

IL CIGNO NERO / THE BLACK SWAN

Translated by author, Massimo Delbò

At the end of 1920s the world changed its speed. In Italy the futurism movement painters paint the sound of the cars and the surrounds of the view deformed by speed. In Germany Walter Gropius create Bauhaus, to teach new architectural models that chase the rationality criteria. In Great Britain is settled the very first particles accelerator. Even the cars are going faster: in style, due to the aerodynamics studies, and in the motor technique, that allows manufacture to produce, with the same displacements, more powerful engines. A perfect sample of this "jump in modernity" is 1930 Mercedes-Benz SSK chassis #36038, known as "Conte Trossi" or "black beauty". In Italy we say Black Venere.

In 1926 the German manufacturer introduce the "Type S", high level car, with a 6-cylinders seven litre engine, with compressor, designed with the help of a certain Mr. Ferdinand Porsche. "Type S", built in 150 pieces, became SS in 1928 (capacity increase from 6.7 to 7 litres, 110 pieces built) and a more sporty version, SSK ("K" means "Kurtz", short, 35 pieces). The final stage is the SSKL ("L" means "Leicht", light), that show a huge amount of lightening holes and built in small numbers mainly for Mercedes racing team (a SSKL will win the 1931 Mille Miglia with Caracciola-Sebastian).

Back to the SSK, chassis #36038, and to the rope that connect it to Conte Carlo Felice Trossi (1908-1949), a one-off of incredible relevance by many points of view. Conte Trossi is a key figure of Italian car movement in the 30s and 40s. Conte Trossi from Gaglianico (today in Biella) made his racing debut the 22nd of June 1931, at the Biella-Oropa hill climb, driving a Mercedes SS 1928 chassis #35944 where he finished 7th on the over-1500cc class. The following week another hill climb, Pontedecimo-Giovi, 2nd in sport class. In the same race, Ermenegildo Strazza, with a 1930 Mercedes-Benz SSK: it's the same one that will be sold, the 9th of July, for 50,000 Lire, to Conte Trossi. The SSK is wearing a Touring body, 2 seater spyder, cream colour and an already "interesting" past. The chassis, with engine nr. 7764, equipped with racing pistons and competition "Elephant" compressor, had left the Stuttgart assembly plant the 14th of February 1930, being shipped to Japan, from where it came back, unsold, the 12th of September. A few days later it is shipped to Italy, on the order of Carlo Saporiti, owner of Auto Garage Mercedes-Benz of Milano, where the car arrive the 1st of October; on the 27th of December the chassis is sold to Antonio Maino, from Somma Lombardo, for 120,000 Lire and registered Va 5690. Documents of the car say that is equipped with a Spyder body (without doors and with cycle wings, as will be

later discovered). 11th of April 1931 the car makes the racing debuts, in the Mille Miglia, with number 105, driven by Antonio Maino and Ermenegildo Strazza. It's a short and unlucky race, where after a few kilometres the car blows the head gasket and it is forced to withdraw. Maino sells the car to Strazza, which in July 1931, will sell it to Count Trossi; Trossi, few months later, became president of Scuderia Ferrari (February 1932), and has in his availability the Alfa Romeo 8C of the team and put the SSK for sale. The SSK goes first to Turin and then to the capital of Italy where it is re-registered with number plate Roma 33253, the same one that it still with the car.

Trossi kept an eye on the car and in 1933, the 21st of June, he bought it back and decided to install a new body: sleek, aerodynamic and much lower, following a draft, most likely directly inspired by himself, inspired by the shape of the Curtiss P-6E biplane of 1931. It is still unknown the body builder who made the car. A following owner, Argentinean Roberto Polledo, in the 90s wrote to a French magazine that the car was made by Saoutchick, but, looking at the Count Trossi SSK, there are no signs of any of the French stylist trademarks. There is, instead, a picture of a Fiat 500 bodied by Siata that look as a smaller model of the SSK, but it is not enough to confirm a connection with the body builder from Torino. From his side the nephew of Conte Trossi is more open to connect the SSK shape to a wooden model (that is still in the family) of a three wheeler with a BMW engine that his grandfather made, in few pieces, in that period: the tail and part of the cockpit, are, exactly the same of the SSK one. Adding to that, the nephew confirms the availability to his grandfather a big mechanical shop, in their Gaglianico premises, able, by sure, to manufacture a car body. What is now known is the fact that at the beginning of 1934 the new body is installed on the SSK chassis: offering proof there is one picture in front of a villa taken the 22nd of July 1934, the date of the Coppa Ciano, in Livorno.

With the new body, the car receives some mechanical transformations: the wheels pass from 20 to 18" and the steering column is shortened to give more space into the cockpit; at the same time a new gas pump is installed, an aeronautical one, and an hydraulic system, managed by knob on the dashboard, to regulate the rear friction shock absorber. In 1936 Conte Trossi sells the car. The car survived the war with no damage and, after the war, takes part in some secondary races until, in 1950, a new owner comes along, Argentinean Roberto Polledo. To register the car in his name, Polledo selects as his address in Italy ACI (Automobile Club of Italy nda), Roma section. After that he ships the car to New York with Argentina as it's final destination.

