
MOLL, KYBARTH, AND COMPANY¹

By Alexander Tikhonov

At the beginning of October 1910 an application was submitted to the Building Office of the Moscow Provincial Executive Committee. The applicant was Gottlieb Henry Karl Moll (known in Russia as Bogdan Vasilyevich Moll), a Prussian citizen. He asked for permission to build a gramophone record manufacturing plant with 15 to 20 workers employed. The plant was to be built on his own land in the estate of Aprelyevka of Moscow-Bryansk Railway, Vereyskiy district of Moscow province.

Bogdan Vasilyevich was not a novice in setting up an industrial enterprise. He had been making money on metal enamel plates, dishes, bath tubs, and chemical products. He possessed a number of enterprises in Russia and Germany, among them Moll and Rohwer, a rather large plant in Hosten. Still, the Prussian citizen chose Russia, and the Molls settled on a farm in the Kaluzhskaya region. When Johann, Bogdan's son, completed his course of instruction in chemistry and physics at Moscow University, his father decided to buy land in Aprelyevka for his son, so that "he was not engaged in hunting only." The idea of setting up the gramophone record manufacturing plant was not accidental: the new business had the signs of growth and could give good profits.

The land cost him 30,000 roubles, and the choice of the place proved a happy one: wonderful nature, lots of cottages, a railway nearby, only 50 versts² from Moscow with the greatest musicians and actors living there. Under efficient management the plant built at such a place was doomed to ... success.

The plans for construction were announced in September 1910 in the *Gramophone World* (this date often is mistaken for that of the plant's inauguration). One could read in the journal: "The new enterprise is sure to have great prospects, for Russia has long been in need of such a plant."

It was Aprelyevka that was to play a special role, the leading role to be more exact, in the history of both the Russian and Soviet gramophone record.

Before construction started a prudent Bogdan Vasilyevich held talks with the Berlin firm, Dakapo-Record which had been recording Russian performers. The talks centered on purchasing matrices so that by the inauguration day the plant had its own repertoire. The bargain was concluded, and Moll, Sr. paid 15,000 German Marks for 400 matrices.

In November when the equipment was being installed August Kybarth and Albert Vogt, two experts in the gramophone business, arrived at Aprelyevka. They had worked in Berlin for the company Nigrolit, where they studied the technology of molding the paste and pressing records. Their arrival intensified the work. Everything was checked

thoroughly and adjusted: every screw and nut, drive belt and nail. In December the inspector examining the plant pointed out that "the construction of the buildings was over and that their visible part was quite firm structurewise." On December 9 the machine bay was set working and a cloud of smoke above the chimney was streaming in the wind like a banner. The plant was ready for work. And then, at last, the great day of inauguration came. After a public prayer and consecration the first 400-gram shellac record was produced. This happened on December 15, 1910.

The plant was a good red brick one-story building having large windows with platbands made of white stone, and a high thin chimney. Using up-to-date equipment, the plant started functioning smoothly. The steam escaped from the valves with a whistling sound, and the engine of the electric power station hummed, setting in motion all the tools and mechanisms. The technician would pour oil onto the machine, watching the pointers of the instrument. Behind the wall of the machine bay there was a paste producing shop. The owners took a legitimate pride in it because nothing of the kind could be found in Central Russia at that time. Here shellac delivered from Syria was mixed with pine black from Hannover and other components to produce the compound used for pressing records. This was done in the neighboring area where the clattering of matrices on iron plates never stopped and was only interrupted by the thick sizzling of opening presses. In that cacophony the workers took out the finished records and piled them, their movements automated. The production of records was not an easy business: in 12 hours of work the presser hardly could produce 100-150 records. In the galvanizing shop there were large tanks with solution where wax plates under the action of electricity were being transformed into copper matrices to be used for pressing the records. There was a special room for listening to the gramophone records coming immediately from under the press. It can be compared to the present inspection department.

It was not so much the procedure of the inspection that was most striking, but rather the sensation of a miracle that appeared from shapeless paste in the next room. Many visitors were unanimous in pointing out that after their visit to the plant they could not help liking the record as one of the greatest achievements of human intellect.

The chief director of the new enterprise, under the high-sounding title Metropol-Record, was Johann Bogdanovich Moll. Its commercial director was August Kybarth. At first, the plant confined its activity to the production of the paste and pressing plates, using the matrices of other companies to execute their orders, including those bought from Dakapo-Record. The new firm regarded the quality of their production as its top priority and hoped to produce low-noise, strong, and comparatively inexpensive records.

