By John Marshall

Often overlooked in the multitude of pistols used during World War II, the VIS pistol made in Radom, Poland is regarded by many experts as one of the finest. When the Germans overran Poland at the start of the war, they appropriated the manufacturing plant and proceeded to arm many of their forces with the pistol. Most of these guns encountered today will accordingly show German acceptance stampings. This was a robust, reliable and quality arm well deserving of a spot on the list of classic handguns.

In the late 1920s, Poland's military was armed with a jumble of handguns, ranging from Nagant revolvers to Mauser and Browning pistols. Seeking to correct this disorganized situation, a standard handgun was sought that would be particularly suitable for the Polish cavalry. Designers Piotr Wilniewczyc and Jan Skrzypiński began work on a pistol in 1930 at the Fabryka Broni (Weapon Factory) in the city of Radom under the guidance of Director Kazimierz Oldakowski. In their efforts, they borrowed heavily from John Browning's U.S. Model of 1911 pistol, as those patents were expiring. The resultant handgun bore a resemblance to the U.S. gun, but it had some interesting twists. First, the chambering would be in 9x19mm Parabellum, which was becoming the de facto standard in Europe. Next, the barrel was dropped from locking engagement with the slide by a cam rather than the swinging link employed by Browning. There was no manual safety, but at the request of the cavalry, a decocking lever was employed at the rear of the slide to enable one-handed decocking – the other hand being needed to grasp the reins of a horse. This lever withdrew the firing pin deeper into the slide and dropped the hammer safely on the firing pin retaining plate. The trigger, trigger lockwork and grip safety were all pure Browning, but in place of a manual safety, the Polish pistol had a lever which simply served to hold the slide in position for take-down. A spring-loaded floating firing pin shorter than the length of its channel enabled safe carry with the hammer down on a loaded round. The grip safety of the 1911 pistol was retained and operated in exactly the same way, as did the magazine release, placed to the left rear of the trigger. A lanyard loop was located at the bottom of the mainspring housing. Some very early guns were slotted for a detachable buttstock, although few were made and almost never used. A rowel hammer similar to the "Commander" hammer featured on more modern 1911 pistols was utilized, enabling cocking by running the back of the pistol down a trouser leg.

drastic or saddle. A captive recoil spring surrounded a full-length recoil spring guide with a spring-loaded buffer; these parts could be removed as a unit. All in all, it was a well-thought-out pistol. Although there has been speculation of some involvement by Belgian Fabrique Nationale engineers who were at the time perfecting the Browning High Power pistol prior to its introduction, nothing to this effect has been verifiable.

The Polish military purchased the rights to the pistol, and in late 1932 and early 1933, trial pistols were issued to various units for additional testing. The pistol was adopted in 1935 as the VIS wz 1935 (VIS Model 1935). Originally, the pistol was to be known as the WiS, using the initials of the designers, but this was quickly changed to VIS, which in Latin means "power," "strength" or "force." "VIS" was molded into the right grip panel, and "FB" into the left, which stood for Fabryka Broni, the manufacturing plant. Planned manufacture of the pistol was to total 90,000 pistols, although actual pre-war production is estimated to be around 50,000. The first pistols were beautifully made, with careful attention to detail and lustrous bluing. A Polish heraldisc eagle was stamped on the left of the slide. In the years 1936 to 1939, the Radom factory employed over 4,000 workers who were producing motorcycles, bicycles and civilian items as well as pistols. The VIS was produced by the old methods of forging, machining, assembly, inspection and

“The Polish resistance had begun smuggling parts out of the factory to assemble pistols in secret... a number of these ‘underground’ pistols were used in the famous Warsaw ghetto uprising.”

September 2012 Blue Press_2012 Blue Press 7/12/12 8:35 AM Page 40