

## Preface

Angelus not only supplied movements to the famous early Panerai models for the Marina Militare. At one point in their history they were the number one supplier of watches and clocks to the Hungarian military. This article details Angelus watches and draws a clear categorization of the various models the military utilized throughout history. We also unearth a special timepiece from Angelus not many have heard of before, but used by the Hungarians many decades ago.

Angelus is one of the great watch manufacturers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A brand, like many, that fell victim to the quartz crisis in the late 1970's. Before that, however, Angelus brought tremendous value to the watch world. Models like the Chronodato and the Chrono-Datoluxe are among the most desired items for vintage watch collectors. Angelus' 8-day movement was the one Panerai incorporated in their early watches as well as the Angelus caliber 215 that Panerai used in the Mare Nostrum. In a previous issue of Klassik Uhren Magazine we discussed the brand in great length. It was a very complex article by Dr. Christoph Öhm-Kühnle that discussed Angelus from its founding days all the way through their life span until they had to close the doors to the company. It not only provided us with a summary of the history of the brand, but also provided an overview of the different Angelus logo variations as well as a serial number chart to help us position various models of the brand in time. The piece also discussed a certain military watch used by the Hungarian Air Force in the early 1950's. A 37mm steel case 2-register chronograph with gilt back dial, the Angelus chronograph caliber 215 and the military marking "L.E." inscribed on the outside of the watch's case back. According to my knowledge, around the heyday of Angelus, in the early 50's, the Hungarian Military bought several timepieces from the brand. I do not know the exact number, however during my research I came across more than 50 examples. It is very likely that they arrived in the country in various batches and were widely used throughout the military. In this article, I would like to shed some more light on these timepieces, list a few possible ways of differentiation and authentication, and perhaps give you a couple of interesting bits of information only a few have heard about so far.

## Historical background

To position these watches in time we need to have some background knowledge of what was going on in the country around this period. Let's go back in time a bit to around 1945. Hungary was on the losing side after the second World War. The country was in ruins, the years spent in war made a mark on every aspect of life from the economy to agriculture, arts and so on. Budapest, just like other parts of the country, was heavily bombed; the buildings were either damaged or crumbling. Shortage of the most essential things was part of daily life. The Soviet forces pushed the Germans back to the west and out of the country, so they were the occupying force in Hungary, who was on the losing side of the war. As history showed us, the Russians had absolutely no intentions of leaving the country. They even found supporters among certain Hungarian politicians and the rest had no other choice but to make them their allies. Another factor that had a major influence on the demolition of the country and its unity was the systematic execution of the Hungarian Jewish population during the war. In the course of five years close to half a million Hungarian Jews were either deported to concentration camps or sent to forced-labor. 90% of these people lost their lives and the ones who survived hardly ever wanted to come back to a country where the government betrayed them.



Mátyás Rákosi (second from left) at the 1<sup>st</sup> May celebration in 1947

Photo credit: Pál Berkó (Fortepan)

In these difficult times an ambitious and ruthless leader emerged to govern Hungary strictly by Soviet ideas. Born to a poor Jewish trader family, Mátyás Rákosi was a great product of the socialist system. He joined the Communist party at an early age and climbed the ladder very quickly. A large portion of his family was killed in various concentration camps during the war, which also fueled his determination to adopt the Soviet ideas to the Hungarian political life. During most of the 2nd World War he lived in the Soviet Union, but as soon as the battles were over, he returned to Hungary and became the General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party with the help and support of the occupying Soviet forces.

Some experts explain that the reason the Hungarian Military bought such “lavish” watches for their soldiers in the late 1940’s early 1950’s was Rákosi’s behavior as the first man of the country. As with most communist leaders, he had to project an image of one-among-many to the Hungarian people. However, again like most communist leaders, he lived in relative luxury and had a soft spot for the nicer things. He resided in a villa in the Buda hills, a favored location for the who’s who of Hungary even to this day and he was driven around in a Cadillac, not a Russian made car. Those only came out of the garage when high-ranking Russian officials were visiting Budapest. The ruling elite of the communist party had access to things the average person did not. Books banned by the government were to be found in their libraries, films censored for public viewing in their private cinemas and so on. During this time, the economy of the country was still not flourishing, to say the least. This is only a speculation as I could not find any official document that backs this or any other theory. Rákosi did not want to equip his soldiers with low-quality watches. They needed great functional gear to represent and showcase how “successful” the economy is in the Eastern bloc. What I think had happened is much easier to explain and lacks the megalomaniac effect. I believe that the military needed equipment that they could rely on and, just like today, at the time Swiss made watches were considered the best timepieces. This of course contradicts the theory of Rákosi’s love for luxury. Not to mention that even before and way after his reign the air force always had Swiss made timepieces. During the war pilots used Grana chronographs and after the 1950’s Certinas, Heuers and so on.

