

# Leica Camera

## *Leitz, Camera, Action!*

What do the following have in common? (1) A T-shirt bearing the image of Che Guevara. (2) Newspaper photos of American soldiers on the beaches in Normandy in World War II. (3) A magazine cover picturing a Vietnamese child running naked and wounded from American bombs. (4) The candid, expressive photos of Henri Cartier-Bresson. You've probably guessed: the original pictures were all shot with Leica cameras.

Our story begins around 1912, with the young German engineer, Oskar Barnack (1879-1936). Barnack loved to photograph mountain scenery. But he was in poor health: he suffered from asthma. Camera equipment in his day was large, heavy, and awkward. It often required bellows and glass plates. Naturally, Barnack dreamed of reducing his physical burdens. So he tried to put multiple small images on one large plate. It did not work out well, but he continued to think about the principle of "small negative, large picture."

Barnack was asked by his employer, the Leitz optical company, to construct a 35mm movie camera. He did that, successfully. He also experimented privately with a small device to accompany the camera. It used 35mm cinematic roll film to produce still test negatives. But he realized that this "exposure meter" functioned well as a compact camera. He continued experimenting, and worked out the 2:3 aspect ratio that the Leica later made famous. This camera has become known as the "Ur-Leica," or Original Leica.

Over the next decade, Barnack further developed the Ur-Leica on his own time. He perfected its focal plane shutter, its speedy, left-right film-loading mechanism (later the industry norm), and other features.

Shortly after World War I, Leitz decided to manufacture a small number of prototypes based on the Ur-Leica. This was the Nullserie or O-series. The series boasted superior new lenses designed for Leitz by the optical physicist Dr. Max Berek (1886-1949).

The first actual Leica (**Leitz** + **camera**) was launched in 1925. There were already more than two dozen 35mm cameras on the market, using negatives of various sizes. But the Leica was exceptionally compact and easy to operate. It was manufactured according to highly precise standards. It incorporated more than a decade of Barnack's engineering innovations and