

## A Gull-Wing Socialist

The comeback of an East German racing car | By Harald Franzen



Four decades ago, Heinz Melkus built East Germany's only sports car. Now his son and grandson are carrying on the tradition – of what may be the strangest car of its kind.

Beginning at 3200 rpm, you get a real turbo boost," shouted Bartholomäus Galter over the engine's deafening roar. "Before that, it's not so eager but after 3200, it really bites down hard!" Galter steps on the gas and guides the car into the next curve. This much "bite" comes as a bit of a surprise. The car is, remember, almost 90 percent identical with the Wartburg, the former East German stolid sedan.

Galter shifts a gear higher, floors the pedal and the car shoots along a forest road at 100 km/h (70mph). He is the proud owner of a Melkus RS1000, East Germany's only sports car, which is being built again in Saxony, in a limited edition.

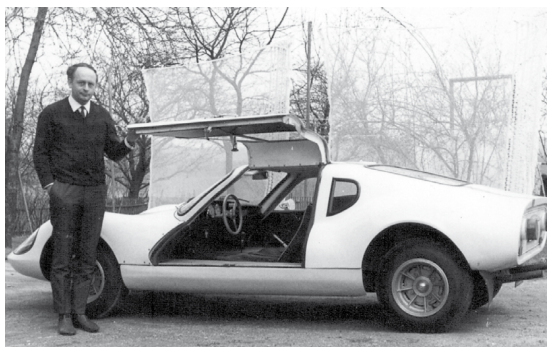
Looking at the RS1000, one would never guess its Wartburg pedigree. At a height of less than a meter (3.2 feet), one practically lies inside the car. Undulating lines and gull-wing doors all but erase the Wartburg's boxy looks. But the Melkus' one-liter, two-

stroke engine is somehow out of place. In neutral, it crackles like a moped; at 800 kilograms (1,764 pounds) the car is remarkably light, which means that even 75 horsepower can strike fear into a passenger's heart.

"The concept is truly unique," gushed Galter. "No other car in the world was designed like this: two-stroke, mid-engine, a fiberglass body with gull-wing doors. It's a fabulous piece of technology."

This fabulous piece of technology was originally produced by a socialist development team led by East German racing legend Heinz Melkus. One hundred and one of them were built from 1969 to 1979, mostly reserved for racing enthusiasts. About 80 still exist. The specimen we're driving, however, is the first of 15 new cars being built in Dresden.

When production began, Melkus Sportwagen KG was based in a garage with barely enough space for four cars. A blue



A legend from the East: the Melkus RS1000 and designer Heinz Melkus with his brainchild.

Melkus next to the door looks just about complete. Reaching under the opened trunk area, a worker makes final adjustments. The rear lights are still missing from the next car over. The space smells of oil and freshly glued fiberglass. A shelf on the wall displays a row of 26 trophies. "Those are from my kart days," said Sepp Melkus, grandson of the company's founder, in passing. "Granddad's are in my father's house."

Car racing is part of family life in the Melkus clan. Granddad Heinz won six East German championships, three "Peace and Friendship Cups" – the European

championship of the Eastern Bloc states – and 80 of the 200 races he started in, making him one of East Germany's most successful and famous racing drivers. His sons Ulli and Peter – and their sons Ronny and Sepp – all compete in some form of motor racing.

As it turned out, building a sports car today that was designed more than 40 years ago proved much harder than anticipated. Some blueprints still existed but, because of East Germany's notorious lack of spare parts, all RS1000s differ slightly. Basically, the mechanics of the time built with whatever was available.

"Back then we had to plan everything we would need a year in advance,"

said Siegfried Anacker, who helped develop the original prototype and now has come out of retirement to join the project. "Whether it was this pipe or that sheet metal or these screws – it was pretty tough." In a way, the spare-parts shortage has continued into the present. "Some elements you can order new today," said

Sepp Melkus. "For example, the Wartburg windshields, which are still built in Finland. Other parts we have to machine ourselves."