One fact worth mentioning is that the Angelus chronographs we associate with the Hungarian Air Force were not commissioned pieces. The Air Force did not ask Angelus to produce a special watch for them like other nations’ military branches did with similar brands like Omega or Junghans. The watches were imported into the country but not as special delivery to the Air Force. They were basic civilian versions that received the L.E. (Légi Erő = Air Force) inscription later in Hungary by the hands



of Hungarian watchmakers of whom a very few were still alive during the time I researched. This helped us to confirm and get first-hand information on this process. Please note that around the late 40's the 215 caliber of Angelus was already an old movement. These watches first appeared during the early 1930's and around the mid 40's Angelus' later caliber the 250 was already in production. So, it is more than likely that the caliber 215 movements were already discounted hence it allowed a country with limited financial freedom such as Hungary to buy these timepieces.

## Categorization

If we want to categorize the Angelus chronographs used by the Hungarian military, we can do it several ways. Most of the external features are the same. The size of the case (even though some later cases are about 2mm longer than the early ones), the shape of the pushers, the color of the dial, are all identical. Still there are several features that we can use to draw a difference between them. The very first one being the dial print. On most of the Angelus watches we know the sub dial at 9 o'clock cuts into the 8 only a little bit. When I started my research and categorized all the examples I collected until that point, I named it the "full 8" as the number is almost fully visible. However, there is another type of dial where the said sub-dial cuts the 8 into half. Hence, I named it the "half 8". Also worth mentioning that while a "full 8 dial's" running second sub dial has the numbers 15-30-45 and 60, the "half 8" dial's same sub dial has 20-40-60. The numbers here are radial, and not vertical like on the other model. What is quite interesting is that approximately 90% of the dials according to my research are "full 8" and it seems as though "half 8" dials either appear randomly (hence I believe those are service dials) in the list or on watches with high serial numbers i.e. younger models.

Earlier so-called "full 8" dial and continuous seconds register (at 9 o'clock) with 15-30-45-60 Photo credit: Balázs Ferenczi





Later so-called “half 8” dial and continuous seconds register (at 9 o’clock) with only 20-40-60 Photo credit: Balázs Ferenczi

This leads us to another way of categorizing the watches; by the serial numbers. These military Angelus watches have a 6-digit serial number starting with 26XXXX being the first 2 digits exclusively. The earliest example we know have a serial number of 2642XX. Interestingly enough, it has the rare “half 8” dial. The second from my list already has the “full 8” type of dial (just like the next few following it) and a serial number starting 2643XX. By this we should assume that the serial numbers of the first watches delivered had to start with 264XXX. On the other end of the spectrum things are not this clear. More than half out of the known 50+ examples I collected has 264XXX serials, another 20% has 265XXX. So about 70-75% of the known military Angelus chronographs either had 264XXX or 265XXX serial numbers and the last 25-30% is a mix of every serial from 266XXX to 269XXX (we could not find any with 267XXX). Watches with 269XXX serial numbers exclusively have the rarer “half 8” dials and even though the military provenance is there they were not issued L.E. watches like most on the list. We will get back to this in a moment. However, regardless of what serial the watches have they all fall into the production date of circa 1948 and December 1950, according to the Serial number chart by Dr. Chritoph Öhm-Kühnle’s Angelus Collector’s Guide.





Typical L.E. (Légi Erő) marking on a 264XXX serial number Angelus chronograph Photo credit: Balázs Ferenczi

When I mentioned that watches with serial 269XXX have military provenance but are not L.E. watches I foreshadowed the 3<sup>rd</sup> type of categorization. As far as we know there were 2 types of timepieces used by the Hungarian military. I use the word *military* and not *air force* deliberately. Even though the air force chronographs with the L.E. markings on the back are the most known watches, during my research I found out that other military branches also used these Angelus chronographs. I have seen a few watches that have no L.E. markings. No marking at all as a matter of fact. We know at least one watch that was issued to cartographers for instance. However, as per the family, the owner of this example did not only work as a cartographer, but also as an intelligence officer. From which branch he got the watch from we do not know. One thing is for sure; the watch corresponds to the list of models I have collected. The dial type is the same as most of the L.E. watches (full 8), the caliber the case and the serial all correspond to the other known models. However, the case back has no inscription meaning there could be other military issued watches out there that, due to the lack of any military markings, have not been verified as Hungarian military timepiece. We will never be able to connect them to the military unless we find evidence to prove otherwise. This could be anything from the owner's side as well as documents detailing concrete serial numbers from the military's side. Chances are slim though.

