

Reine's Curtain raiser

Porsche reliability and power brought victory to Reine Altenheimer at the Zlatni Piasatz ("Golden Sands") Rally, when despite some poor showings early in the event the West German driver was able to withstand the might of the Eastern European Renault challenge. Altenheimer was able to take over the lead halfway through the two-night event which, although based at a Black Sea holiday resort, stretched halfway across the country of Bulgaria. He was forced to conserve his car which had been damaged in a pre-rally collision with the Lancia Stratos of Andrzej Jaroszewicz during the races at Albena, which ultimately enforced the non-starting of the Polish driver because of engine trouble. Sweltering heat by day and sometimes tropically torrential rain by night made this European Championship event very tiring, despite a very small proportion of the route being on gravel roads.

Bulgaria is a country that is very alert to its potential in the modern world, and it has a reputation of being one of the most "free" of Communist countries. For a start it is not necessary to obtain a visa if one is visiting as a tourist, and if the number of cars on the roads of the country is any guide, it seems to enjoy a good standard of living. It is a country of strange paradoxes. Despite its freedom, its language is very similar to that of Russia, even to the use of the Russian alphabet. It has quaint customs. To signify assent, Bulgarians shake their heads from side to side. To signify a negative, the head is shaken up and down!

Maybe much of the apparent freedom is engendered by the holiday atmosphere of Zlatni Piasatz, a resort about 20km north of Varna, which is the third biggest town in the country. This resort has an abundance of hotels all within easy walking distance of each other and of the celebrated "Golden Sands," where sunbathers start business at eight o'clock in the morning before the humidity of midday gets too bad. Just ten kilometres to the north of Zlatni Piasatz is another resort, Albena, where scrutineering is held and also where the street racing takes place in the afternoon before the start.

The country has not yet developed its inter-town network of roads, and even on major roads it can take a long time to travel from place to place. This assumes that the correct roads are taken, that the few petrol stations can be found—and that the signposts written in a strange language can be understood!

ENTRY

The entry was a little smaller than in previous years when, for example, the factory Fiats have appeared in their quest for European championship points. Basically the favourite was Jaroszewicz, who has been maintaining a lower profile in his rallying activities following his disappointment last year in the ECR. He still has his Stratos, maintained in Italy by Maglioli at Biella, still two valve per cylinder, and on paper the car which could and should win easily.

The only car that could remotely maintain some pressure on the Stratos was Altenheimer's Porsche. This was a normal 2.7 litre car with competition exhaust and about 240bhp, which the German had entered as a trial run for the Tour d'Europe later in the year. This event which began its life as a glorified touring run is now a major rallying fixture in the German world. It is a sponsors' delight, as it passes through about 15 different countries.

ive drivers as well. Altenheimer is no stranger to Bulgaria, however. He won the first ever Zlatni Piasatz in 1970 and has often been well placed since then.

After Altenheimer in order of competitiveness came a group of G4 Renault 17 Gordinis, all from eastern countries. These were driven by Attila Ferjancz (Hungary), Ilija Tchubrikov (whose spelling varies like the passing clouds, depending on how one chooses to translate the name from his original tongue) from Bulgaria and Jerzy Landsberg from Poland. We have seen Landsberg many times recently in the west: he was the man who was almost allowed to beat the Polski Fiat team in his own country last year with a Renault 5TS, and since then has used an Opel Kadett GT/E G4 in Spain and elsewhere. This Renault 17 Gordini was the car that Blazej Krupa has often used. He and Krupa run in the Stomil team, a team which publicises Stomil tyres, which permits the drivers to use other makes of tyres when they are more suitable, for instance Michelin on asphalt. It was the first time he had rallied such a car.

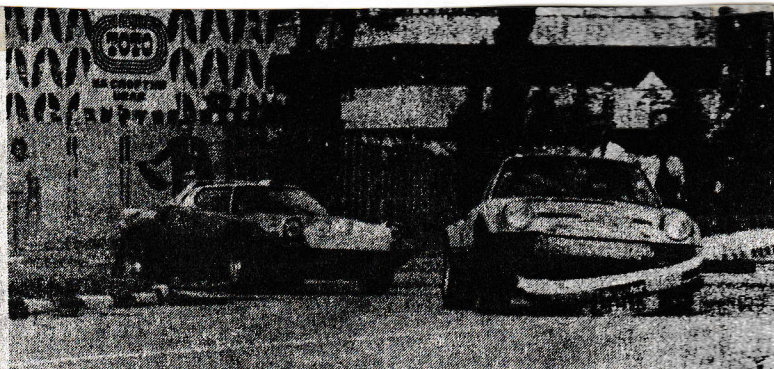
By way of a contrast Krupa himself had gone over to Renault 5, in his case an Alpine which he had only a few days earlier collected from Billancourt in France. Krupa was very quickly converted to this little car. "It forgives everything you do to it", he said. All the time he was thinking about Le Mans, held at the same time, wondering how Renaults were faring, thinking that perhaps a good result might enable Renault to concentrate on rallying and benefit him more. The car was so much quicker round the corners than either the 12 Gordini or the 17 Gordini that he had used previously. All it needed was another 20 bhp so that the car could see off those little plastic Skoda 130RSs from Czechoslovakia.

