

Adventure in the Desert

by Bernd Loosen, Toronto Section

The Hunt

The ink was barely dry on my article on the 540K Autobahn-Kurier scale model in the *Mercedes-Benz Model Club Journal* before questions were heard. Was such a model justified? Had there really been a 540K Autobahn-Kurier, or should it have been a 500K instead?

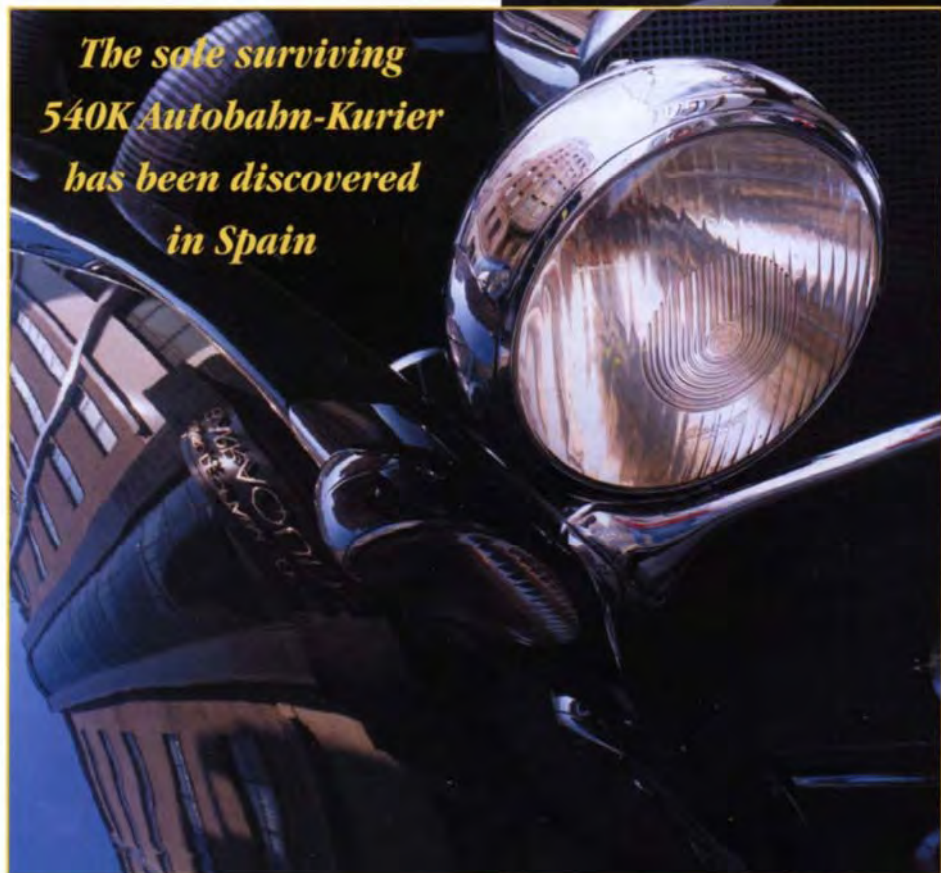
Indeed, it was impossible to find a picture of a 540K with such bodywork. None appeared in books dealing with the 1930's Kompressor cars. Even the DaimlerChrysler archives could provide no information or photographs of a 540K Autobahn-Kurier. Yet one thing was sure. Judging from the model, the real car was definitely not a 500K; too many details were different. It was also not the 1934 Mercedes-Benz Sport-Limousine, nor the special 1937 540K Sport-Limousine. Existing pictures of these cars did not fit the bill.

To clarify the situation, I wrote to the Mercedes-Benz Club of Spain, which had commissioned the 1/43-scale model, and asked for documents related to the real car. The speed with which they answered my letter was in inverse ratio to the speed with which they sold me their model. Indeed, I am still waiting for a reply. Instead of shedding new light on the existence of the real car, their silence only increased the doubts. Now it became imperative to prove or disprove the existence of a 540K Autobahn-Kurier.

I made little progress either way until I got a tip from England that a doctor in Catalonia, Spain, owned a supposedly unique Mercedes-Benz. Catalonia is only one province in Spain, but it is not small, so surely there had to be many doctors there. This was the typical case of finding the needle in the haystack, yet once the needle was found, would it be the right one?

Via the internet I discovered that a professor of ophthalmology, Senor Joaquin Barraquer, in Catalonia, owned a one-of-a-kind Mercedes-Benz. One call to the Spanish equivalent of Directory Assistance provided a telephone number, which, as it turned out, was wrong! Still, I reached the Barraquer Pharmacy (belonging to a branch of the family), which obligingly provided the right number.

