

THE SL THAT CAME IN FROM THE COLD

Thought to be the only Gullwing that was exported new to the Soviet Union, this Mercedes has led a remarkable life

WORDS JAMES PAGE PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER





The history file suggests parts of the engine were swapped for those from a 300 Limousine, but it was later rebuilt. Below: Einari Koppel in *Dead Season*

Not often do you find a car that has rumours of KGB involvement, high-stakes card games, movie stardom and even a tenuous link to Vladimir Putin in its history. But this Mercedes 300SL spent the first three decades of its life in the Soviet Union – a technological wonder of the Western world that arrived behind the Iron Curtain at a time when Nikita Khrushchev was championing what he saw as the impending victory of Communism over capitalism.

Its mere presence there at the height of the Cold War is a story in itself. So is the fact that it was eventually brought back to Germany and restored, and is now kept in pristine condition by its current owner, Anatoly Evdokimov. A young Russian who speaks quickly and passionately about classic cars, Evdokimov has enthusiastically embraced the challenge of separating fact from fiction when it comes to this particular 300SL. He's also living proof of how much Russia has changed over the past few decades.

"My dad was a keen driver," he explains. "A really good one. He put me behind the wheel – of a Lada – when I was six years old. It not only gave me a proper shot of adrenalin, but it also taught me how to drive, with no power steering. This is how Russians become Russians! I was sitting on his lap, he was changing gears and I was steering. From that moment on, we would do lots of road trips. I was besotted with cars.

"I got my driving licence aged 18, but I didn't appreciate cars the way I do now. I didn't go into their history and see their significance in that way. I had a Porsche 911 turbo, which was my obsession from the age of 13. I started adding a bit of power to it, and that's when somebody said, 'You really ought to think about buying a proper car, a car that's a wonderful machine but also a good investment.' I'd never really thought about cars in that way.



"I bought a Porsche Carrera GT for crazy-stupid money, and was blown away by it. Then James [Cottingham] called me and said, 'I know you've been considering a Gullwing, but there are a few things we should really look into because there's something about the car's papers.' I thought it could be anything, but when he gave me the passport, the USSR document of ownership, that's when my eyes opened..."

Private ownership of a car during the Soviet era was a complicated business. You had to apply for a permit and the government put quotas in place. If you worked for a particular company, it might be given a certain number of cars, which in turn were allocated to lucky workers. Having gone through all of that, people tended to hang onto their prized possessions, so there wasn't even a secondhand market as such.

There were ways around it, of course, most of which centred on two considerations: money and power. But even then, we're still talking about homegrown cars here. Foreign machinery was even rarer, and exotic foreign machinery – such as a Mercedes-Benz 300SL – was practically unheard of.

"It wasn't possible at that time in the USSR," says Evdokimov. "It's so surreal. Unless you were at the very, very top of the hierarchy – Mikhail Gorbachev or whoever – or you were a Gagarin or similar, there's just no way you could have owned a car such as that. And even if you did, driving it around would not have been a good idea at all. You couldn't show off wealth in that way."

The first thing Evdokimov did was look up the name of the person on the SL's document of ownership. "Quickly it became obvious that this guy was indeed a very special gentleman," he says. "He was an aircraft engineer with multiple awards of the highest order for extraordinary achievement."

The man in question seemed to be Alexander Mikulin, who designed Russia's first liquid-cooled, piston aero engine, as well as the

From top: current owner Evdokimov is infatuated with the SL; stylish fitted luggage strapped to rear shelf; iconic name from a legendary marque



engine for its first jet airliner, the Tupolev Tu-104: “But there was one thing that didn’t fit the story – the guy was too old. When I looked up the name, his age made the whole thing lose any sense. Then I found out that he had a son, and the son was also named Alexander. He was a skilled driver who was often called on to perform stunts in movies. It was his name that was on the document. But, even being a stuntman, having a car like this in your own name wouldn’t make much sense. It’s just a crazy story.”

It didn’t get any less crazy the more Evdokimov looked into it. The document of ownership placed the 300SL in the Soviet Union during the 1980s, but it had apparently been there for almost its entire life. The 300SL Register noted only that it was completed on 30 July 1956 – there was no information listed about its early owners or subsequent life – but it’s thought that it went straight to Russia, making it surely the only Gullwing to do so.

One theory is that the KGB arranged for it to be imported, and it ended up at a fuel research institute in Leningrad – now St Petersburg. In its history file are notes made much later suggesting that its engine was removed in order to study Mercedes’ innovative fuel-injection system, and replaced with one from a 300 Limousine. By the time it was restored in Germany in the late 1990s and early 2000s, however, the original engine was back with the car, and it seems far more likely that the research institute simply removed the injection system itself.