The new product appeared in the Moscow gramophone market at the end of January 1911, under the foreign mark of Luxophone-Record. The owners of the plant hoped the foreign mark would be accepted by salesmen better and did not hurry to lay their cards on the table, the more so as their repertoire was of a wide range and diversity. Besides, the fears of Bogdan Moll proved true: in spite of superb paste, the quality of sound did not turn out very high.

At the end of February 1911, a great dispute between Kybarth and Vogt led to Vogt's return to Berlin. He was substituted by Moll, Sr., inspirer of the business. The unexpected departure of Vogt who, among other things, was responsible for the sale of the production, aggravated the situation, for he had failed to find a wholesale buyer. At first they had to deal with small employers paying in cash.

It wasn't easy to win the market. The plant was not alone in Russia: at that time similar plants were functioning in Riga, Warsaw, St. Petersburg, and even in Moscow. It was possible to compete with them only by starting to record performers on their own.

A skilled technician was invited from Berlin to take up this job. The first recordings made at Metropol-Record were a success from the technical point of view. They attracted the attention of critics and aroused interest among salesmen. The journal *Gramophonnyaya Zhizn* remarked, "The record is characterized by distinct, sonorous and vivid sound." The hiring of performers was not cheap, but having estimated its financial resources the firm declared its intention to record not less than 40 items a month. The work with singers started in April and was conducted vigorously and smoothly. All the necessary equipment was installed at the Moscow office of the firm at Sitov's house in Myasnitskaya Street (now Kirov Street) in Bank Lane.

At first the repertoire was arranged to meet the tastes of a wide public, which accounted for the prevalences of folk and pop songs.

It was necessary to advertise, and these advertisements appeared in various publications. Skilled commercial travellers won over by Metropol-Record from other firms left for various parts of Russia. Due to this personnel policy, Moll and Kybarth soon had a strong crew. The main salesman of the firm was P. M. Levin, known for his great energy, persistence, and ability to make a mutually beneficial bargain with the buyer. With him making a tour of the central provinces of Russia, the firm kept receiving orders every day. The work of Troitskiy, who has passed through the excellent schooling at the firm of the Isserlin brothers, was also a success. A little later they were joined by Ya. I. Berkwits, who had worked for the Grimm brothers. When this alliance formed, the plant created the commercial house "Moll, Kybarth and Co."

Soon the firm took another step to strengthen its position at the gramophone market. In July 1911 there was an official announcement about its joining the German company Dakapo-Record, which had sold its matrices with the Russian repertoire to B. Moll when the plant in Aprelyevka was being constructed. Both parties were pursuing their own interest. Dakapo-Record hoped to avoid the high duty imposed on records imported to Russia. The records were to be pressed in Aprelyevka and sent to customers from its Moscow storehouse. As for Metropol-Record, it was supported by the famous company and gained access to new technologies and foreign markets. Today we would call it a joint venture. This agreement was supported with 150,000 roubles in capital.

Many commercial rivals were seriously worried: the plant which had been in the background advanced so drastically. Commercial travellers of various firms complained to each other that provincial Aprelyevka bothered them greatly. Actually, things were going quite well. The factory was selling about 50,000 records a month, at 50 kopeks each record. Even with such a low price established, the financial accounts showed the growth of the firm's income. Moll Sr., who supervised the work of the plant, did not invest his money any longer, but received profits. Satisfied with developments, he made up his mind to stay aloof from the business and pass over the administration of the plant to his son, Johann, and A. Kybarth.