*The sole surviving
540K Autobahn-Kurier
has been discovered
in Spain*



The Doctor and his Son

The charming receptionist at the Institute of Ophthalmology confirmed in fluent English that the Professor not only owned a unique Mercedes-Benz but the very car I sought. Unfortunately he was in Latin America, visiting a branch of his Institute in Colombia. My contact would be Senor Julio Elizalde, also from the Institute, so I wrote and told him about my search.

Amazingly, a thick envelope soon arrived from Spain, containing not only an explanation of how the model came to exist but also press clippings about it and lots of interesting documents (in Spanish, of course) about the real 540K Autobahn-Kurier. Two CD-ROMs contained amazing photographs, most never before published, taken during a late 1930's drive around the Mediterranean Sea by the Professor's father in his then-new car, allowing us a glimpse into the family album.

The Car

Order number 288557, built in 1938 in Stuttgart-Untertürkheim, was one of only two 540K Autobahn-Kuriers built. Named for the new German superhighways, these coupes were streamlined and powerful.

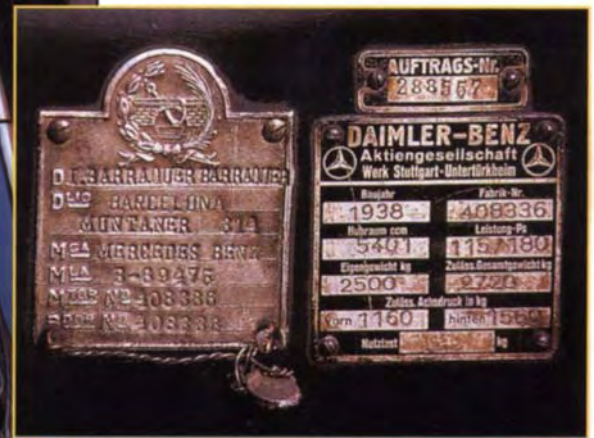
Not surprisingly, this car is the subject of legends. Some claim that Professor Ignacio Barraquer received the 540K as a personal gift from Hitler. Other rumors have it that the giver was a German government minister whose eyes he had successfully operated on. Yet another legend claims it was the gift of an Arabian prince whose eyesight the doctor saved. Professor Ignacio Barraquer's son, Professor Joaquin



Barraquer, brushes aside these rumors and explains, "At the time, my father had been working for a while in Germany, and that is when he bought the car."

The fate of the second 540K Autobahn-Kurier is less clear. As far as we know, it was destroyed during World War II. We don't know its original owner, but—we supposed the myth requires this—it is said to have been Eva Braun. Research in the Mercedes-Benz archives on who ordered 288556 or 288558 might clarify matters.

One thing is certain. Don Ignacio fell in love with his new Autobahn-Kurier immediately. In 1938 he set out with his wife on a driving trip from Spain through North Africa and across Libya to Cairo and Alexandria in Egypt. From there he had his 540K shipped back to Barcelona.



The factory identification plate, right, was supplemented by a Spanish plate, left, showing the owner's name and address and secured with a lead seal.

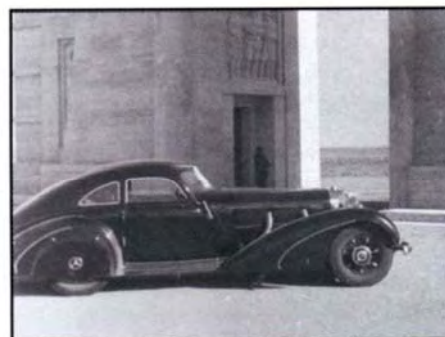
Above: The car with its original 1938 Spanish license plate; the "E" for Espana designates its Spanish registration; orange turn signals are non-original.

Right: Professor Joaquin Barraquer, son of the original owner, in front of the 540K outside the Barraquer Ophthalmological Institute in Barcelona.





The car's original owner, Ignacio Barraquer, with his son, Joaquin, its current owner, sometime during the 1930's.



At the Fellini Arch, an Italian victory monument in Libya.



An expert on ophthalmology, Professor Barraquer knew enough to protect his own eyes in the Egyptian desert.



Mrs. Barraquer in the Libyan desert with the dusty 540K.

Desert Adventure

The journey was, as his son tells it, interesting as much from the tourist viewpoint as from the mechanical aspect. The drive was hard on tires, and in the middle of the Libyan desert the cylinder head gasket gave up. Without hesitating, our eye surgeon, right there under the hot desert sun, removed the cylinder head, replaced the gasket, adjusted the valve timing, and went on! If you have seen a 540K's huge eight-cylinder engine up close, you can appreciate that achievement.

Broken shock absorbers and shredded tires were frequent, and when a tire went flat, the Professor commented about his 540K, "It's dancing a little..." Then he removed one of the two spares from the car's trunk and started working.

