

# **WOLFGANG LEITHNER, EMPEROR FRANZ JOSEF I AND THE ISCHLERSTUTZEN**

*By Marc Gorelick*

*Photographs of Firearms Courtesy of Joh. Springers Erben, in Vienna, Austria*



*Cartridge break-open Ischlerstutzen by Wolfgang Leithner. The knob under the stock can be unscrewed and screwed into the patchbox cover in order to slide open the patchbox.*

The Ischlerstutzen is an Austrian legend and has been a good choice for those hunters who are passionate about needing only one shot. The creation of the Ischlerstutzen, a specialized form of hunting rifle, was born from the passions of two men, Wolfgang Leithner, Jr., a gunmaker in Ischl, Austria, and Franz Josef I, Emperor of Austria and King of Hungary, who was an avid hunter.

The municipality of Ischl lies in the Austrian Alps near Salzburg. The Leithner family in Ischl, Austria has a long history of fine gunmaking. Benedikt Leithner is the first of the Leithner family to be recorded as a gunmaker. He was born in 1712 and in 1763 at the age of 51 he became a Büchsenmacher (gun maker). His son, Franz Wolfgang Leithner (born 1738) followed him in the gunmaking trade. His son was Wolfgang Leithner Sr who was born in 1778. He was also a gunmaker and in 1810 he married a gunsmith's widow, Konstanze Schickeneder. Their son, Wolfgang, Jr. was born in 1811.

Wolfgang Leithner Jr. is recorded in Eugene Heer's *Der Neue Stockel* as being an active gunmaker between 1850 and 1880 but, considering that his father was a successful gunmaker, Wolfgang Jr. may have been active in the trade much earlier. He was interested in new designs, especially hunting guns for mountain conditions, and according to one source, it appears that he worked with a merchant, Eleonore Ramsauer (who was a supplier to his Majesty Emperor Franz Josef I) to develop the famous "Ischlerstutzen," which became a favorite rifle of the Emperor, who had a hunting lodge in Ischl .

This fairly lightweight hunting rifle was named after the town of Ischl where it was created. The typical percussion Leithner-made Ischlerstutzen was a short, large caliber single-shot percussion muzzle loading rifle with a finger rest trigger guard and a full length stock with a horn tip, ramrod/cleaning rod beneath the barrel, and double-set triggers. Designed for stalking in the mountains it had a large bore octagonal barrel, usually of .55 to .58 caliber. The full-length stock was intended to protect the barrel while climbing in the mountains, and also to provide a solid grip if the rifle was used as an *Alpenstock*. Wolfgang Leithner's trademark became a male chamois of silver or gold inlaid into the cheek piece of the stock. After he came to the Emperor's attention, he became a gunsmith to both Imperial and Royal courts (K ü K Kaiserlicher und Königlicher) and a personal gunsmith to the Emperor. As such his products exude the quality that is expected of a court gunmaker.

Wolfgang's son, Franz Leithner, (born about 1850) followed his father in the gunmaking trade. However, in 1905 he became Bürgermeister of Ischl and Johann Von Lidl took over his firearms business, thus ending the Leithner dynasty of gunmakers in Ischl.

Franz Josef I (b. August 18, 1830 – d. November 21, 1916) was Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, and the ruler of other Habsburg monarchy states from December 2 1848 until his death on November 21, 1916. He ascended to the throne at the age of 18 when his uncle, Emperor Ferdinand I abdicated as part of the plan to end the Hungarian Revolution of 1848. A bit of a reactionary, Franz Joseph spent much of his reign resisting constitutionalism and nationalism in his domains and the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, fighting several wars. After Austria's defeat in the Austrian-Prussian War of 1866, Austria turned its attention to the Balkans. When his nephew and heir Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914 Austria declared war on Serbia, starting World War 1. Franz Josef I died about two and half years later, after ruling for 68 years.



