

Another Gem from Behind the Curtain

BY NICK KURCZEWSKI

IF VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE, THEN Tatra was the European habanero pepper of the auto industry prior to World War II.

Those familiar with the Czech company often point to its luxury sedans of the 1930s as the apex of Tatra's innovative spirit. These cars used rear-mounted, air-cooled V8s, semi-monocoque chassis and, most significantly, spectacular aerodynamic bodywork. At a time when a spindly Model T was just another used car, Tatra's wind-cheating wonders appeared to be leaping from a *Buck Rogers in the 25th Century* comic.

With the war over, Tatra was in trouble. Its top creative guy, Hans Ledwinka, was sent to prison by Czechoslovakia's new Communist government for allegedly aiding the Nazis. His six-year sentence meant Tatra faced a battle-scarred Europe without its most valuable player (the Czech Supreme Court rescinded Ledwinka's conviction in 1992, 25 years after he died).

After being nationalized in 1948, Tatra's plan for a smaller, less expensive car—the Tatrapian—was well under way. But in 1951 the Czech government ordered Tatra cease car production. Skoda was tapped to produce low-priced vehicles for the Czech market, with Tatra directed to focus on commercial trucks.

Soon government officials realized Skoda did not produce a vehicle befitting the power and the egos of Communist leaders. In 1953 Tatra was allowed to develop a large luxury sedan, with a primary condi-

tion it be sold only to high-ranking government and military officials.

And so the T603 was born, introduced in prototype form in 1955 and continuing the rear-engine, swing-axle layout of early Tatra sedans. 603 body styles were especially strange, with three centrally located headlamps behind a single glass panel.

Second-generation 603s—dubbed T2-603—debuted in 1962 with revised headlights, taillights, instrument panel and a new, slightly smaller 2.4-liter V8.



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Final revisions came in 1968. Minor mechanical changes lurked underhood, but the most obvious difference was made to the headlights, taillights and trim. Known to many Tatra enthusiasts as T3-603s, the factory continued to refer to these third-generation models as T2-603s.

Ivo Slezak moved to Hubbardston, Massachusetts, in the 1960s. As an engineer, he admired Tatra's unique design. As a proud Czech, he hoped to import a symbol of his homeland to the United States.

In 1989 Slezak brought over this 1969 T2-603 that once belonged to the Czech Minister of Agriculture. He says the paperwork process was difficult. "You had to have the patience of a saint," he explained.

The Velvet Revolution and the spread of democracy means regulations are less restrictive now, but Slezak says good connections for parts are essential. "I have several contacts in the Czech Republic," he says. "If I'm lucky, they have what I need. If I'm even luckier, they will sell it to me."

Slezak's car is now thoroughly restored with new paint, upholstery, chrome plating, bodywork repairs and a rebuilt engine.

While three race-prepped T2-603s took top honors in the sub-2500-cc class at the Nürburgring's 84-hour Marathon de la Route in 1966, our time with a 603 was limited to one afternoon.

Absent the terror of the Nord-schleife's Flugplatz or Karousel, the T2-603 has a loping, almost floaty ride on a mixture of winding dirt roads and straight country lanes. It won't make you seasick, but you won't be

fooled into thinking it's a sports car either.

Slezak explains the Tatra's reputation as an evil-handler is unwarranted so long as the driver is familiar with the quirks of a rear-engined vehicle. Hint No. 1, which owners of classic Porsche 911s or VW Beetles know: Never lift off the gas in the middle of a corner when traveling at a rapid rate.

The Tatra lasted until 1975. Its legacy of comfortable driving characteristics and clever engineering outlived a world war and endured well into a cold one. ■

MARKET

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Los Angeles
May 14

1984 Pontiac Firebird KITT

Black with tan cloth. 305 V8. Built by George Barris as TV show *Knight Rider's* KITT (Knight Industries Two Thousand) talking car. KITT might want you to know the paintwork is now lousy, with tons of orange peel, lots of runs. Good glass. The talking dash is cut out, the original remains. Featured



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in the third season of *Knight Rider*, reconfigured to resemble the Pursuit car used in the made-for-TV *Knight Rider* movie.

Sold at \$69,000

The new owner can't get his car for a month, as Barris contracted it for use in the new Adam Sandler movie *Bench Warmers*. The promotional fee stays with Barris (surprise), but after the shoot the talking dash will be reinstalled, and the provenance of KITT will have gained another chapter. Frankly, this is a pretty dumb show (*Lost in Space* on wheels) that survives on its kitsch appeal only. Price was high enough without being really stupid.

—KEITH MARTIN