

Emancipation, Revolt, and Noblesse: The World of the Porsche Driver

In the beginning Porsche was something reserved for the very few. Accordingly, being a Porsche driver was completely different to what it is now at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, anyone who wants to understand the Porsche myth must know who its first adherents and propagandists were. They were wealthy self-made individuals and those born into riches, all of whom, despite their privileges, wanted something from life that at the time they had to create themselves. They were unruly spirits, activists, fanatics, go-getters, adventurers, idealists, bon viveurs, connoisseurs, speed lovers, and individualists.

Switzerland, which escaped the war and its destruction, would become Porsche's pioneer market. The first serially produced 356 was bought by Jolanda Tschudi, an emancipated woman far removed from the Nazi ideal of motherhood, who set records as a glider pilot and survived a series of risky African expeditions as a co-pilot, including seven emergency landings. The wiry little sports car appealed to individualists, to those who didn't need a car of baroque proportions to assert themselves. From the very start this included women, who also used the Porsche, a comparatively dainty car devoid of macho posturing, as a driving force for emancipation. They were sporty, self-confident, often tomboyish ladies of a provocatively natural type who were determined to define their own roles, rather than have them dictated by society. They were independent in every

sense, including financially. As daredevils and risk takers they competed in motor races, frequently beating the men, who, back then, were as incapable of dealing with this shame as their fellow men 70 years later.

Gilberte Thirion had a model for a mother and a motor racing-obsessed industrialist for a father. During her first racing trials in a Porsche 356 SL, her father sat in the co-driver seat and assisted his courageous daughter. A highly unusual role allocation for a successful businessman at the beginning of the 1950s. Nevertheless, it fitted the image of that privileged, liberal milieu where Porsche found its first and increasingly loyal customers. Thirion worked as a PR woman for Champion spark plugs and surprised journalists with her technical knowledge, which was unusual for a woman at that time. In 1953 she had a bad accident during a race in France, lay in hospital for over a month, and was confined to bed for a further four weeks. This failed to cure her of her passion for speed, however. Like many racing drivers of the time Thirion competed in both road races and rallies. For the 1954 season she shared a Gordini Roadster with Annie Bousquet, nee Schaffer, a native of Vienna who was even more uninhibited than Thirion. Having met her French husband when he was a prisoner in Austria, Bousquet began to take an interest in motor racing, when, after a skiing accident in Sestriere, she met the then famous racing driver Alberto Ascari at the hotel bar who engaged her on the spot as a co-driver for his next rally. Like Thirion, Annie Bousquet competed in rallies and circuit races. Both racing drivers paid little attention to male

» Count Paul von Metternich with a 356 1500 S cabriolet at the Carrera Panamericana race in November 1952.

