



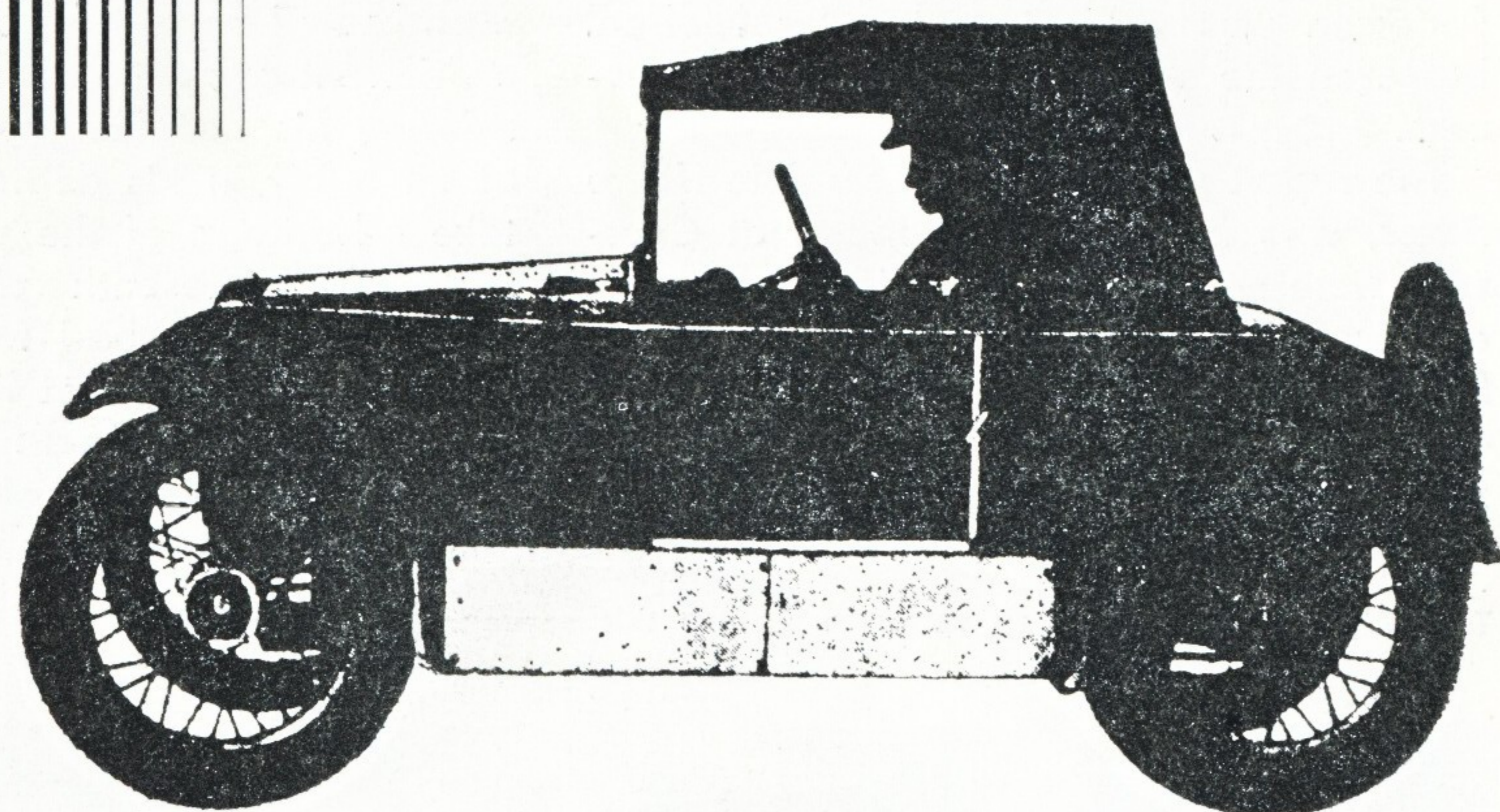
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CZECHOSLOVAK
**MOTOR
REVIEW**

