

Una regina per il conte /A Queen for the Count

by Massimo Delbó

Center caption: Beautiful, with forms that will give goose bumps. In 1932, it was born at the hand of Count Carlo Felice Trossi. One of the most charming vehicles of her time. The Count Trossi SSK, after numerous ownerships, now is a part of the Ralph Lauren Collection.

Once upon a time... How many fairy tales from our childhood begin like this.

The story of this Mercedes-Benz could be a fairy tale: there is not a Prince but there is a Count, there is no evil but there is a cast of characters. But the most important thing, there is a Queen. And there is a happy ending. Let's start at the beginning.

In the summer of 1930, at the Daimler-Benz factory at Stuttgart, the body of #36038 is completed. A model of the W-05 SSK series, equipped with a motor type M-06 with specifications 27/180/250 that indicates respectively fiscal power, power without compressor and with compressor engaged. The capacity of the straight 6-cylinder inline is seven litres. The mechanical project director is Ferdinand Porsche, creating it for speed.

This chassis was created for left-hand drive, while at the time most drivers preferred right-hand drive. It was sent to a Mercedes-Benz dealership in Toyko where it stayed unsold for more than one year. Towards the end of 1931 the chassis, still without a body, was sent back to Stuttgart where it was quickly detailed and sent to a Mercedes-Benz dealership in Milan. This dealership was frequently visited by Count Carlo Felice Trossi. At the time 24 years old, he was well off and had a passion for automobiles. In 1932 Trossi was president of Scuderia Ferrari, that was racing Alpha Romeos and in charge of sport events held in Emilia Romagna (a region of Italy).

Trossi also raced for Scuderia Ferrari and showed he had talent. In fact, he placed second in the 1932 Mille Miglia with co-pilot Antonio Brivio. It is still not understood today why Trossi, who was more familiar with the Alpha 2.3 litre eight cylinder, would drive a Mercedes-Benz.

Anyway, in the fall of 1932 the chassis found an owner. But every chassis needs a good body builder. The design of Trossi was influenced by the form of two fighter airplanes (Curtiss P-6E and Boeing P-26) and he decided to include their styling in the body of his car. Still today the panel beater is unknown. They suspect that some big Italian body designers were responsible for this design, or maybe only Zagato could have designed something of that nature. Another thought was that Trossi, who loved English designs, would have given the project to a body builder by the name of Willie White or maybe Park Ward, who had already built beautiful automobiles of that nature.

So many names but no one for sure. Until mystery unveiled in 1984 when Richard Polledo, director of Automobile Club Argentino and at one time owner of vehicle, said mysterious body builder was Jacques Saoutchik, of Ukranian origin but resident of Paris. He was a metal artist and, besides having worked on the most prestigious marques of the era, he also created some bodies based on Mercedes chassis.

The body lines of this SSK are breathtaking. The fenders are so sculpted and the tail so slanted – all the body lines were very unusual. The body, all in aluminum, is set on a chassis made of oak and the detail craftsmanship was extreme. The finish of the leather and the level of aluminum work was at the highest level of craftsmanship of that era.

The life of this Queen was rather adventurous and tormented. Between 1943 and 1949 the Count himself sold the car and repurchased it 3 times. In May 1949 the Count passed away, and his inheritors sold it as a parts car to Richard Polledo, who was then a race car driver. Polledo tried to get authorization to bring the car to Argentina but was unsuccessful, and so sold the car.

At that time, to find in Europe a buyer for that particular auto was practically impossible. So Polledo shipped the car and parts from the Trossi family to an exotic car dealer in New York named Charles Stitch. In 1952 Charles Stitch sold it, and the SSK changed owners a number of times, including Carter Schaub, Ray Jones and British Sir Anthony Bamford, when in the early 1980s the car comes back to California to the collector Tom Perkins. In 1988 he sold it to current owner Ralph Lauren, world famous designer.

The condition of the car was acceptable. It had been restored during Sir Antony Bamford's ownership and car was drivable. It looked good enough to have appeared in some magazines. But the restoration was not at a level that this particular vehicle deserved. In 1992 Lauren decided to have a complete restoration that would return the SSK to its old splendid condition. He gives 18 months project to American auto restorer Paul Russell.

In Paul Russell's shop the vehicle gets completely disassembled, every mechanical part is rebuilt, every part of the body gets stripped and repainted. The existing red leather is removed and replaced with original antique black color. The spoke wheels are rebuilt. The dashboard turning is only polished, the dash gauges did not need anything. In the engine, the original compression ratio of 6.2:1 is increased to 7.0:1. Originally, thanks to the head engineer of Mercedes of that era, Hans Nibel, there was installed an *elephant* compressor of 12 PSI like the official SSKs were equipped with. When the car arrived to be restored, it had a regular blower and the *elephant* blower was reinstalled. During restoration, the shop did all the work necessary to find everything as original to the last little detail. One of the details that touches the heart is the license plate (Roma 33253) located on the left side of the tail.

A special car and an impeccable restoration. And right away the SSK receives an award that says everything: Best of Show at the Concours d'Elegance at Pebble Beach.

Now that the car is like new, the head mechanic of Paul Russell assures us that, if driven properly, you can achieve 200 KPH. And the acceleration is comparable to many grand touring cars of today, capable of reaching 0 – 100 KPH in 8.5 seconds. For an automobile that weighs two tons and is 67 years of age, that is more than an exceptional statistic. In case of a breakdown there is nothing to worry about. "We took it apart once and we can easily do it again." Which is correct because in the owner's manual under ordinary maintenance there is a sentence that is quite worrisome, that says "Every 18,000 Km completely disassemble the vehicle..."

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Photo caption:

Above: File photo of the 1947 Milano Grand Prix where Count Trossi is in Alfetta 158 #30 , next to Sanesi with #24.

Below: Other details of the SSK designed by Trossi and bodied by the Ukranian, naturalized Parisian Jacques Sautchik. Body #36038, of the series W-05 SSK equipped with engine type M-06 with 27/180/205 displacement, in-line 7 litre six cylinder, that still today has top performance.