of its employees by 1983, spending the remaining couple of years liquidating all remaining stock (mostly to Gallet). Robert-Edmond passed away in 1985, and EP eventually shut down in December of 1985, some 7 months after his death.

Throughout the better part of the 20th century, Excelsior Park produced movements, primarily chronographs, for Gallet, Girard-Perregaux, Zenith, and an assortment of other (and now mostly defunct) smaller brands. This was at a time when the principal ébauches were the likes of Valjoux, Landeron, Venus, and Lemania.

⁵ Excelsior Park advertisement, by *Fiedler Arts Graphiques SA*. Image may be subject to copyrights. Source: [Auguste Fiedler, Master of Modernist Watch Advertising](#), by Stephen Foskett.



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In addition to manufacturing movements for other brands, Excelsior Park also sold watches under its own brand.

The brand name Excelsior Park was eventually purchased by the German tool company [Flume](#) in 1986, who attempted to revive it using leftover Valjoux 7740 and Chronomatic movements, albeit unsuccessfully. Interestingly, the Korus group [purchased the name](#) in 2020, and launched a handful of “homage” chronographs. While the watches are heavily inspired by the Excelsior Park 1950s oversized chronograph design aesthetic, when it comes to the movements, they feature Sellita SW510 variants.

If you’d like to learn a more thorough history of Excelsior Park be sure to check out the excellent [grail-watch article on Usine du Parc](#).

Movement

During the 1950s Excelsior Park competed with another movement manufacturer, Martel Watch Co, in providing

⁶ Image may be subject to copyrights. Source: [#TBT The Excelsior Park Tuxedo Dial Chronograph](#), by Michael Stockton. Fratello Watches.

chronographs to Zenith. The histories of both Martel and Excelsior Park are murky in places, and there’s been [heated debate among watch enthusiasts](#) regarding the relationship between Martel, Universal (Universal Genève), and Zenith.

Zenith eventually bought Martel Watch Co in 1958, acquiring with it the repertoire of movements and IP, including a modern automatic watch movement with rotor. The acquisition served as a basis for developing the Zenith El Primero a decade later. But that’s a [whole other story](#).

The Zenith 143 features an Excelsior Park 4 (EP4) chronograph movement, while the 143-6 (with -6 suffix) designation additionally indicates the presence of the incabloc anti-shock system. It’s my understanding that prior to approximately 1955, EP equipped Zenith with chronograph movements with and without incabloc, so the -6 suffix was a way for Zenith to indicate the difference in calibre numbers. If you’re looking at Zenith chronos from the latter half of the 50s and later, they should all have shock proofing. This means that my Zenith 143-6 was among the last EP4-based Zenith chronographs that required the -6 designation.



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⁷ Image from page 224 of the book *Chronograph Wristwatches: To Stop Time*, by Gerd-R. Lang and Reinhard Meis.

The EP4 was part of a family of Excelsior Park chronograph movement variants. It features two sub-registers, the running small seconds and a minute counter, and prior to 1955 was seen sometimes with incabloc, and sometimes without. The similar EP40 features a third sub-register serving as the hour counter. The EP4-68 and EP40-68 came later. The -68 movement number suffix is not to be confused with Zenith's -6 designation for incabloc, and rather indicates the presence of a movable stud carrier on the balance bridge⁸. Finally there is the EP42 which has an oval base plate ("ovoid" shape) and in my experience is more often seen in 1940s chronographs, and probably came prior to EP4 and EP40.

Operating

The crown action on my Zenith 143-6 is incredibly satisfying. The crackle accompanying each turn is loud and distinct, and resistance builds up every so slightly toward full wind, providing nice tactile feedback which helps prevent overwind. Activation and stopping of the chronograph is among my favourite: the pusher is buttery soft until the halfway mark, and then requires a slightly harder squeeze to "click" and engage. The reset pusher is activated by squeezing until the chronograph hands snapback: in other words, there is no hard "click" other than the satisfying sound of the hands flying back to their starting position. Words cannot capture how much fun it is to engage and action the movement. For me, few vintage chronograph movements compare.