*Left – Staged photo card of Emperor Franz Josef I with his son Crown Prince Rudolph (1860's)  
Above – Enlargement of Emperor and his rifle. Note that in both images Franz Josef has an Ischlerstutzen. The rifle in the photo closely resembles the percussion Ischlerstutzen described and pictured below.*

The emperor was a passionate hunter who especially loved hunting in the Alpine Mountains. Hunting was his chief form of recreation and it was both a personal passion and a political tool. It allowed him to relax away from official duties while also meeting with other European leaders, such as Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany and the Russian Crown Prince. Reportedly, during his lifetime of hunting he took about 55,000 game animals. It was recorded that 48,345 were various species of deer, as well as ibex, chamois and other game. His passion is reflected in his many hunting lodges. His Ischl lodge, the Imperial Villa at Bad Ischl (Kaiservilla), which is more of a palace that served as the imperial summer residence than a hunting lodge, and is decorated with numerous trophies, including about 2,000 sets of antlers mounted on the walls. It was while he was in Ischl that Franz Josef came into contact with Wolfgang Leithner,

possibly through Eleonore Ramsauer, and the association between the Leithner's Ischlerstutzen and the Emperor was born. Leithner's Ischlerstutzen was said to be the emperor's favorite hunting rifle.



This percussion Ischlerstutzen was made by Leithner about 1860 and is representative of this type of gun. It is 37.8 inches (3.15 feet or 96 cm) long, with a 22.5 inch (57 cm) long octagonal barrel and 13 inch (33 cm) long butt stock. It weighs 6.4 pounds (2.9 kg). The caliber is a little more than .48 (12 mm).



The octagonal barrel is inscribed with the maker's name "**W. Leithner in Ischl.**" Both the front and rear sights are dovetailed in the barrel and there is a tunnel-like sight protector covering the rear sight. The top of the breech is engraved with Leithner's trademark of a chamois. Behind it, on the upper tang, is a small folding diopter sight. The hammer or cock has a safety lever in front of it. It has a large trigger guard with finger grooves and a German double set trigger. It is fully stocked as a Stutzen, with a cap near the muzzle made of stag horn. The single ramrod ferule is made of antler.



It has a finely checkered walnut buttstock with a monogram plate, steel butt plate and sling swivels. The patchbox has a sliding cover. On the left side of the butt is an oval cheekpiece with a gold chamois (Leithner's trademark) inlaid into it and arabesque floral carving behind it. The lockplate is engraved with various nature and hunting scenes and floral designs. Behind the cock a hound is attacking a deer and in front of the cock two chamois are resting under a tree. The cock itself, is decorated with matching floral engraving. The sideplate is also engraved with arabesque floral designs.



*Leithner's trademark, a gold chamois is inlaid into the cheekpiece of the stock.*



When the self-contained metallic cartridge became widespread in the early 1870's Wolfgang Leithner began building single shot break action rifles along the same lines of his percussion Ischlerstutzen, with a full length stock and relatively short, large bore, octagon barrel, and lock up with an under lever. Other gun makers soon followed and the Ischl type became standard with either an under lever or top lever break action (kipplauf), an octagon barrel, external hammer, staghorn fore-end tip and a short overall length. Other gunsmiths building Ischlerstutzen style rifles used a number of other actions, such as falling block and bolt actions. For example, the famous Vienna gunmaker, Ferdinand Fruwirth, is said to have made Werndl-Holub action Ischlerstutzen rifles.

Although the new rifles were breechloaders and fired metallic cartridges, they still maintained many of the features of the muzzle loading percussion Ischlerstutzen that went beyond tradition because the conditions under which they were used hadn't really changed. For example, early 19<sup>th</sup> century cartridge rifles that used black powder ammunition often came with a cleaning rod under the barrel instead of a ramrod, and a patchbox that held cleaning equipment instead of patches and lead bullets. The reason given is that Ischlerstutzen were designed for alpine stalking for chamois, roe and red deer. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century a hunter in the Alps had to walk up into the mountains carrying all equipment on his person, his rifle on his shoulder and with some food in a rucksack. He then stayed for a week or so at high altitude, sleeping outside or in the huts of summer shepherds and herdsmen in the high mountain pastures. Under these conditions cleaning equipment came in handy to remove black powder fouling between stalks, to prevent rusting in the bore, or to remove a torn case. After the introduction of smokeless powder towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and improvements in ammunition, there was less need to carry a cleaning rod on the rifle, so these and patchboxes were left off later Ischlerstutzen.