Conte Trossi SSK never reached the supposed destination: bureaucratic and customs problems will keep the car in a New York harbour warehouse for

almost 2 years, until when Polled sells the car to a car trader. The SSK comes back to Europe (1970) and lands in France; in 1978, it crosses the channel and 10 years after goes back to the USA. The then new owner, stylist Ralph Lauren, hands the car over to be restored by Paul Russell, one of the most respected car restorer of the States. The results will be not waited for long: SSK wins Best of Show at the 1993 Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance and Meadow Brook in 1995. In 2007 the car comes back to Italy, even if only for few days, to take part in the Villa d'Este Concours where it wins both First Place of the Jury and Peoples choice. If we would like to write down the top ten cars in the world, Conte Trossi SSK will be, for sure, to be included.

Page 36: REPORT ON A RESTORATION

The oil sump swapped, a second Mercedes SS...
An intricate history, at the end discovered

The Mercedes SSK Conte Trossi, just saw in the previous pages, it's the final result of a restoration done after a very careful historical research, that involved expert witnesses from both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. From his atelier in Essex, a small village 30 miles north from Boston MA., Paul Russell is the author of the restoration. He says that if he has been able to provide a good job, made with absolute historical respect, as desired by the owner of the car, stylist Ralph Lauren, is because of the help and availability of the Trossi family and of the previous owners of the car. Every one of them helped, bringing a piece, as a picture, documents or memories, that together enabled to finish, or being very close to, the entire car history.

As a sample, the dashboard and the instrumentation, with a different layout from the "normal" SSK built by Mercedes-Benz, would not have been possible to be fixed in the right way without the photographic evidences showed by the Trossi family. During the dismantling of the car, Russell says, he noticed that many pieces were stamped R.B. 1420, the original order number from Mercedes-Benz: a warranty of their originality. Concerns arose on the oil sump, stamped with a different number, so probably not original. What we discovered worth to be said, because it is a beautiful story where the luck helps too. A German collector, Fritz Grashei, questioned on the number printed, understood that was a swapped sump. To be clear: the Trossi sump was from another Mercedes car. He called all the SSK owners around the world, asking them to have a look at their sump, and look for the numbers printed on the sump. At the end of the research, we found the right one, and the owner has been very pleased of swapping it with ours, so now we can have both the right one installed. Paul Russell often wonders where and when the original swap could happen, but as of today, this remains a mystery. He does remember, that when the car arrived in his atelier, the car was

complete, but the care to details, from the previous restorer, had been much lower than what the class of the car and its history would deserve.

The most challenging part involved the woods that make the structural part for the body: to avoid completely changing them, they have been dismantled and refurbished one piece after the other. On the other side, the engine has been easier: beside the time in dismantling it to check every component, only the compressor needed a full revamp. The historical research on the car has been appointed to an Italian company, *Historica Selecta*, which found them involved in a very intrigued thriller. "Up to the 90s, the general thinking was that the car was with a Saoutchik body: one of the previous owners said that in a letter sent to a French magazine, *Automobile Classique*, without giving any proof. Another idea, based on a design found in the Trossi archive, was that the creator was a Willy White, but we don't think so because there isn't any other project or car involvement before or after that one. Looking at the report of the races of the period, then, the situation became very hard to understand, because of the date's differences. When Trossi was listed as racing with a Mercedes, the time was not possible with the same information about the car we had. A first solution arose when we discovered that Trossi owned not one, but two Mercedes. Once again have been the pictures to give us the proof and the clue. In one picture, we were able to see Conte Trossi driving a SS, different from the SSK with its short wheel base. Starting from this, other research showed evidence, as other reports, order of arrivals and number plates, which confirmed in Conte Trossi's life of another car". It's not finished yet: *Historica Selecta* discovered even the past of the car, before the "new" body installed from Trossi. The discovery was that the original car was a Touring body, and that took part in many races. In one picture the Touring emblem is easily recognizable. "Crossing information, data, news and number plates we discovered many things. Up to now only one major question mark is still open, who did the Trossi Body? The idea is that was made directly in his own body shop inside the Gaglianico castle, but we don't have evidence". At least up to today...

Page 37: MEMORIES FROM THE NEPHEW
Cars, Airplanes, Boats, his passions

Maurizio Fracassi is Conte Felice Trossi Nephew. He's the one who saved, and now looks after, the family archives, that contain a lot of information on his grandfather, dead young when his mother was only ten. Everything he knows is thanks to the memories of his grandmother, Conte Trossi's wife. Mr. Fracassi says that Conte Trossi was a great lover of engines. He piloted airplanes, hydroplanes, and racing boats with the same easy approach that we have today with our cars; he was often with Cortopassi, his mechanic in

charge of his racing cars. The two made the prototype of what later became the Vespa (Trossi knows Mr. Piaggio very well because of the airplane). He had a tight connection with aeronautics, as shown from the Trossi-Monaco, a car with a 16-cylinder radial engine made in 1935. He was used to changing cars so often, that in house no one was putting attention about them any more. Even the SSK, that back then could make the same sensation as arriving home today with the Shuttle, at home was simply the black Mercedes. The draft of this car, most probably, was not done by Trossi himself, but he was, for sure, the man behind it. Many chances are that there is a tight connection between some of the technicians, English or Americans that were working in his shop and the draft of the SSK. Mr. Fracassi says that there was a shop, inside the premises of the castle, totally dedicated to this kind of stuff. No surprise if tomorrow, we'll discover that the body has been assembled in his shop or around Torino, not very far, where the Count had many friends.

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