12/86



THE MYSTERIOUS UGLY DUCKLING

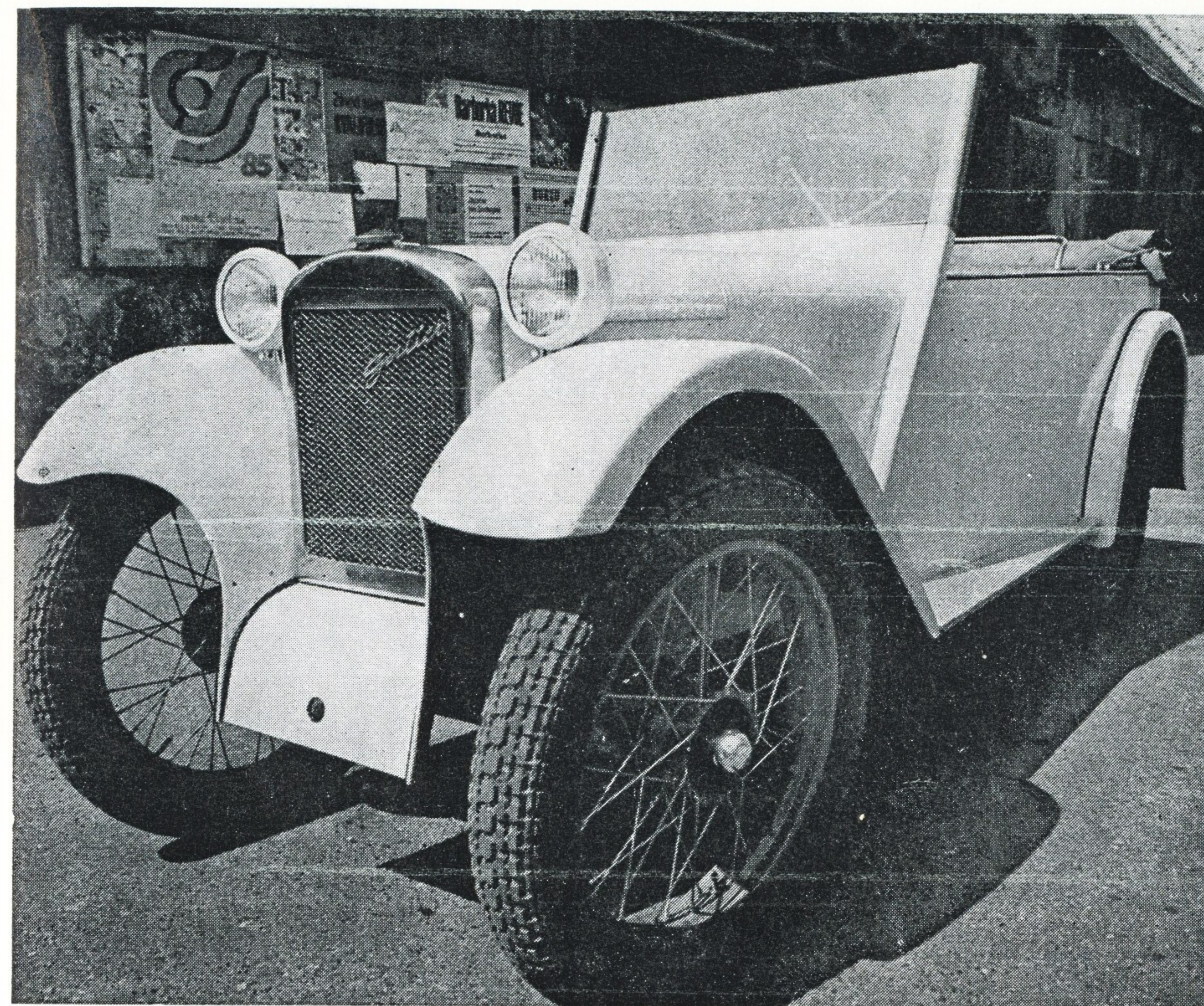


This is the last article in our series on Czechoslovak collectors of veteran vehicles. These articles have led us among cranks who live amidst and for antiquated bicycles, motor-cycles, tractors, engines and cars; have taken us inside a vast shed that houses more than sixty vehicles made by Praga; and have enabled us to meet a chap who has toured Europe on one of the few surviving motor-cycles of the long extinct Böhmerland alias Čechie marque. This final article should obviously cap the whole series, but that is a tall order indeed: it takes more than an ordinary subject to outdo all that this series has presented to you. Perhaps Jiří Šilha and his supercharged Bugatti 37 A racer would do the trick? Or Krejčík Senior and Junior, father and son, whose collection includes a Stanley steam car? No, Bugattis and even Stanleys are relatively plentiful. At least as compared to a car which is unique, and guaranteed to be the only specimen of this make still in existence.