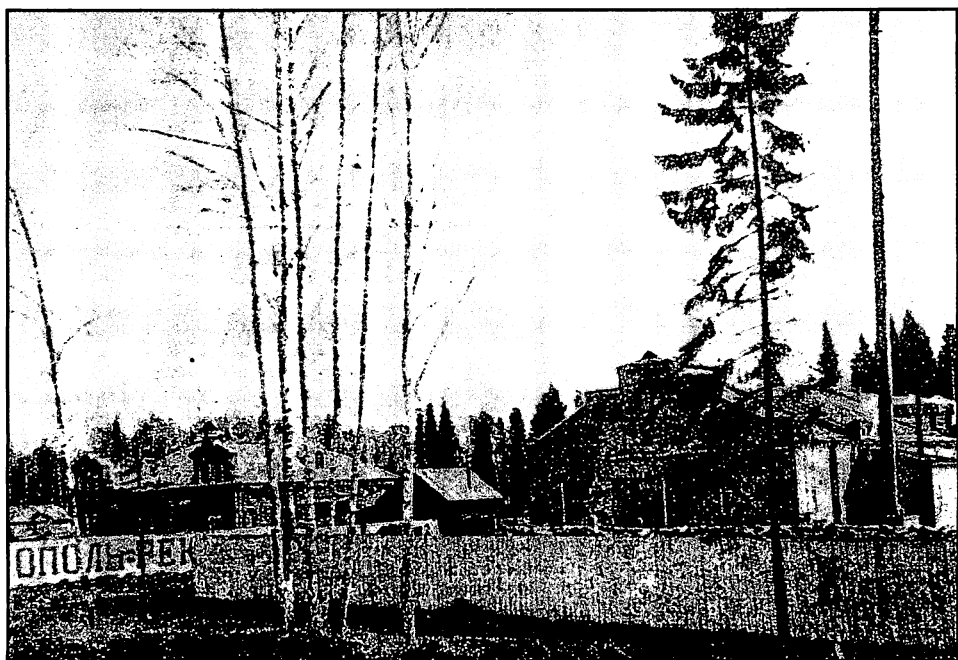
The new owners did well. By polling customers, they learned the names of the most popular performers and released a record of their performances. All the records were sold up in a few days in Moscow and the provinces failed to get any of them. To meet this growing demand, the plant started to produce a special edition. The gramophone-lovers were amazed at the variety and the happy choice of repertoire. The range was wide: from serious opera arias and overtures of classical music compositions to Gypsy romances and comic stories, from Russian folk choruses to xylophone solos. For the first time the orchestras of the firm—symphony, string orchestra, and brass band—took part in the recordings. The technical characteristics of the record were wonderful, for the musicians were adapted to studio work.



METROPOL 1627, from 1910-11: *Give me your hand, dear friend, for luck. Romance of music by D. K. Sartinskiy-Bey. With orchestral accompaniment. Artists of the Imperial Opera. A. M. Davidov. Davidov (1872-1944) was a well-known tenor of the time. (Photo from author)*



METROPOL 2654, from 1912-14: *Unwillingly to these sad shores. Prince's aria from the opera "Rusalka" by Alexander Dargomyzhskay. Sung by A.M. Labinskiy, artist of the Imperial Theater, with orchestral accompaniment. Labinskiy lived from 1871 to 1941. (Photo from author)*



A general view (1911) of the factory at Aprelyevka Station on the Moscow-Kiev line. Note the writing on the fence, which is advertising Metropol Record. (Photo from author)



Johann Moll (1886-1927)



Gottlieb Moll (1859-1926)

1 *Записи* ПЕЖТВЪ 1912 г. № 1177

ИНТЕРЕСНЪЕ ВСЕГО

слышать свой собственный голос и голос безвѣстныхъ артистовъ,
записанныхъ на граммофонныхъ пластинахъ.

== ЭТО ТЕПЕРЬ ВСЯКОМУ ВОЗМОЖНО. ==

ТОРГОВЫЙ ДОМЪ
МОЛЛЬ, КИБАРТЬ и К^о,
Москва, Мясницкая, Балвановскій пр., домъ 7, кв. 33. ☎ Телефонъ 2.96-97.

Устроимъ на Гороховской улицѣ, въ домѣ Швацовскаго, № 8, телефонъ № 3.29-57 (рядомъ съ Сметницкѣмъ Рингомъ «Дворецъ Спорт») являе, въ которомъ записываются не только лучшіе артисты, артистки и знаменитости для граммофонныхъ пластинокъ «Метрополя»-рекорда (которыя, какъ извѣстно, наилучшіе двусторонніе пластины на рынокѣ, но и принимаются заказы ослѣ, желавшихъ и исполняются художественно.

Цѣны записи на пластинкахъ грошъ, 10 дюйм., Руб. 25, приблизительно 300 словъ; за что заказчикъ получаетъ 12 пластинокъ своей записи изъ лучшаго матеріала (того же, изъ котораго производится пластинки «Метрополя»-рекорда) и, кромѣ того, заказчикъ получаетъ одну изъ лучшихъ посеребренныхъ италіанск., производимыхъ гальванопластическимъ способомъ, отъ котораго заказчикъ имѣетъ возможность всегда заказать на фабрикѣ «Метрополя»-рекорда любое количество своихъ пластинокъ, по цѣнѣ 1 рубль за штуку.

Бесплатно, а также, предлагаемъ и утѣшительные свои голоса и свое интересное воспоминаніе изъ дѣтства.

Подтвердите Ваше духовное завѣщаніе своимъ собственнымъ голосомъ и собственноручною подписаніемъ на пластинкѣ, противъ которыхъ никакіе споры будутъ немыслимы.

