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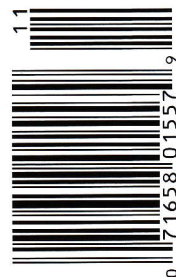
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**WHICH 356?
SPEEDSTER OR ROADSTER**





Stormy Six

The tale of the one and only Hispano-Aleman 914-6 Vizcaya

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DAN PROUDFOOT

More than a hundred guests were dining alfresco in Madrid, saluting the completion of a bunker housing the late Verne Heiderich's favorite automobiles, when the wind rose as though the sky was rupturing in the heat.

Tablecloths began blowing and raindrops multiplied into a downpour. People scattered. Some went in the house, while those who cared for the cars returned to the bunker for more time in the presence of the one-of-a-kind Hispano-Aleman 914-6 Vizcaya. It wasn't the first storm in the history of the car, by any means. A gorgeous thing, a beauty from any angle, the car was Heiderich's dream realized.

And his enduring frustration, too.

Three days after the celebration, we arrived. Horst Kroll, Heiderich's friend of 50 years, was determined to bring the Hispano-Aleman to life. Your reporter

was there to drive it. This was a long time coming. Heiderich described his one-off Porsche to me six years earlier, when as was his custom he'd flown into Toronto, once his hometown, for a dinner with friends on his way back to Madrid from the Detroit Auto Show.

In 1970 he commissioned Pietro Frua, the Torino-based designer and prototype builder, to re-body a 914-6. Heiderich was Porsche distributor for Spain at the time and was not a fan of the 914's styling. His account over dinner seemed unbelievable, but, sure enough, a reading of Karl Ludvigsen's *Excellence Was Expected* later that night confirmed the details, including Ferry Porsche's interest in putting Heiderich's car into production until a legal dispute with Frua sabotaged the project.

I'd fly to Spain, I told Heiderich, if only

I could drive the car and write about it. "But it isn't running," he replied. "It has been sitting for more than 20 years with the same gasoline in the tank."

"Verne," Horst said, "I can get that car running. We put a new battery in it, we pour in some new gasoline, I guarantee you I can start it. I've been doing this sort of thing all my life." Heiderich shrugged, as though to say, "Try if you like."

Our mission to Spain was not to happen during Heiderich's lifetime. An aerobatics enthusiast as well as car collector and racer, he died in June 2008 during a failed landing attempt at a Lithuanian air show (a hired pilot was at the controls, as Heiderich, 73, was no longer licensed). In her grief, his wife, Mari Asun Ornilla de Heiderich made it her goal to build within the year the bunker he'd conceived.

And here we were.

The company to which Heiderich entrusted maintenance and restoration of his cars had warned us to not bother coming. A week before our departure, an email from Fernando Moret, of Moret Clasicos S.L., noted that the car was checked for the first time in 20 years in October 2008 and that grave fuel and brake system deterioration indicated we really should postpone our trip.

We went to work soon after our arrival from the airport. The re-bodied 914-6 sat third from the door, lower level, beside a 959 and an Oettinger-modified Volkswagen Beetle Cabriolet. On its other side, a Pontiac GTO (of the Australian Holden sort rather than the muscle car of the 1960s) is explained by Heiderich's recent involvement with a group importing various GM products. A Lamborghini Diablo and a BMW Z1, both red, were next in line. A Lamborghini Miura was among the cars upstairs. Heiderich imported those brands as well as others at one time or another.

As soon as Horst connected the new battery, the Hispano-Aleman's windshield wipers came to life. Promising. He poured a can of his chosen elixir into the tank expecting to restore some life to old gasoline. But there was nothing promising in the engine's subsequent failure to fire. Fresh gasoline was the next step. While pushing the car outside before adding it, however, I spotted a trail of clear liquid defiling the newly painted green floor. It turned out to be — guess what? — Horst's magic potion.

Horst was soon under the car, determining how his snake oil had leaked out when the fresh gas, siphoned into the tank by a second Fernando (this one a house employee) suddenly began gushing over him. Horst cut the deteriorated line from the tank outlet hoping to reconnect it, only to have the line snap out of his hand and out of reach. Clearly, now, the tank had been empty to begin with. Clearly, it was quickly emptying again. And, clearly, it was beginning to rain.

"It's getting late, we'll do it tomorrow," said Horst. Fernando, unable to speak English and frustrated over our lack of Spanish, gestured frantically that the car had to go back in the garage. *Mamma mia!* tumbled from the man. "Everything is fine," Horst said more than once. "It's good it is raining. It'll wash the gasoline down the drain."