This next Ischlerstutzen, also built by Wolfgang Leithner, is representative of his single-shot cartridge hunting rifles that followed the format of his earlier percussion stalking rifles. Made around 1880, it is chambered in .460-60 BP Express. It has a 23.6 inch (60 cm) long octagonal barrel and weighs 6.6

pounds (3 kg). On the top flat of the barrel is the maker's name inlaid in gold – “**Leithner in Ischl.**” There are thin inlaid gold borders on the breech end of the barrel. It has a full stock with a tip of horn, a cleaning rod under the barrel, and a staghorn cleaning rod ferule.



The rifle has a Lefauchaux T-bolt action with a long underlever below the fore-end to break open the gun for loading and unloading. It has a bright rounded action with a back action lock plate, all decorated with sparse scroll engraving. The hammer has what's known as a hare's ear spur and a sliding safety. Like the earlier percussion stalking rifle it has a small folding diopter sight on the upper tang, a large trigger guard with finger grooves, and double set trigger. Also like the earlier rifle, this one's stock has sling swivels, a sliding patchbox cover, fine checkering and the gold chamois trademark of Wolfgang Leithner inlaid into the cheekpiece.



*Note Wolfgang Leithner's trademark of an inlaid gold chamois in the cheekpiece of this break open rifle.*



*Leithner break open cartridge Ischlerstutzen with the lever under the fore-end.*

## TURN OF THE CENTURY

The Ischlerstutzen tradition in Austria (and other Alpine hunting countries) continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond. This specimen of an Ischlerstutzen style hunting rifle was manufactured by Joh. Springer's Erben in Vienna circa 1909, presumably for a member of the Austrian nobility. The 39.75 inch (101 cm) long rifle was chambered in 6.5x57mmR and it displays the features of a classic Ischlerstutzen – short barrel, single shot break action with an exposed hammer, full length stock with a horn tip on the fore-end and German double set triggers. The butt has an oval cheekpiece on the left side, and instead of the patchbox of the older percussion guns, it has a magazine that can hold three extra cartridges. The 23.25 inch (59 cm) long Krupp barrel is engraved on the side with “**K. u. K. KAMMER GEWEHRLICFERANTEN**“ and “**JOH. SPRINGERS ERBEN IN WIEN**“. The lever to open the action is on the top tang and the action has a double barrel hook and doll's head,



The receiver, lock plate and other metal parts are colored case hardened and all are engraved with delicate arabesques and edge stitch decorations. The lockplate is also engraved with the maker's name, "**JOH. SPRINGER'S ERBEN GEWEHRFABRIKANTEN WIEN.**" It has an external dolphin-shaped rebounding hammer and a horn pistol grip plate. Both the fore-end and the pistol grip have fine checkering. The fore-end is unusual in that it is actually in two parts. The front element with its horn tip is fixed by a cross bolt that can be removed to the right while the rear part of the fore-end is secured with a swing lever.



This Ischlerstutzen was fitted with a claw mounted modern Zeiss Diavari-C 3-9x36 rifle scope. It was sold on May 16, 2024 at Joh. Springer's Erben's 41<sup>st</sup> Classic Auction in Vienna for about \$4,430 US (3,800 euros).

## SOME MODERN CUSTOM ISCHLERSTUTZEN

Wolfgang Leithner created a style of stalking rifle whose basic form has lasted to today. His Ischlerstutzen's design of a light weight, full stocked, single shot, short barreled, stalking rifle, often with an exposed hammer, has survived over the centuries through numerous improvements in firearms. Two things that have changed are that many now mount optical sights and the calibers have gotten smaller with improvements over the years in ammunition performance and ballistics. Often made in different actions (i.e., break open, falling block or bolt) it continues to inspire elite European gunsmiths, such as Josef Hambrusch, Johann Franzoj, Peter Hofer, Josef Just and Manfred Wutti, of Austria, Oswald Prinz of Germany, and A. Furter of Switzerland, to create new forms of custom Ischlerstutzen rifles to this day.