Требуйте всякое важное для Васъ общіе или условіе записи на пластинкахъ, и это будетъ неоспоримымъ доказательствомъ.

Слышите Рождественскіе заклинанія, такъ какъ изготовление картинъ потребуетъ не менѣе 10-ти дней.

За справками просимъ обращаться въ контору
Торговаго Дома **МОЛЛЬ, КИБАРТЬ и К^о,**
Москва, Мясницкая, Балвановскій пр., д. № 7, кв. № 33 ☎ Телефонъ № 2.96-97.

An advertisement from 1912: "To everyone who wants to listen to his own voice...recorded on a gramophone record..." This was advertising Moll and Kybarth's ability to record any voice. Although not a highly profitable venture, this illustrates the company's flexibility. (Photos from author)



The Moll home in Aprelyevka, Russia, under construction in 1910. (Photo from author)

The same house pictured above, in 1987. Currently, the house is the administrative center of the Aprelyevka record factory "MELODIA." (Photo from author)



The rumors which spread in Moscow in February 1912 held that Metropol-Record was to be transformed into a joint-stock company of the well-known local capitalists. Those rumors had their grounds. The commercial house Moll, Kybarth and Co. was getting ready to expand. In addition to the perfectly equipped plant in Aprelyevka, the firm decided to set up a branch office to improve the conditions for producing records and the quality of their galvanoplastics. In a busy district in Gorokhovskaya street (now known as Kasakov street), in Shidlovskiy's house, they rented large premises and started to reconstruct them. A studio for recording was equipped in a spacious hall, a shop for galvanoplastics was being mounted next door. Thus, two main stages of production were located at the same place and the records no longer ran the risk of being spoiled or broken, which took place when the records were being transported from Aprelyevka. This also made it easier to deal with actors and musicians, for many of them lived in Moscow. In fact, a new, perfectly equipped plant soon appeared in Moscow.

The branch office was set working with appropriate ceremony in August 1912. Soon the new shop developed a new product; 30 cm double-sided "Giant" records were introduced on the market. This effort seemed warranted because such records had mainly been produced by the joint-stock company Gramophone thus far. The "Giants," intended for recording orchestra and symphony concerts, developed a new, highly artistic etiquette: a pretty girl with a harp was represented against the background of the Kremlin. The appearance of the harp on the trademark of "Metropol-Record" came not by chance. The firm was among the first to reproduce the sound of that instrument, which was very difficult to achieve for mechanical recording. The records were a success, which also could be attributed to their low, and thus competitive, price.

The studio in Gorokhovskaya recorded not only the best actors and celebrities, but accepted orders from anyone who wanted to be recorded. For a reasonable fee a client could get 12 discs made of the "best material" and silver-plated negatives, whose owner could order any number of discs, one rouble each, whenever he wanted. There appears to have been many such clients and the business proved rather profitable, though its contribution to the firm's income was not great. That was how Johann Moll put the idea of engineer V.I. Rebikov into practice.

One of the facts which testifies to the success of the plant was the number of "hits" produced. No doubt Metropol-Record was flourishing. One of the hits of that time was the series *Songs of grief, street and beggars*. All the sales records were broken by the superhit "Murasy got poisoned" performed by tenor S. P. Sadovnikov. Sensation was caused by "Cold seamstress," "Song of a Stoker" and other so-called masterpieces. Good fortune prevailed in other ventures, too. The firm bought the exclusive rights for recording many interesting compositions from V. N. Gartevelde, the famous propagandist of folklore of Siberian penal servitude. Appropriate attention was paid to classical music—Wagner, Guonod, Bizet, Verdi, von Zuppe and other composers.

Unlike its not very successful debut at the fair in Nizhny Novgorod in 1911, the next year was far more favorable for the commercial house Moll, Kybarth and Co. The firm equipped the store at the 1912 fair, included rooms for listening to the records, rented better lodgings, and delivered a great stock of records. With the fair half over, the firm had already sold several times more records than during the whole of the previous fair. Communication at the fair with various associations and companies, and inquiries of salesmen from all parts of Russia helped Metropol-Record to perfect the strategy for its repertoire policy. Until now, the firm had not produced records in the Tatar language. But they proved to be in great demand. The owners of the company were quick to make decisions. On returning from Nizhny Novgorod they started to prepare the repertoire

in various languages of the peoples of Russia.