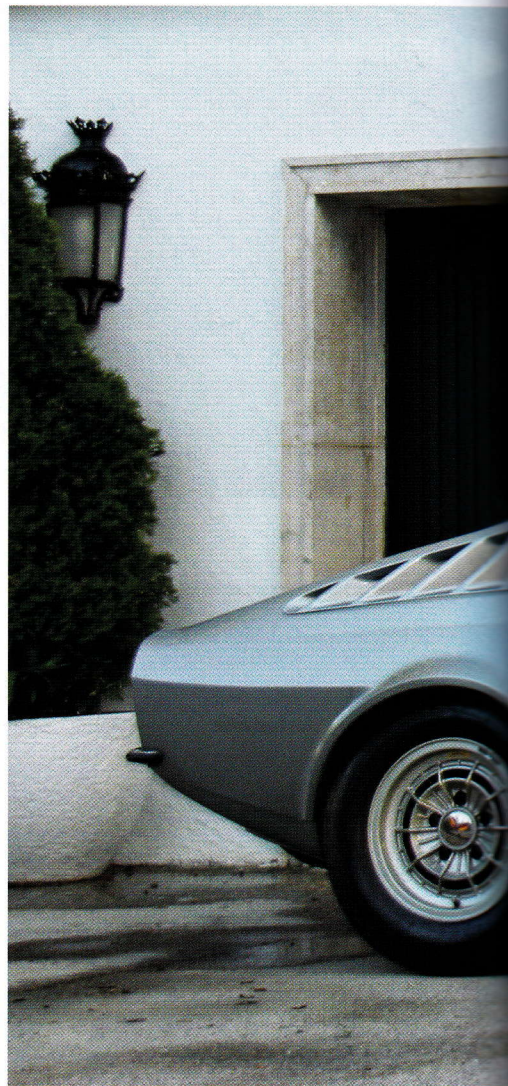
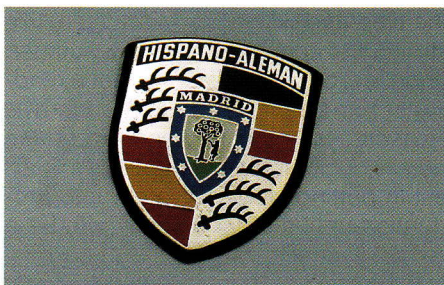
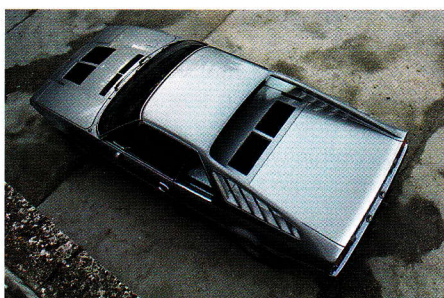
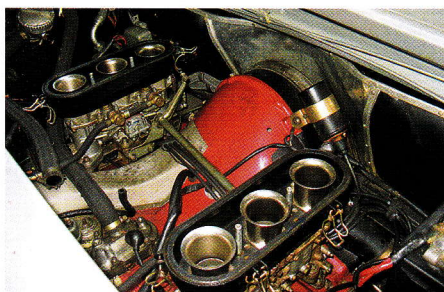
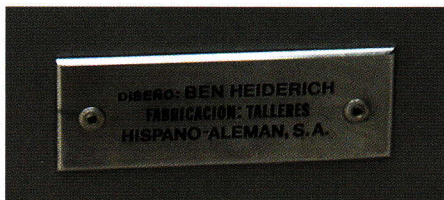
The ensuing storm was so severe that a tree blew over on the tennis court atop the bunker. It's a safe bet the Hispano-Aleman had never previously been exposed to such a soak test, if even a

shower. That evening, Mari Asun, Verne's wife, recalled the details of its creation, having returned from ongoing meetings dealing with resolving the couple's business interests.

"When Ben saw that the 914 was so ugly, he said, 'I have to do something about this,'" she began, using Heiderich's first name as he was known in Spain, as opposed to Verne, as most of us knew him in North America. "Ben never slept well and so he'd get up and do sketches, designs of what he wanted this car to

look like. Then he went with his drawings to several car builders and designers. Giorgio Giugiaro (Italdesign) was too busy. Pietro Frua was the last one and, of course, he didn't have work. So he accepted, very happily. And we gave him lots of money."

According to published reports, they paid 200,000 DM (then \$728,600 in U.S. dollars) for the prototype. As Maria Asun relates, the cost wasn't limited to the currency. "It was very stressful through this time because we would regularly go to



The Heiderichs meet Huschke von Hanstein and Ferry Porsche (top, left; photo courtesy of the Heiderich collection). The latter, said Heiderich, fell in love with the Hispano-Aleman 914-6 Vizcaya's design. Credit for the design would become one more bone of contention between Frua and Heiderich—though the tag on the front fender (above, left) makes it obvious who won the argument in the end. From every angle, the Vizcaya is an attractive car, but hardly one that uses Porsche design language. Custom hood crest (left) calls Madrid home...