Still staying with the case back markings, we have another sub-category (4th) of watches that indeed have military engravings, but they are not the L.E. markings. These watches were very valuable to my research because they helped to put a year to the serial number as the engraving contains a date. One has the serial number of 266xxx a "half 8" dial and a date on the back that is from April of 1952. This watch was given out as an award to the winner(s) of a shooting contest organized by a military branch. Let's take a second and jump back to our historical background and connect an interesting fact to these watches. In 1952 Mátyás Rákosi was celebrating his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. The country had to

commemorate this for a whole year; children in kindergartens drew pictures for him, students had to write their first essays about him, and workers had to participate in various contest to celebrate Rákosi. Everybody had to work harder, produce faster or better to show their appreciation to the great leader. This was of course mandatory. We think that this watch could also be the prize of such a contest. Angelus watches, like most Swiss chronographs were extremely expensive especially in those days. It

was very unusual for any organization, let alone a military branch, to organize such contests and give out lavish prizes to the winners unless the occasion was something so highly regarded as Rákosi's birthday.

Shooting contest inscription on a later 266XXX watch from 4<sup>th</sup> April 1952 Photo credit: Vintage Caliber GmbH

Lastly, watches that are somewhat connected to the previous model yet a bit different. In my research, I have seen a few examples that have very similar markings on the case back and even matching dates. These watches were given out a few months before the shooting contest model, in December 1951. These examples have the following text on the case back: For outstanding work – Mihály Farkas Colonel General Ministry of Defense 1951 XII. 2. Because the date and the text of the



back I assume this was also some kind of a token of appreciation that the Ministry of Defense gave out to high ranking military personnel or important civilians to thank them for their hard work in the past years or so. In the case of all the watches that were not marked L.E. but had a different inscription or no inscription, but are verified military history, we can tell that; they all have 266XXX or higher serials (269XXX in case of the models from 1951 and the cartographer watch), and have “half 8” dials. Once



again, I want to emphasize that what we know is based on the research I conducted. I was unable to obtain any official documents from the Hungarian Military to back this. However, I collected over 50 different examples with photos and serial numbers. I showed it to various experts, we talked about them compared different models, and came to the following conclusion;

Ministry of Defense inscription from 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1951 – note how the serial of the watch (269XXX) is higher than the above shooting contest watch (266XXX) yet the date is earlier.

Photo credit: Tamás Fekete

## Conclusion

Based on all of the above I talked about we can confirm that: Angelus military chronographs all had 38mm steel cases with pump pushers, removable spring bars, hesalite (plexi) crystals and black gilt dials. The case backs, which were exclusively press-in, always had the serial numbers (starting with 26XXXX) and the double framed Angelus logo engraved. The watches housed the Angelus caliber 215, a column wheel in-house chronograph movement with signed Angelus bridges. They were executed as central second-hand 2 sub-dial chronographs where the 3 o'clock sub dial was a 45-minute counter and the 9 o'clock sub dial was the continuous 60-seconds counter. The dial always had the double framed Angelus logo under the 12 and the "Swiss" marking at the bottom of the dial. Everything was painted on the dial in bright yellow/gold color. Every number except for 3 and 9 are visible either fully or partially. The numbers just like the hands are covered with radium coating for



visibility - though in some cases the radium is removed revealing the painted numbers underneath. Regarding the scales, every dial had BASE 1000 chronograph scale to measure speed.

So far, the similarities. Now let's see again how can we categorize the various models. Most of the L.E.s came with either 264xxx or 265 serial numbers. Some examples that I found had 266XXX or 268XXX, but these numbers are insignificant compared to the first 2 number sets and their originality is

somewhat questionable. About 90% of the Angelus military watches had the “full 8” dial. Later models (266XXX and up) however almost exclusively had the “half 8” so we must assume that they must have come in a later batch. To sum it up, if you manage to find a watch that has a low serial and a “full 8” dial with L.E. stamped into the case back chances are high that you found an original Hungarian Air Force chronograph. Watches with higher serial numbers, i.e. younger, probably have the “half 8” dial, serial in the 266XXX-269XXX range. They mostly do not have L.E. markings but rather a plain case back or text commemorating some event. These watches were most likely part of a later batch when the “refreshed” design was already in production. It is also worth mentioning that due to the large interest in these Angelus watches, I have seen a few good forged examples. These watches were not issued exclusively to the military, as I explained before, civilian versions with the same external features were also sold during that time. Some of these examples were later forged by inscribing the L.E. on the case back to drive their prices up in the pre-owned watch market.