How long the 300SL stayed in Leningrad is unclear, but in those early years it’s thought that it was looked after by Boris Znamenski, as Evdokimov explains: “He was the guy who

‘Vladimir Putin revealed that *Dead Season*, in which this SL starred, inspired him to become an intelligence officer’



actually dealt with the import of the car. The KGB is an organisation; there still has to be somebody who deals with it. His name wouldn’t be mentioned anywhere for obvious reasons, but he seemed to have the car.”

In 1968 it turned up in *Myortvyy Sezon (Dead Season)*, a moodily shot, black-and-white Russian film starring Donatas Banionis. He plays a Soviet spy, Ladeynikov, tasked with tracking down Dr Hass, a German war criminal who’s working on a poison gas that he’d tested during WW2. Ladeynikov hooks up with Ivan Savushkin – a prisoner in the camp where Hass used to carry out his experiments – in order to stop him. It’s a typical spy thriller of the time – hepcat soundtrack, lots of smoking, laughable fight sequences – and opens with a warning from a very serious-looking old man about how evil capitalist countries such as the UK and America were working on chemical weapons.

The film uses various locations and is a car-spotter’s delight, with everything from Ford Taunus to Hudson Hornet and GAZ Chaika making an appearance. By far the best entrance is reserved for the SL, though, which comes roaring through the countryside to the accompaniment of badly dubbed engine noises, then arrives on a beach, where it performs a perfectly executed powerslide around a 1932 Lincoln.

Whether doing that, gliding over cobbled back-streets or just sitting in a car park, the Mercedes is an other-worldly presence in otherwise dour surroundings. An interesting footnote to its appearance is that Banionis – who starred in a number of highbrow films during the 1960s and 1970s – met Vladimir Putin in 2004. The President apparently confirmed that Banionis’



Clockwise from left: exquisite instruments in painted dash; Merc in the shadow of a missile silo at Greenham Common; *Dead Season* beachside liaison

performance in *Dead Season* had inspired him to become an intelligence officer.

The fact that the SL stayed in Russia meant that its subsequent custodians must have been very well connected. At some point, it was acquired by Gennady Grushevsky, a successful powerboat racer. After Grushevsky came Mikulin – the name that appeared on the ownership document – but there are differing theories about how he came to get his hands on it. By far the most appealing is that Mikulin – who’d staked a Chevrolet Impala that was apparently registered to production company Mosfilm – won the Mercedes in a marathon game of cards that took place in the exclusive Nikolina Gora district west of Moscow. The more prosaic version is that the car spent a while off the road during the 1970s because of problems maintaining the injection system, and that Grushevsky eventually traded it for Mikulin’s Audi.

“The end of it all was that the car was shipped out of the USSR to Germany,” explains Evdokimov. “There’s a little stamp that basically says the car was sold through a commission store.”

This was during the 1990s, after the Cold War had thawed and the Communist regime had crumbled, and in fact there had been rumours that the Mercedes had perished in a fire. While those proved to be wide of the mark, it was clearly a little tired – its 2004 DEKRA report goes further and says that it was in ‘a terrible state’ when it arrived from Russia – because its file documents a thorough restoration process. The rebuild of the engine and gearbox

alone totalled DM41,897, but the DEKRA assessment went on to praise its overall condition and original specification. Shortly afterwards, it arrived in the UK, which is where Evdokimov keeps it, pointing out that, in Russia: “The season changes are not nice at all.”

Mikulin once said in an interview that he found the 300SL not to be the ideal everyday companion, and Evdokimov’s early impressions were along the same lines: “When I drove it for



the first time, my friend and I took it through London and I thought we were going to cook in there! It was so unbearably hot – I felt like one of those chickens turning in an oven. It was not a particularly warm evening, either.”

He nonetheless describes being “infatuated” with the 300SL: “Even if someone had put me in it and told me to close my eyes, I’d have known it was a Mercedes-Benz. The DNA is

100% there. It’s amazing that they’ve managed to carry that through over the years.

“My favourite detail is actually the dials. I love watches and when I look at them, the craftsmanship is on the level of Swiss watchmakers. It’s so beautifully made – it’s so fine in every way.”

The Russia of 2018 is very different from the Russia into which the SL was imported in 1956. Its freedom and wealth have led to a burgeoning classic-car scene: “First people get money and then they start spending it on all the things that are fashionable. They then start to look deeper and have the ability to appreciate other things. That’s what’s happening. The country is opening up and it’s becoming more popular.

“Cars are a very special topic because people have always appreciated the arts – architects, poets, painters. But very few were able to view a car as a work of art. That’s definitely changing. There are probably more classic cars in Russia than I or anyone else knows about.”

During the Cold War, the rhetoric was based around ‘them and us’, East vs West. As a musician who spends much of his life travelling, Evdokimov is part of a new generation of enthusiasts – the latest Russian custodian of this charismatic and quite possibly unique 300SL, but different in every other way from those who came before.

“A car breaks the ice between people,” he says. “In every man there’s a boy. We talk about cars and our differences fade. We connect.”

Thanks to James Cottingham at DK Engineering (01923 287687; www.dkeng.co.uk); Shane Prater