Torino for several days to inspect the work. Ben would want this or that changed. Frua would lose his temper. I was in the middle, speaking both Spanish and Italian, and it was terrible. At some point, Frua would say in Italian, 'Tell him to get out,' and Ben would be shouting curse words in Spanish, telling me, 'Say those words exactly, every one of them, to him.'

It's obvious that Mari Asun has no good memories of the man. Whatever she thought of Frua's gruff manners and

Mari Asun. "The auto show was in a big compromise because they didn't know who owned the car. Frua said it was his and we said it was ours. Ben called the police. They came and the car was seized. Dr. Porsche, who loved the car and had said that as soon as the show was over Ben was to go to Stuttgart to see how they could do it together, said, 'We will wait, we will wait.' But you know, it was such a long time..."

The first court case was decided in Heiderich's favor. Frua appealed. And

Frua had an unfortunate history of quarrelling over who did what. His highest volume production car — the Renault Caravelle/Floride sports coupe penned while he was lead designer at Carrozzeria Ghia in 1957 — produced a disagreement over its paternity between Frua and Ghia director Luigi Segre. The result was Frua's departure and creation of his own firm.

"Frua was stupid because the car going into production would have been good for him also," said Mari Asun, com-



perceived lack of confidence at his shop, however, would be compounded by his behavior after the car was highly praised at its debut at the 1971 Geneva Auto Salon. Heiderich had commissioned the car, intending to put it into production. But when Porsche indicated its interest in participating in the project, Frua claimed ownership of the design.

"We didn't know until the last day of the show, (but) we found out Frua had registered the car in his name," says

so on and so on through 1976, by which time 914 production was coming to an end. Pietro Frua died of cancer in 1983. Had the Hispano-Aleman gone into production, it may have been remembered as his greatest achievement. Whether it would have sold in significant numbers can only be the subject of speculation, because the reported target price of 35,000 DM exceeded that of a 911S Targa, which commanded 32,200 DM as the Hispano-Aleman took shape.

pleting her account. "Maybe he thought Porsche would come directly to him, leaving Ben out of it, but of course Dr. Porsche didn't pay any attention to him."

Next morning, hats off to Frua's construction skills if not his judgment, for the car showed no sign of leaking from the downpour. Horst was determined to find the fuel line that had snapped into the recesses of the car, thinking he could then reconnect it to the tank. The container of gasoline was at hand.

Our search led to the fuel pump at the front of the engine; all three braided lines were severed. The connection to the tank itself was now beside the point. "I just want to know who cut the hoses," Horst kept saying, but with Fernando Moret having declared himself on summer holiday, there was nobody to ask. Getting new hoses, on our schedule, was impossible. Driving the car was, too.

Our defeat was not total, though, for this left the balance of the day for exploration of the Hispano-Aleman and its

houette and the large, matte-black grille areas ventilating its front oil cooler are notable on a model of the C 111 in one of many model display cases inside the bunker. Heiderich once told me he'd wanted gull-wing doors as well, as the C 111 had, but Frua ruled them out.

A plate on the side of the car states "Designo: BEN HEIDERICH," and with Frua no longer around to consult his lawyer that would seem to end that particular argument. Whomever deserves the credit, the Hispano-Aleman 914 is

reads 4,749 kilometers— but Mari Asun maintained that they never drove the car. "Maybe Frua drove it before he delivered it to Geneva," she said.

The seats differ from original. Perhaps they're from a Glas GT Coupe, a car designed by Frua for what was then Germany's smallest carmaker. In another flashback for 914 fanciers, the rearview mirror is lying on the dash rather than adhered to the windscreen. When I try the gearshift, my smile in response to first gear being left and back turns to a

What sort of person brings such a car to fruition, and damn the cost?

grimace. Somewhere between third and fourth, the linkage turns into a tangle of rubber bands.

Heiderich would have updated the shift linkage, you can be sure, if Frua hadn't interrupted the car's evolution. The engine, after all, was created very much to his taste, very different from that of the stock 914-6. His mechanic, Antonio Santes, who'd been recommended by the factory when Heiderich took over Porsche's Spanish distribution, assembled a 2.4-liter unit with hand-picked pistons and cylinders. At a claimed 225 hp compared to the 914-6's 110, this engine was said to give the Hispano-Aleman a top speed of 143 mph with acceleration to 62 mph in 7.0 seconds.

