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he highway runs straight as an arrow from Thillois to Gueux. It lies a few kilometers outside of Reims, and there is nothing that would indicate its history. Until suddenly, imposing rows of bleachers emerge from the fog of this October morning. Then a long pit row. Ghostly and deserted, they flank what once was the start/finish line in the former Reims-Gueux Grand Prix racetrack.

This area became known for its champagne. But it is about to become unique for another reason: A half-dozen Silver Arrows have gathered on the former homestretch for a photo shoot, poised as if the race will begin at any moment. They are reminders of the golden Grand Prix era from 1934; it was exactly 75 years ago that this completely new and ambitious generation of 750-kilogram (1,650-pound) formula race cars rolled up to the start line.

As the largest of the German automobile manufacturers at the time, Mercedes-Benz played a primary role in Grand Prix racing for a long time. Those successful ones in Stuttgart in the 1930s could look back on an abundance of racing experience. The situation was different at Auto Union. It emerged in 1932 at the direction of the Saxony State Bank as a merger among DKW, Horch, Audi and the automobile division of the Wanderer works—four companies, four rings. The companies were masters of automotive engineering, but racing was a new endeavor for them. Only Wanderer had given thought to this, with a bold plan outlined in 1931 for competing in Grand Prix races in the future. However,

the Chemnitz-based firm was not chosen to develop the race cars. The task was given to the Stuttgart-based Dr. Ing. H.c.F. Porsche GmbH instead.

As the new Grand Prix formula was finalized, Ferdinand Porsche began to outline the parameters of his design: 16 cylinders, displacement around 4.4 liters and a Roots supercharger—unusual but not revolutionary. The layout of the design was what caused a stir: He moved the engine back to the rear axle because that provided more traction. His idea took off and is still used in formula racing today. But it required an adjustment for the drivers. They were pushed to the front of the car, while the weight that was moved to the back made the rear of the car very agile. Regardless, talent such as Bernd Rosemeyer, Achille Varzi, Tazio Nuvolari and the hillclimbing expert Hans Stuck still competed in the Silver Arrow. They drifted around the curves on all four wheels with precision and control.

Once the 1934 season started, Auto Union quickly accumulated numerous racing achievements. The young firm earned the recognition it had hoped for. As the image grew, Porsche optimized the technology. Higher output was coupled with an impressive increase in torque. The Type A was followed by B and C, and a spectacular streamlined body emerged for record runs. The biggest changes were seen in the Type D Silver Arrow in the 1938 season. Instead of a 750-kilogram weight restriction, the displacement was limited to three liters for supercharged engines. Porsche's former coworker Robert

Eberan von Eberhorst headed up the project. To conform to the new formula, he reduced the number of cylinders to 12 and installed two Roots superchargers.

The last Grand Prix race in this era took place on Sept. 3, 1939, in Belgrad. Nuvolari finished in first place for Auto Union, followed by longtime rival Mercedes-Benz with Manfred von Brauchitsch at the wheel. Auto Union driver H. P. Müller, who had won the race in Reims on July 9, 1939, came in third. But the good news went unnoticed back home. With the German invasion of Poland two days earlier, the war had begun.

The victory in Belgrad marked the end of a grand career. The Auto Union Silver Arrows celebrated numerous successes in more than 80 starts between 1934 and 1939. It was no wonder that interest in the race car intensified again after the end of World War II. But the Red Army marched into Saxony, the home of Auto Union, and the Soviets took possession of the advanced German technology. In the fall of 1945, a truck presumably carrying 18 race cars headed toward the east.

Rumors multiplied after that. Fans and experts searched out remaining specimens. It appeared that the Soviets eventually scrapped most of them, but now and then, a single battered Silver Arrow surfaced.

The story of American Paul Karassik became famous. After years of secretive searching, he found two Type D models in a Ukrainian province. The second part of his victory came when he had them

restored. One now belongs to the Audi collection in Ingolstadt. This collection also contains the 16-cylinder hillclimbing race car, which Audi purchased from the automobile museum in the Latvian capital, Riga. In the West, only one Silver Arrow was able to survive those perilous times: a Type C that Auto Union had once presented to the German Museum in Munich.

Apparently, not a single Silver Arrow from the early years survived. The Type A that posed for photographs in Reims is a complete replica built in the 1990s. Recently, this race-ready car, traveling more than 168 mph, left an Audi R8 in its wake. Yet it boasts only a single original part—its fuel pump. But that original car that was reduced to nothing gave rise to the Type C, the Type D with the twin-supercharged engine and the world-record-making race car with its streamlined body.

While the photographers wait for the sun to appear, an elderly man makes his way through the deserted pits. Leaning on a cane, Jacques Compas gazes out onto the Silver Arrow armada, lost in thought. "I was at every race back then," says the 84-year-old. "Just the sound of those engines! Oh, it was such an unbelievable atmosphere."

The value of the six Silver Arrows has increased by €50 million or maybe even €70 million (\$74 million to \$104 million), if the value can even be measured. But that is not what matters to Compas. In this moment, they are starting again for him. He smells them. Hears them. Feels them. 🍷

Editor's note: Starting in December 2009, the Audi Museum Mobile in Ingolstadt is presenting an extensive special exhibit about the Silver Arrows. In addition to Auto Union models, Mercedes-Benz race cars are expected to be on display. It will be the most exquisite collection of Silver Arrows in history. For more information, go to www.audi.com.

The decrepit grandstands at the Reims-Gueux Grand Prix racetrack were vacant in October as six vintage Auto Union race cars gathered for a photo session. But the stands were packed for the 1939 French Grand Prix (opposite, top right), where Tazio Nuvolari and Hermann Müller, driving Auto Union D-types, led at the start of the race. Müller went on to win.