Skoda entered three officially: for Sedivy, Havel and Blahna, and between the four of them the competition for G2 honours was to be fought. Experience had showed that they ought to be faster than the Russian cars, of which five were entered: three Lada ("Vaz" in these regions) 1600s for Brundza, the same cars complete with flared arches as seen in Acropolis for Giraudskas and Kozircikov, the latter navigated by his wife who makes for all the world a passing Russian imitation of French belle "Biche"!

Group One came as a complete anticlimax: for British people it was interesting to see four RS2000s, the incredible Mark 1 car from Portugal of Giovanni Salvi that went so well on this year's Portuguese, whilst Chris Wathen had a Mark 2 bearing Withers and Vespers stickers and supported by Castrol and Champion. Wathen proved to be quite a bit faster than Salvi on the event, despite doing no practice and also having taken some poor advice from a well-wisher about tyres. This event demanded racing tyres on nearly all the stages and on the few loose surfaced tests they would probably have sufficed.

RALLY

The purpose of the racing at Albena was publicity. The organisers reckoned that 120,000 people saw the racing (free) and the mammoth traffic jams away from Albena afterwards helped to justify this estimate. The times taken to cover the five laps of the 3-km circuit were used as special stage times but did not decide the starting order later that



Above: Altenheimer clings determinedly to the lead in the Albena race while the Polish Stratos prepares for another fanatical lunge. Evidence of previous contact is obvious! Below: Chris Wathen outpaced all the G1 runners and was a most unlucky retirement when water was mistakenly poured into the RS2000's tank.



started in the 60s.

It was an occasion for the vain, and nothing appeared to have incensed the crowd-pleasing Jaroszewicz more than to have the yellow Porsche nose of Altenheimer challenge him for the first corner. The Pole went wild! Altenheimer then added insult to injury by taking the lead in the race. Jaroszewicz fought back angrily. In every possible way he tried to pass the Porsche. For a moment we thought they would touch each other, then on the next lap the Porsche's plastic nose was sadly adrift, it seemed as though they had.

In the middle of the race the flags (any flags, so long as they were waved and created a sense of urgency) were shown. A Peugeot 304 from Italy had gone off backwards, dangerously near the crowds, and with the rush of spectators to the corner in question, it seemed certain that the race would be stopped. But no. Then the Porsche and the Lancia arrived again, neck and neck, each daring the other to start braking first. By a miracle, the cars avoided the crowds, the marshals who were engulfed in them and the police who were blowing their whistles and in passing, doing little except heighten the sense of panic.

In this confusion, Altenheimer won the race, the Stratos stopped with smoke pouring from the exhaust and the Peugeot got going three laps down and proceeded to keep circulating at maximum speed oblivious of the crowds who assumed the race was over.

At 10pm the rally proper started under floodlights in front of the International Hotel. Rain hung in the air and in fact many of the stages were due to be wet. Landsberg started to attack, even though he had an unfamiliar car and gradually began to reduce Altenheimer's lead. Only after dawn could the Porsche begin once more to set the pace, by which time Landsberg was two minutes ahead. In the first night, only two important retirements occurred: Giraudskas's Lada had engine trouble, and so did Sedivy, who had been the fastest Skoda at Albena.

Landsberg had been off a couple of times, each for a half minute or so.

shaft failure, whilst the same problem put the Portuguese RS2000 out as well.

The four-hour rest was barely long enough to allow crews to recuperate. There was only a perfunctory parc fermé, and for most of the halt crews were able to work on the cars. Lidbury had grave problems with his alternators: a contact behind it had fused and shorted. Altenheimer had an oil leak which gradually got a lot worse and forced the crew to replenish the car with a litre every 100kms, whilst the battery would not hold its charge and they had to resort to push starts frequently. Ferjancz had a series of punctures and also had misfiring problems. The stages used in the second part were mainly those already used but in the opposite direction, and usually those done previously in the dark were in daylight, and vice versa.

There were three gravel stages and Landsberg was forced to tackle these on racing tyres after mislaying his service crew. This gave the hard-charging Pole a couple of punctures and the loss of a minute penalty at the end of the time control.

Tiredness was creeping up on the crews. Gunther Scheffel with his Group 1 Kadett GT/E from West Germany snoozed at a time control—and was woken by the Belgian Jan van der Bosch (Group One Datsun Violet) after he had waited three minutes too long. It was not only the drivers who felt the effects. Sadly Chris Wathen suffered the cruel fate of a tired mechanic filling his tank—with water. It took 45 minutes to drain the tank, far too late to continue.

The Porsche was four minutes clear of the Polish Renault, with another one minute before the Hungarian Renault whilst the last remaining Skoda was another 6 minutes back. This was Havel; Blahna having suffered gearbox trouble just before dawn.

Back at Zlatni Piasatz the early morning sun worshippers gathered to witness the arrival of the cars and also the non-competitive slalom which many tired drivers hardly cared about. Certainly the route taken by many bore