A great contribution to the development of the repertoire was made by Ya. I. Berkwits, who knew the demands of the clients and had a subtle musical taste. On his initiative, famous actors were recorded, such as: A. M. Bragin, N. F. Monakhov, K. D. Zaporozhets, A. G. Pekarskaya, and A. O. Kaminskiy. Berkwits signed agreements with the leading choruses, instrumentalists, and mimics, and was seeking something new and original. The technical aspects of all these recordings were supervised by August Kybarth.

Metropol-Record developed a new style focused on innovation and assurance. The company was the first to use a gramophone and a record for educational purposes. The most popular manuals of the French, English, and German languages were recorded. The technicians did their best to make the voices sound distinct and expressive. The educational discs were issued in series, 20 records each. For convenience of studying the material, Bogdan Moll invented a special device for the smooth lowering of a sound box on discs (now such a device is called a microlift and all modern record-players of quality are equipped with it). The rights to the innovation were patented by him on December 28, 1912. A few orders for special instructive gramophones were placed from England, where many companies took great interest in the ideas of the Russified Germans.

At the end of 1912, the plant in Aprelyevka strained to fulfill the numerous orders. It was equipped with 35 presses, and a staff of about 100 people, which produced 200,000 records each year, with all of them finding a consumer.

In spite of the fact that the gramophone business was afflicted by crises in 1913, the firm Moll, Kybarth and Co. started its third year full of great hopes. The head office of Metropol-Record was transferred to Aprelyevka from Moscow. In that way the owners of the factory wanted to achieve quicker and more effective fulfillment of orders. The experience of other firms, as well as their own, proved that it was easier to achieve these goals, when the head office was situated at the plant. In Moscow the branch office with a studio and a galvanoshop continued functioning. In spite of the resignation of Berkwits, who had moved to the new Kiev company Extraphone and Johann Moll's leaving for Aprelyevka Region, the company kept functioning as intensely as before. The office now was supervised by K. Lörtscher, former manager of Moll's farm. He understood the operation and enjoyed his patron's confidence. These were hard times, and competition was beating down the price of records. But even at that time, the firm stuck to its obligations and kept expanding the repertoire.

The firm of Moll, Kybarth and Co. was growing. Within a short period, a small, timidly begun, careful, and modest firm developed into a big enterprise ready to compete with the pillars of the gramophone world. At the end of 1913, Bogdan Moll resumed his activity at Metropol-Record. There were important reasons for this move. In the first place, the firm joined the gramophone syndicate of the Isserlin brothers. Secondly, the plant at Aprelyevka was preparing for expansion. Those factors appeared far more important under the alarming conditions of the gramophone market and demanded the presence of the man who had invested such huge sums of money, as well as his personal energy and knowledge, into the business. Whenever the plant at Aprelyevka found itself in small or great trouble, Moll Sr. gave a helping hand. His advice was always helpful, for the man enjoyed well-deserved respect and the reputation of a skilled and clever businessman in commercial circles.

Metropol-Record's joining the syndicate restricted the company's activity and threatened it with the loss of its individuality, and hence the trademark which had gained a foothold in the market though great effort. The plant at Aprelyevka was losing

its initiative and the right to make independent decisions, for all orders had to be registered at the association in Vilno. Nevertheless, at that difficult time the firm ventured to expand the plant. In May 1914 the Moscow Provincial Executing Committee got an application asking for permission to erect extensions to the old plant. The petition was satisfied, and the construction started immediately. The buildings having a modest name of "extensions" in the petitions proved to be two shops occupying an area equal to that of the whole of the existing plant. By December the construction had been completed, but Moll, Kybarth and Co. failed to enjoy the inauguration procedure because World War I broke out.

In Vologda, where many German citizens had been sent for the duration of the war, many people were involved in the gramophone business: B. Moll, A. Kybarth, O. Blösche, J. Zimmerman, Br(üder) Grimm and others. They did not lose heart and every night they would meet at the restaurant Soloty yakor, read letters and newspapers, exchange their impressions and look forward to the end of the war and the resumption of their business. But the situation was not so simple.

The developments at the Russian-German front, and the boycott of German enterprises had grave consequences for the owners of Metropol-Record. The plant was expropriated and transferred to the possession of the Russian joint-stock company of gramophones whose plant had been burned down in Petersburg. Surviving matrices of the largest Russian enterprise Sirena-Record, were delivered from Warsaw when it was occupied by German troops. The matrices were installed at the plant in Aprelyevka. The plant acquired new owners and started a new page of its history.

Notes:

1. The author expresses his gratitude to the physicist Dr. Georg Moll, the grandson of the founder of the plant in Aprelyevka, who now lives in Germany, for helping with the documents for this article.
2. A verst equals 3500 feet.