Josef Just of Ferlach, Austria made this Ischlerstutzen style stalking rifle in 1995. Chambered in 5.6x57R it is 39.75 inches (101 cm) long with a 22.75 inch (58 cm) long octagonal barrel and weighs 7.9 pounds (3.6 kg). It is a break action that locks with double barrel hooks and doll's head, and has a quarter rib above the barrel surmounted with a Swarovski Habicht 6X36A rifle scope. Its Ischlerstutzen ancestry is also reflected in its exposed dolphin shaped hammer, full-length stock and clean simple lines. It is, in fact, a modern finely crafted and visually striking interpretation of the earlier Ischlerstutzens.



Another modern Josef Just Ischlerstutzen style gun rifle is this 7x65R caliber, falling block action rifle that was made around 1960. With an overall length of 40 inches (102 cm) and a 22.25 inch (59 cm) long barrel, it has a vertical falling block system with an underlever around the triggerguard. The receiver is decorated with deep arabesque engraving with a running deer in motion on the left side and a roebuck on the right side. The wide part of the opening lever has a chamois engraved on it. The stock has fine Scottish checkering.



Manfred Wutti of Eggartsbeg, in the Styria region of Austria manufactured high quality custom long guns in a variety of configurations, including Ischlerstutzen style rifles. This one is a break action with an opening lever on the upper tang. This exquisite rifle's 23.6 inch (60 cm) long octagonal barrel has a stepped partially matted rib. Built in 1993 and chambered in 6.5x65R it has a bright rounded action,

engraved with fine scroll and scenes of roe deer and chamois with marmots on the back action lock plate. Designed to emulate the old style, it has an external rebounding hammer with a hare's ear spur, an external safety lever, double set trigger, a carved horn finger rest with a contrastingly grained walnut full stock that is French polished, and has fine checkering and a horn tip near the muzzle. The en-suite engraved steel buttplate has a trap that holds 3 cartridges.



The final modern Ischlerstutzen we are looking at was made in 2006 by Oswald Prinz, Büchsenmachermeister (Master Gun Maker), in Maierhöfen, Germany. Chambered in 9.3x74R, it is an external side hammer break action rifle with a 24.8 inch (63 cm) long octagonal barrel. It has a bright rounded action, embellished with fine rose and scroll engraving with gold inlays on the back action lockplate, a rebounding hammer with an inlaid gold ribbon, and a gold washed set trigger. The full length stock is of beautiful contrastingly grained walnut with a carved horn finger rest, Bavarian cheekpiece with double folds, and a horn tip at the muzzle. Its scope is a Zeiss Diavari Z1, 5-6x42T\*.





***AUTHOR'S NOTE:** The name Ischlerstutzen has two different spellings. It has been spelled as either one word, Ischlerstutzen, or as two words, Ischler Stutzen. I chose to use the former Ischlerstutzen. All firearms pictured were offered for sale at various auctions by Joh. Springers Erben in Vienna, Austria.*



*Above Left - Idealized painting by Franz von Pausinger of Emperor Franz Josef I hunting in the mountains (1898). His short rifle appears to be an Ischlerstutzen.*

*Above Right- Photo card from the mid-1860's of Emperor Franz Josef I with his young son, Crown Prince Rudolf. In 1889 Rudolf died in an apparent murder-suicide pact with his 17-year mistress, Marie von Vetsera in the infamous Mayerling Incident. The Emperor appears to be holding an Ischlerstutzen.*



*Emperor Franz Josef I (third from left) as a hunter surrounded by his foresters with a twelve-point stag slain in Mitter Weissenbach near Bad Ischl on 24th August 1912. Note the Ischlerstutzen carried by the hunters.*