Jiří Beran lives in the little town of Český Dub in Northern Bohemia, and at one time was a highly successful builder of model aircraft, even winning some races with

them. Then he decided to build himself a house, which left him no time or energy to spare for models. When the new home was finished, Jiří invited his relatives and friends to a house-warming party, and had to keep answering questions about the size of the garage he had constructed. One day, he explained, he would buy a big old car, a real monster of a veteran. At this point a cousin who lived some 50 kilometres away mentioned that she had an old Gatter standing in a barn which it had not left for years. So would Jiří like to have it, free of charge of course? A generous offer, surely – and that was what Jiří thought too, until he saw the thing. In the interim he made a few inquiries: what exactly was a Gatter? Oddly enough, no one seemed to know. Someone suggested it might be one of the lesser old German makes, but there was no reference to any such name in the literature. The mystery deepened.

When Jiří finally went to his cousin's barn, he got the shock of his life. The Gatter turned out to be the tiniest car he had ever seen. It made the smallest car ever produced in Czechoslovakia, the single-cylinder 500-cc Aero of 1929, seem ro-

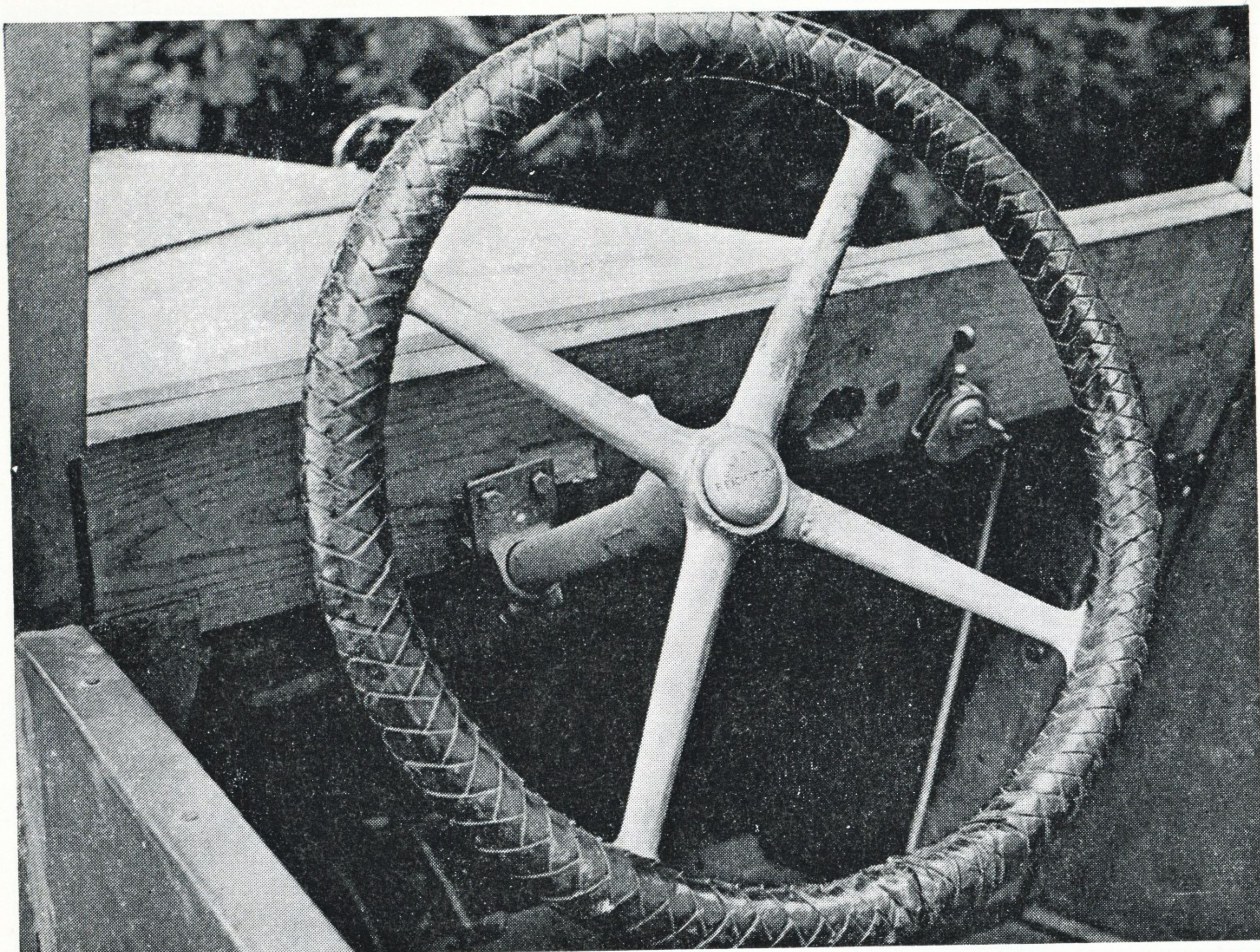


bust by comparison. And not only the tiniest, but the ugliest too: it looked like those wooden make-believe cars they have on merry-go-rounds. Just as short, squat and unsightly. Its water-cooled single-cylinder two-stroke engine of 360 cc was concealed under a bonnet the size and shape of a frying-pan lid. The two-speed gearbox was just ahead of the rear axle, where the differential would have been if the Gatter had one. But the most incredible part of this ugly duckling was its frame: two long leaf springs running fore-and-aft, with one axle at each end, one motor-cycle wheel at each corner, the pencil-thin propeller shaft midway between them, and a peculiar kennel-like body on top. When someone squeezed into the car, the leaf springs sagged and the wheelbase increas-

ed visibly; the heavier the load, the lesser the ground clearance and the longer the wheelbase. The contraption had to be seen to be believed. And there was still no clue to its origin.

The cousin said she had no idea where the thing came from, or how many previous owners it had had before it ended up in her possession. Once she had used it to take her boy friend, now her husband, to a dance. When they came out the car had vanished: some boisterous youngsters had dumped it on the dance hall's roof. When it was back on firm ground, she had locked it in the barn, and that was where it had been ever since. Did Jiří want it?

The gift no longer seemed so generous, with its perished tyres, battered body and casing of rust, but after coming all this way



