

Pen and Ink —All in One

The invention of the ballpoint pen

BY LISA DE NIKE

Even in this age of computerized everything, the humble ballpoint still serves important functions, from scrawling shopping lists on scraps of paper to signing checks and legal documents. Who among us, after all, doesn't have at least a half a dozen stuck in an old mug on our desks or on our kitchen counters?

So ubiquitous is the ballpoint pen, in fact, that it's diffi-

cult to imagine that it has only existed for about 70 years, ever since Hungarian newspaperman László Jozsef Biró decided that what the world needed was a convenient writing instrument that didn't require the user to stop intermittently to fill it up with ink.

Biró wanted his pen to utilize printer's ink, because it dried rapidly and didn't smudge. But he also knew that substance was too thick to flow easily through traditional pen nibs, so he and his brother, George, fitted the invention with a small ball bearing at its tip, postulating that the ball would acquire ink as it rotated and transfer it onto the paper as the user wrote.

It's worth noting that Biró wasn't the first person to come up with this notion; in 1888, a man named John J. Loud patented a similar device to mark leather, but that patent was never commercially exploited. Biró patented his version in Hungary in 1938 and again, five years later, in Argentina. (The Biró brothers fled Hungary for Paris several days before the Nazis' anti-Jewish laws went into effect in 1938. Shortly thereafter, they moved to Argentina in an effort to outrun the Third Reich.)

In Argentina, the Birós' newly formed Eterpen Co. commercialized the ballpoint pen, with ads boasting that it could "write for a year without refilling." In 1945, the brothers sold their patents to the Eversharp Co., which continued to make and market the product in South America.

Chicago businessman Milton Reynolds was introduced to the ballpoint pen in 1945 while on a business trip to Argentina and recognized its potential right away. Back in the United States, Reynolds founded the Reynolds International Pen Co., selling the devices at \$12.50 apiece through Gimbel's department store in New York. The company sold \$10,000 worth of the "Reynolds Rockets" pens the very first day on the market. At the same time, Eversharp also was aggressively marketing its version. Sales for both skyrocketed, even though their pens skipped, smeared and leaked. By 1951, consumers were tired of the pens' poor quality, and most went back to buying and using fountain pens. It seemed that the ballpoint pen craze was over.

Three years later, Parker Pens introduced the "Jotter," a ballpoint that not only came in a variety of point sizes, but also actually worked! The company sold 3.5 million the first year. A variety of other competitors (who also made vast improvements to the Birós' original designs), also quickly entered the market, including Europe-based BIC, which sold its ballpoints for between 29 and 69 cents apiece in the early 1960s. Consumers loved BIC pens for their low cost and reliability. BIC continues to dominate today's market, selling about 14 million pens a day. In fact, chances are, you have a BIC pen in that cup on your desk right now. ■

