

## ARINA SLABKO, HERVE LE DEVEHAT:

### “IN RUSSIA FOR LUX THERE ARE ONLY CLIENTS”

*Once Arina Slabko and Herve Le Devehat decided to prove that it is possible to produce accessories of lux class in Russia. The story about how a workshop with a showroom in Pushechnaya has turned into a leading manufacturer of leather cases supplying products to re:Store and Aeroflot is told by the founders of Atelier Marcel Robert.*

- Herve who has worked a lot of years with leading watch brands initially opened his workshop and the showroom for watch straps, that story is unique and not to go on a large scale at least taking into account that the target audience is limited. So how did phone cases appeared there and also in mass production?

**Arina Slabko:** In due time Herve has presented me a new phone but to find a case for it has turned to be an impossible task – of the things sold in Moscow I have liked absolutely nothing. Taking into account that at that time we realized “the ceiling” of watch straps market and were searching for new ideas, we decided to make a case ourselves. At first we sewed the cases in the form of a pocket – classical model for the market, we called them “Marcel” and “Suzanne”. But they were not sold well and we sold only 50 cases for all that time. Then we decided to make our own cases with a cover – I attended the courses of inventors (“Factory of Perfect Products”) and very soon the idea took a certain shape. For four month we have been working in the workshop and in the result we have got a know-how on which we have received a patent – flexible cover with magnets trimmed from inside with microfiber. Now in Russia and in Europe only we can produce such cases. We placed information on the cases at the same website where we sold straps and soon we got a call from re:Store asking us to send samples. And in a couple of days they ordered 400 cases making a revolution in our business – before we manufactured three or five cases per day and sold them in the showroom or with the help of the courier delivery. So that to make such a big supply we invested in the production all available funds plus we took a loan, and bought leather, necessary tools, hired additional staff. Then we had a project with the air company Aeroflot and its “shop on the board”. There they ordered 1800 cases which was fantastic for us – we had to take a loan of 30 thousand euros, buy new equipment and hire more staff. But we made it all up as our cases entered top sales on the board. Probably it is explained by the fact that before buyers of leather cases didn’t have any choice – either China for 1000 rubles or nothing. We offered an absolutely new product applying the technologies used by the leading companies like Hermes. More than that, Herve has invented a new method of crimping the thin border – no one in the world does like this.

- But not long ago your cases were mounted to a plastic case that started to chip and break as time has gone on. Clients paying from five to fifteen thousand rubles, got upset by it, to put it mildly...

**Arina Slabko:** If you only knew how it made us upset! We are very sticky as to the quality, starting with the leather that we get from Italians and finishing with the work of craftsmen in the workshop. We tried to solve the problem with the plastic body from the very beginning. But there was no solution nowhere in the world – we came to DuPont but even there they told us: it is unreal, leave it, anyway you won’t find unbreakable plastic, it doesn’t exist. By the way, we warned honestly re:Store that the plastic case can be broken, that the world hadn’t invented anything so far, and asked to send clients to us: we changed the plastic body as much as it was needed. Due to this reason we put on the brake till December concerning the cases for iPhone 6, though there was a queue from October and we got a call from re:Store everyday asking: so what, when? But I said that until we found a solution with the plastic

body, we won't make cases for iPhone 6. And when at last we got thin silicone, I started to jump from happiness. It grows in the phone as the second skin, it is aesthetic and doesn't break. We launched production at once on this basis, sales for iPhone6 cases were fantastic.

- Leading fashion houses also produce in cosmic lots. But where does the selectness of brand end and starts "today and always at every second in the underground"?

**Herve Le Devehat:** One of the workers of Hermes once told me that lux philosophy consisted in that you could always renovate this product – it was eternal. Our cases can also be eternal – we can renovate them for clients, clear, we try to buy the leather of such a high quality that it would "get old" in a beautiful way. We have a maximum of manual work, maximum of expensive equipment and tools for every operation. In Russia we have big problems with staff – there doesn't exist the corresponding work culture and understanding that you have to check every millimeter and every stitch. But the potential of Russian workers is great and the hands are gifted. Our operators often come to Atelier Marcel Robert having no experience at all: somebody sewed shoes before, somebody sewed dresses, somebody just can sew, and somebody has just learned to sew. But there is nothing impossible for the company where the production processes are settled to a dot. You know, I have been in luxury industry for 15 years and in due time when I was in watch business I got to a famous watch workshop in Moscow. I had a shock – here stood a microwave with sausages, here not finished coffee and here watch for 500 thousand dollars was waiting for repairing. But exactly those people did miracles in critical situations, and then I personally received delegations from France and Switzerland – we passed them know how of our workshop. Now we have a factory of European level in Leninsky avenue – there it is clean and clear, expensive equipment is installed. We are ready to make a million cases per month if people buy them. Yes, it is lux. It is like Hermes or Etro – it is not craftsmanship anymore but a combination of manual work, high quality materials and cosmic technologies. We will by the way sell phone cases in Europe – we started already in Germany and we will sell soon in France through the subsidiary company. And they cost there twice more than in Russia. But people buy them because nobody makes high quality cases with flexible cover and magnets. By the way, we didn't increase prices though leather in rubles got 1,5- 2 times more expensive. But everybody understands that nobody has become richer that is why Atelier Marcel Robert has optimized the production: marginality was put down, the wastes are reduced maximum, and technologies are refined constantly.

- Don't you think that the cost of phone case making 5-15 thousand rubles is mentally high?

**Herve Le Devehat:** The client decides that. If he buys he considers this price to be fair. And listen, you can't sell at retail a really quality leather thing for 1000 rubles. Take away from there the seller's fee, VAT etc. and you will get the prime cost – it will be not big. Taking into account the leather cost and the cost of manual work, of what quality can we speak about? Re:Store helped us to fix the price. They just said: we are ready to sell your products for this price.

- Didn't you think of opening shops?

**Arina Slabko:** There will be a point in opening a shop when we broaden the range of products. I, for example, dream of producing cases for tablets, but Herve hasn't taken the decision yet – there we will need huge pieces of leather, and the cost of a mistake is too high. Besides we can't find quality cases and without them launching production is useless. I want to make women belts, covers for documents. And my faraway dream is bags the quality of which wouldn't be inferior in quality and even would

exceed the oldest fashion houses. But so far we have started producing cases for top models of Samsung and Sony.

- Don't you think that in Russia where the influence of brands is still too high to persuade a client to buy your bag, not Prada bag will be practically impossible?

**Herve Le Devehat:** Yes, rich Russian people often don't trust Russian people who sometimes make things better than Italians or Frenchmen – we observe that, for example, in clothes. Legend, status is important, all this “metaphysics”. Before we were also not trusted: some mythic Marcel Robert, supposedly French craftsman, and in reality everything is done in Moscow. But then buyers meet me at the showroom. I indeed can do everything: to take an order myself, to advise on choice of material and colour, to repair. And the attitude has changed. You know, when you work somewhere for Louis Vuitton, as time passes by, you stop imagining your client. And we see if not everyone but many and we have a perfect feedback in real time. Alas, in Russia for lux production there are only nice clients, and I would buy everything with pleasure – from leather to cars. But now there is nothing and we order in Moscow only package boxes.