

Automobiles

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Old Russian Cars: Once More Around the Bloc

By NICK KURCZEWSKI

IN many world capitals during the cold war, the sight of a long black limousine with a strong resemblance to a vintage Packard most likely meant that an official of the Soviet Union was attending to state business nearby. In the United States today, such a scene indicates nothing more ominous than the presence of a collector whose automotive interests are more closely attuned to Moscow than Detroit.

Whether as kitschy artifacts of Communism's faded glory or as nostalgic mementos of things left behind in the old country, cars of the Soviet era are attracting a devoted, though still small, following among American collectors.

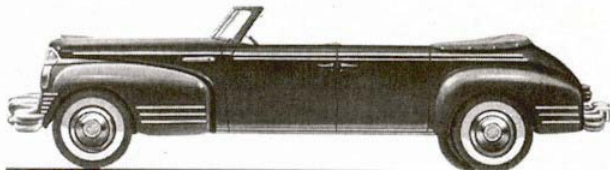
Motoring in the Soviet Union was always a challenge, except, of course, for the elite of the party and the state who were supplied with limousines and drivers as a privilege of their offices. For the masses, auto ownership was a rare exception, and those intrepid individuals who were able to scrape together the purchase price of a new car still had to endure years-long waiting lists and an all but impenetrable bureaucracy.

Cars from both ends of the scale — stately Zil and Chaika limousines of the ruling class as well as modest Pobeda and Volga sedans — appeal to enthusiasts looking for something quite different from commonplace Corvettes and Mustangs.

No matter what brand a collector is searching for, finding the right car and the parts to repair and restore it can be tough. Buyers of Russian models are particularly stymied by the distance from the market where it was originally sold. One solution, naturally, is the Internet, and another is the knowledge of resourceful collectors like Gary Shikhman, who moved to New York from Ukraine when he was 18.

For years after moving to the United States, Mr. Shikhman said, he wondered whether it would be possible to buy one of the cars he grew up with. Three years ago, using the Internet, he finally found a 1953 Moskvich 401 at a tiny auto museum in the Midwest and purchased it.

The experience made him wonder whether others might also be interested in owning a Russian classic. Through online research and careful reading of the federal regulations, Mr. Shikhman learned that the restrictions on importing cars were less than he had anticipated, as long as the cars met certain age requirements (the requirements differ, depending on the type of regu-



Illustrations from the brochure collection of Steve Hayes



Cars of the commissars, clockwise from top left: Zis-110 7-seat convertible and sedan; 1964 Chaika M-13; 1953 Pobeda; 1952 Zim.

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lation and vehicle).

Having gained an understanding of the issues, Mr. Shikhman followed the footsteps of modern entrepreneurs: with the help of friends in Ukraine, he imported a 1965 Volga GAZ 21 and put it up for auction on eBay. "The reserve was a price I was sure no one would pay," he said, but to his amazement, a bidding war ensued.

Not only did the Volga meet its reserve of \$6,000, but the second-place bidder contacted him to ask whether he could arrange the importation of another Volga. In time, Soviet cars became a sideline to Mr. Shikhman's full-time occupation as a mechanic (repairing new cars, not classics).

Some of the collectors who own Russian classics are not Soviet specialists, but have broader tastes. Charles Major, of Bowling Green, Ky., has more than 20 cars but ranks

his three posh Russian sedans — Chaika limousines from 1961 and 1977 as well as a 1953 Zim — among his favorites, despite living in the city where Chevrolet builds Corvettes.

Mr. Major has a particular affection for the Zim, which he has owned for five years and calls a "stylish, extremely durable and highly original example of Soviet engineering." He prefers to collect vehicles that are out of the ordinary and enjoys watching peoples' reactions when they encounter the Chaikas and Zim.

"The No. 1 question I get is: 'Where would you find something like that?'" said Mr. Major. "My answer is always: 'Not by accident.' People who get into something this insane usually know what they're looking for."

It was certainly no accident that Vitaly Yazvin came to own his 1967 Volga GAZ 21 sedan. He was the second place eBay bidder who asked Mr. Shikhman to find him a Volga. Originally from Belarus, Mr. Yazvin now lives in Irvine, Calif., where his car is an odd fit for the Southern California car culture of high horsepower, flashy paint

jobs and ground-hugging aerodynamics.

The Volga has none of those attributes, but this has not stopped Mr. Yazvin from treating it like any treasured classic. At first glance, most people mistake his car for a Ford and look at him blankly when he tells them what it is. This new addition forced the Yazvin family's everyday cars, a Mercedes-Benz and a BMW, out of the garage.

"My wife was not excited about it," he said.

Garage space is the only thing limiting Andre Lukatsky from buying another Russian car. From Moscow but now living near Chicago, he already has two Ladas to choose from: a boxy 21011 sedan and quirky Niva, a mini sport-utility prized for its off-road prowess.

"I'd love to have a Volga or a Zaporozhets," he said.

Mr. Lukatsky was treated like a celebrity recently when he drove the Niva to a Russian community picnic near his home. "People were yelling and going crazy," he said. "When I drove through the crowd, people were chanting 'Niva! Niva! Niva!'"