Personal Experiences

Dr. Joaquin Barraquer recalls many a story from when he rode with his father at the wheel (no one but Don Ignacio was allowed to touch the car). "My father liked to drive fast, and I sat comfortably and without a care in the world beside him, hitting 170 km/h (105.5 mph). It was a car he really enjoyed, which he used as much as possible, and he never had an accident, although once we had quite a fright. Near Grenoble in France, we suddenly skidded and found ourselves with the back pointing where the front-end should have been.

"Another time we were on the road from Rome to Naples, and my father was driving full

speed, when we noticed an Alfa Romeo catching us. No way would my father be overtaken, so he hit the compressor, but for some reason the car didn't react. My father didn't think that was funny, but salvation came a little further down the road in the shape of a cart pulled by a donkey. As we reached the cart, we stayed behind it, pretending to look for a safe way to overtake. Naturally the Alfa thundered right by us, but my father had saved the honor of Mercedes-Benz!

"Once we reached Naples, we climbed Mt. Vesuvius as far up as the road allowed the car to go. Afterward my father had the car shipped back from Naples to Barcelona; he did not want it damaged in any way.

"These were different times, different cars and different driving conditions than today. I remember well how incredibly hot the inside of the car could become. That did not in the least disturb my father. Then the drivers were still sporty. Today we can't imagine driving without air-conditioning."

The son wasn't allowed to take the wheel even once; no one ever was! But as it grew harder to get the necessary spare parts and to find competent mechanics, the father switched to a 1950's 300S (which the son has also kept). The 540K went as a gift to his son-in-law, but just before the son-in-law died, the father bought it back from him.

Today the "Autobahn-Kurier" is the property of the son, who says, "I want to keep the car, if only for all it means to me. I had it fully overhauled and have re-attached the bumpers. My father preferred to drive without them. He

wanted to avoid them getting scratched."

Today, in exhibit on loan to the Antic Car Club de Catalunya, in Barcelona, the car can be admired there by everyone.

Driving the Car

Professor Barraquer's 540K "Autobahn-Kurier" has not been restored. The car is in its original condition except for the turn signals, mandated by law to replace the semaphore indicators. That the car is unrestored is only noticeable here and there a little in the trim and paint, but mechanically it has always been kept in outstanding condition. Its condition grants the car authenticity, which many brilliantly restored cars lack. The red leather seats, the garnet-colored carpets, the wood trim, and a certain smell—a mix of all the of the above and of years gone by—transport you into another time.

Getting into the car is not exactly easy, but once behind the wheel, everything feels just right. Considering the endlessly long hood, the view ahead is surprisingly good, but backward you can't see a thing! When this shortcoming was mentioned to Daimler-Benz at the time, the response was, "This being the fastest car in the world, that's of no importance!" At least the rear window sheds some light into the small storage space behind the rear seats, where you barely can put a little luggage which won't fit into the trunk, which is taken up by the two spare wheels.

The engine starts at the slightest turn of the key. The engine sound reminds you of a deep purr. Not the slightest vibration is felt. Into first gear, the clutch is stiff, but the gear lever's short shifting movements are smooth. Second gear. . .third gear. . .the car picks up speed. The elasticity of the engine is incredible. In third gear the 540K can easily be driven as slowly as 18 mph (500 rpm) then accelerated to 87 mph. By then it is advisable to change into the fourth (direct) gear.

Experiencing the supercharger in action is special. It squeezes an additional 20 to 30 Km/h out of the engine but can be used no longer than 30 seconds. Press the gas pedal right down, and you'll hear a peculiar whistling sound. A metallic roar engulfs everything, the horses pull you forward, and you are overcome by a feeling of strength, of might.

The Professor and the Model

On February 12th, 2002, Professor Joaquin Barraquer was named an honorary member of the Mercedes-Benz Club Espana in Barcelona. To commemorate this, a scale model of his 540K Autobahn-Kurier was offered to him at a party at the Ophthalmological Institute. His model, enhanced with the original B-69475 license plate, is mounted on an acrylic base. This base and the license plate are the only details differentiating his model from the other 4,999 numbered 1/43-scale models that the club commissioned. Proceeds from their sales will buy technical materials for the Spanish club, for use by all members.

Acknowledgments

Revista *Gran Auto*, August 1989; Prof. Joaquin Barraquer; Sr. Julio Elizalde, RR.PP., Centro de Oftalmologia Barraquer, Barcelona, Spain; and Mercedes-Benz Club Espana, Barcelona, Spain.

Photographs from the collection of Prof. Joaquin Barraquer, Barcelona and Revista *Gran Auto*, August 1989.



On the 1938 trip to Egypt the 540K stopped for gasoline in a small Libyan village (gas pump in background).



The 540K on the dock at Alexandria, awaiting shipment by boat back to Genoa, Italy.



This 1/43-scale model of the 540K Autobahn-Kurier was commissioned by the Mercedes-Benz Club of Spain in 2002.