The movement does not hack. For me, this isn't a problem at all, particularly on a vintage watch where I don't particularly care

about some seconds drift here and there. That said, it manages to keep excellent time. Not too shabby for a 70 year old watch!

Case

The case measures 37mm wide without the crown. The lug tip to lug tip length is 44mm. The distance between the lugs is 20mm, which is rather nice for a vintage piece considering that many of my existing straps and bracelets fit. The height of the case is a very slender 7mm without the crystal, and 11.5mm if you include the height of the acrylic crystal.

The lug shape on the case is distinctive in that it features triangle facets. This gives the lugs an elegant look when looking at the watch from an angle, without sacrificing the appearance of thickness when looking at them directly from above.



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I've been trying to figure out who the manufacturer of the case is. There are no hallmarks to be seen, but one interesting fact is that this Zenith 143-6 has the exact same case as other watches featuring the EP4 movement from the same era, from

⁸ See [Grail-Watch.com reference](https://www.grail-watch.com/reference).

⁹ Image by author of his watch, a Zenith 143-6 from the 1950s.

other brands, including Excelsior Park branded ones as well. This makes me think that perhaps Excelsior Park provided not only the movements but the movements with the case, and that only the dial was installed by the *établisser* (in this case, Zenith). Consider for example the case on the Excelsior Park for the Japanese and Swedish militaries, as well as the Girard-Perregaux with EP4 shown below:



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¹⁰ Image may be subject to copyrights. Girard-Perregaux 6558N chronograph, from [sales listing on Omega Forums](#).

¹¹ Image may be subject to copyrights. Excelsior Park Swedish Army chronograph, from [Watches of Knightsbridge](#). Source crediting Watches of Knightsbridge for image: [WatchProSite](#).



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In fact, the way that the Japanese EP dial chocolate patina has developed looks eerily similar to that on my Zenith 143-6, albeit sans the radium splatter, which makes me wonder whether even the dial may have been supplied by EP according to specifications from the brand. Admittedly this is all complete speculation, but it does make me wonder.

Dial

There is no doubt that the dial is the main attraction with this watch. Even if you cannot appreciate the movement, and could care less about Excelsior Park itself, the dial can draw you in, especially when experienced “in the metal.” The radium filled numerals have aged and acquired a sandy mustard tone. Believe it or not, the original colour of the dial was smooth and black, but over time it has faded to a beautiful dark chocolate brown, and the texture is sublime. This watch was obviously worn. It did not sit in a desk drawer, it spent its time out in the real world. It’s just impossible to suitably capture the impact it leaves in photos alone, as much as I’ve tried. There is a very fine radium dust splatter,

¹² Image may be subject to copyrights. Excelsior Park chronograph for the Japanese Self-Defense Forces (JSDF). Source: [Analog Shift sales listing](#).

invisible to the naked eye, but so evenly distributed across the dial, in a way that gives the impression of a matte texture.

Then the hands... original and, from what I can tell, unmolested. Some of the white paint has come off the chronograph seconds and minute counter hands, but not enough to warrant any sort of repair attempt, in my opinion. Some of the lume has flaked off the minute hand, but legibility is fine in decent light conditions.

Final Thoughts

I've had my eyes open for this Zenith 143-6 for some time. I finally found it on eBay over a year ago, posted by an antique store

owner from Kragujevac (present-day Serbia). Unfortunately, the chronograph didn't run, but it looked original. It's a bit of a gamble with such watches, because you never know how much effort and money it will take to bring them back to life. In addition to its history, what undoubtedly drew me in was the dial. I've looked at many examples over the years, and the dials have ranged from refinished to messy. This was the one.

Finally, a special thanks to Ashton Tracy from [Precision Horology](#). My Zenith spent some time with him as he patiently cleaned it, serviced it, and restored the movement.



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¹³ Image by author of his watch, a Zenith 143-6 from the 1950s, on a modern [Forstner](#) bracelet.



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