In some cases, though, the only adequate solution is to head for the flea market. "Some parts are simply very rare," added Sepp Melkus. "For example the hood hinges for the Skoda MB1000, which we include to lift the hatchback. Of course we could reconstruct it but we always try to use original parts." That is also why the Wartburg engines are overhauled, he explains: "That was also common practice at the time, because of the shortages."

Despite the obstacles, the constructors get validation in their work. "The interest is enormous, and the solidarity we get from the

local population is astounding," said Sepp Melkus, adding that when word got around that the Dresden-based team was having trouble tracking down certain parts, the phone began ringing. "We still have something like that in the basement, do you think you could use it?" complete strangers would ask.

And the old racing spirit? Hardly anyone is driving in races with the original models anymore, says Sepp Melkus. If so, they do so in vintage car events where they drive with rather than against each other. But at least one customer has very special plans for his car: Peter Melkus, Sepp's father who raced the original and wants to build his own, very special RS1000. It's supposed to include a great engine, with a Leutert block, which was never in serial production in the Wartburg. And then he plans on hitting the race-track for real again, perhaps in the Trabant-Lada Racing Cup, where souped-up Ladas, Trabants, Dacias and other former East Bloc models compete on circuits such as the Lausitzring in southern Brandenburg.

The dream of the younger Melkus generation is the classic's successor model. So far the car exists only on paper. But it's supposed to be light, too, with a fiberglass body, mid-engine and of course gull-wing doors – a real sports car. Only the sputtering two-stroke engine would be a thing of the past. ■

The Dauphin's are avid collectors of oldtimers. The oldest motorcycle in their collection dates from 1914: an exceedingly rare Royal Enfield with a sidecar.

Gifts rarely please anyone these days as most people already have everything they want. But Elke and Friedrich-W. Dauphin still have a few modest desires. Their vintage car collection is still missing 15

extremely rare cars, including a Porsche 356 Carrera Abarth, a Talbot-Lago 150 SS "Tear-drop" and a 1947 Cisitalia 202 coupé.

On the Munich to Berlin autobahn just past Nuremberg, one passes the Hersbruck exit. This town of 12,500 is home to one of the biggest private vintage car collections in Germany. On 18,000 square meters (193,750 square feet), the Dauphin Speed Event company organizes auctions, fashion shows, concerts and company functions in its events hall, where 200 motor-

cycles and 130 old cars provide the backdrop. They are select classics from 50 years of racing and sports car history. Here, the spirit of pioneers like Ettore Bugatti, Ferdinand Porsche and Enzo Ferrari lives on.

The Dauphins have been collecting for about 30 years. But before that, Friedrich-W. Dauphin had a weakness for old cars, which he drove with gusto and often worked on himself. "At that time, replacement parts could still be purchased cheaply from junkyards," he said. "Unfortunately, parts like that often are worth their weight in gold today."

The idea of collecting cars seriously came from his wife who asked her husband – at the time, an enthusiastic collector of historic firearms – "for once to collect something that interests the whole family. For example, old cars."

Two weeks later, the Dauphins had their first exhibit: a Bordeaux colored Mercedes 280SE convertible from 1971, which they immediately used for drives through the countryside. A 300 SL roadster from 1961 followed and soon, the excitement gripped the entire family.

Friedrich-W. Dauphin is, first and foremost, fascinated by technology. For his wife Elke, it's more the design and the aesthetics of the cars. "This fender is simply sexy," she said, caressing the undulating form of a prewar Alfa Romeo.

Friedrich-W. Dauphin found the collection's first two Ferraris while taking a walk near Bern. "In a courtyard, I saw some beautiful, old cars," he recalled. "I talked to the owner and bought the cars that same evening. Not exactly to my wife's delight, who was wait-

ing for me in the hotel, not suspecting a thing."

The motorcycle collection also includes precious and pioneering models from legendary manufacturers, including Münch, MV Agusta, Norton, an English Vincent and some two-wheelers made in Japan. The oldest motorcycle in the collection dates from 1914: an exceedingly rare Royal Enfield with a sidecar. ■



## The Sexy Fender

Indulging a passion for classic motors  
By Nina Pauler