What sort of person brings such a car to fruition, and damn the cost? An ambitious man, one accustomed to goals achieved, one whose charm along the way proved remarkable. He was a salesman at Toronto's Willowdale Volkswagen when Horst met him 50 years ago. Already a Canadian citizen with a pilot's license, Heiderich talked about his first job installing telephones in northern Ontario as though it were far behind him. As a newer arrival, Horst spoke very little English — so the two took pleasure in conversing in German when Heiderich



This 914-6 looks particularly Italian from the rear, with hints of Lancia, Alfa, and Abarth harmoniously rolled in. The interior (above, left) is less successful. Inside Heiderich's bunker (above, right).

creator. Fernando towed the car from the lower bunker and positioned it in front of the house's garage door, washed it as carefully as though it were his own, and started snapping photographs. In this setting, its proportions seemed perfectly framed. Heiderich would warm with pleasure at the sight.

A certain resemblance to the Mercedes-Benz C 111 has been acknowledged. The rotary-powered prototype and the production 914 made their debuts at the same Frankfurt International Auto Show in 1969, and we know which car Heiderich preferred. Indeed, his car's sil-

more athletic in appearance and less slab-sided than the C 111; rear three-quarters vision through the artfully considered voids in the buttresses is beyond criticism. While something is owed to the C 111, something is owed to the 904, as well. Some of this, one imagines, is due to Heiderich's late-night sketching.

Inside, the dashboard and steering wheel are familiar to anyone who ever owned a 914, except for the words Hispano-Aleman in chrome script at the glove box. Instruments are upgraded, with the tachometer of a 914-6 GT reading to 10,000 rpm with no redline. The odometer

would bring his 356 for warranty service to Volkswagen Canada, where Horst worked as a mechanic having been dispatched by Porsche from Stuttgart.

In 1959, Heiderich invited Horst to fly with him to Sebring for the 12-hour race. When weather conditions made flying impossible, they drove together in the 356, becoming good friends in the process. Then one day Heiderich asked if he could borrow a suitcase. Horst would not see him again for a decade.

Mari Asun filled in more of the story. In the early 1960s, Heiderich joined the Royal Canadian Air Force. He flew Sabre jets and was posted to a base in Germany. A crash left him in a coma for months. No longer able to fly, he moved to Spain to recover and made a living selling cars to Americans at a U.S. base.

"In 1965 he came to Bilbao to see an air show," she said. "With all the hotels full, he was directed to a resort close to where my father had a house and there we met. I was engaged at the time, in fact, but we fell in love and my life changed. I joined Ben in Madrid and sold cars with him. We worked day and night, always together. To begin with, I did not know which end of a Volkswagen the engine was in, but I had a good mind for details."

An advertisement for International Motors, Avda del Generalísimo 38, Madrid-16, from November 1965, is among the dozens of framed documents and photographs hanging in the bunker. "Tourists, Diplomats, Servicemen," the ad was headlined, "If you are looking for the best deal in town on a new or used car, come and see Ben at. . ."

They prospered, all the more so after Heiderich convinced Porsche to name him the Spanish distributor. The next time Horst and Heiderich crossed paths would be in Stuttgart at Porsche's annual champions dinner of 1968. Heiderich had just won the Spanish endurance racing title in a 906, Horst the Canadian championship in his Kelly Porsche special. Verne and Mari Asun entered the dining room in the company of Ferry Porsche and Huschke von Hanstein. Horst could scarcely believe his eyes.

The photographs on the bunker walls attest to toys enjoyed and company kept. In some Heiderich is with Spanish royalty. In one, he's posing with multiple-world-champion Michael Schumacher, whom he considered a friend, and then-teammate Rubens Barrichello. All three are wearing Ferrari drivers' uniforms with

Heiderich's bearing his name and a Canadian flag. He maintained his Canadian citizenship to the end.

The reservation for my return flight was made not knowing a memorial service for Heiderich was to be held at a church later the same day. The night before, Mari Asun, the Heiderichs' daughter, her fiancé Horst, and I gathered at one of the family's favorite restaurants. Heiderich is remembered well there, of course.

The wind was gentle, barely a breeze really, the temperature exactly right for our seating on the patio. With summer a week away, the weather had become less turbulent. "This is a very emotional time for us, as you can imagine," Mari Asun said in an aside, and, later, following a toast to the man we were honoring, "You asked what will happen to all of these cars. I suppose the answer is that I already have sold dozens of Ben's cars. Maybe as the years pass, these will be sold as well — except that car."

She meant the Hispano-Aleman, of course, named the Vizcaya honoring her native region of Spain, the place where they met. "That car, we will keep in the family forever, our daughter after me, because that was a really important car in Ben's life." ■

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