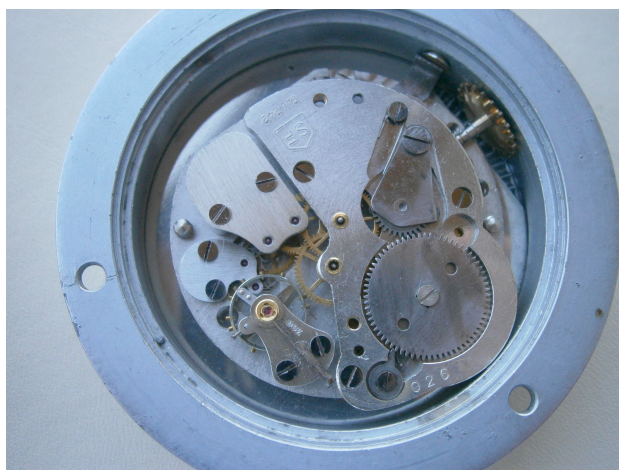
### **Angelus military clocks**

As I dug myself into this topic and searched for Angelus chronographs, I came across something fascinating about the relationship between Angelus and the Hungarian military. Throughout the years, many Angelus board clocks appeared for sale on various forums, all coming from Hungary. They looked the same; round mountable chromed steel case (6.7cm wide and 1.8cm thick), black dial with large numbers, sub dial at the 12 o'clock position. They had the Angelus logo at 6 o'clock with an “8” underneath it, marking that the movement inside is an 8-day caliber. Vintage collectors are aware of these types of clocks, many brands produced such examples and most of them were used by military branches all over Europe. This led us to believe that at one point in time these clocks were also in use by the Hungarian military. Given that wrist chronographs were around in many different branches of the military this seemed logical. I needed to find some examples and see where they are coming from, which was not an easy task but with some luck I managed to unfold the mystery. As in the case of the Angelus wristwatch chronographs, I do not have any official information from the military. However, from various sources I learned that these clocks were most likely used in commander 4 by 4 cars, screwed to the dashboard. Similar models were to be found on old military radios, however in some cases those clocks have the sub-second at 6 o'clock. There is a great community of vintage radio fans who collect anything and everything in connection with this topic and these clocks were fairly known among these circles. According to a base commander for one of these military radio stations, the military imported the Angelus clocks in the 50's from Switzerland because the Second World War left its mark on the previous stock and there was a shortage of clocks to be used at the base. The 50's corresponded to the years of the military wrist chronographs so I was on the right track. Another detail that helped me in determining the age of such Angelus board clocks is the logo. It is the double-framed D3 type logo that the brand used roughly between 1948 and ca. 1957. There is however another detail that puts an end to my speculation. These Angelus movements, unlike the wristwatch chronographs, in most cases had the year of manufacture engraved into the base plate. With all three pieces of information at hand I could define and double check the year of such clocks. It is very likely that around the same time the military bought the chronograph watches they also acquired some clocks from the same manufacturer, though in much smaller numbers. It was easier and more convenient to buy everything from one brand and have the whole stock imported into the country rather than buying from various sources.



Photo credit: Mr. Gabor Mayranek

The movement inside of these Angelus board clocks is the SF 242, a manual wind 8-day caliber. It is a rare movement, to date I have only seen them built in these types of clocks. There is very little known about the SF 242. According to my research, the Italian Navy (Marina Militare) used very similar clocks in their ships as well. Those models looked identical to the Hungarian Military clocks but had different type of hands – cathedral hands to be precise. However they did not have the SF 242 caliber inside, but rather the more common SF 190. This makes the Hungarian Military Angelus clocks even rarer and collectable among vintage watch fans. Another interesting feature of these clock is how you wind them. Since they were mounted on the dashboard one would have no access to the back of the clock where the winding stem usually is. You could actually wind the clock by rotating the bezel. If you wanted to set the time, a pin needed to be pushed in that is located between the 7 and 8 o'clock, and again the hands would move by rotating the bezel.



## Epilogue

I am certain this article will help you navigate your way through the wonderful world of vintage Angelus chronographs of the Hungarian military a bit better. I also hope that what I said above made sense and based on this you might be able determine what watch you have should you come across a similar model in the future. These are wonderful timepieces and I'm not saying this because I'm biased about Hungary. The looks of the watches as well as the movement and the size make them not only a looker, but also very wearable compared to many other brands from this era. The military history is just an added bonus.

The author would like to thank the following for their tremendous help. Without them this article could have not been made this article:

Dr. Christoph Öhm-Kühnle, Dr. Sébastien Chaulmontet, Dr. Christian Pfeiffer-Belli, Zolt Csörgő, László Simon, Gábor Mayranek, Miklós Lázin, János Juhász, Christopher Kae, Máté Janka, Tamás Fekete, András Oszolik, Simon Stern and many more. Thank you!