Jiří did not feel like returning empty-handed. So he pushed it out into the sunlight, where it looked even worse; shook the mice and spiders out of it; and had himself towed home, very slowly, timing his arrival for dusk so the neighbours would not see him and so he would have all evening to prepare his wife for the shock.

The mystery dissolved when the Veteran Car Club of Český Dub held a parade of its members' cars, and Jiří pushed the Gatter to the line-up. There a very old man, whom nobody in town seemed to know, pounced on the Gatter and nearly hugged it. Did he know the make? Of course he did, hadn't he worked for old Willibald Gatter as a blacksmith for a dozen years or more? Gatter used to own a smithy in nearby Zákupy, and made a decent living out of horseshoes and the like till he took it in his head to start building cars. How many did he build? Only a handful, who would remember the number after half a

century? But perhaps there was still one of those Gatter leaflets back at home, he'd take a look. And a few days later the mail delivered a faded yellowed leaflet that held the first real clues.

Jiří and his friend Miloslav Sovadina, another veteran car fan, then did a little detective work. They found that Gatter had been no ordinary smith: he had worked at Daimler's design office in Vienna, and on returning home had decided to start producing a small car that almost anyone could afford to buy. He even had some of its features patented in Czechoslovakia, Germany, France, and Britain. Before ending up bankrupt in 1937, he turned out between 1930 and 1934 certainly no more than a few dozen of these cars – and the one in Jiří Beran's possession is the sole survivor.

Reconditioning this car called for much more detective work, because the leaflet showed the prototype and not the version

actually produced. The reconstructed rear end of the body is based on the recollections of a hoary old man who used to own a Gatter more than fifty years ago, and on a few bits of sheet metal from an original tail end which were found in a loft. At least there was not much trouble with the accessories: the electrical system of a Gatter, for instance, consisted of a pair of headlights, an accumulator battery, a switch, and a few lengths of wire. That was all.

Last year, Jiří Beran finally finished his

labours and took the Gatter out on the road. He says driving it is no fun: you feel you're sitting in a straight-jacket, and the thing still has not learned to climb hills. But otherwise he is obviously just as proud and as fond of his ugly duckling as his friends and rivals are of their Jaguars, Bugattis or Stanleys. More so, in fact, because his Gatter is sure to be the only one still running anywhere on Earth. So what does it matter if it is squat and ugly and short of breath on the hills?

Original of the poster advertising the tiny motor car. The text – Gatter, Motors, Zákupy in North Bohemia, price of the standard car with top, electric lights, spare wheel and toolkit – seems today rather archaic

GATTER

Autopodnik Zákupy sev. Čechy

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