

'I shall fight on'



Above, Fritz Schlumpf was a visitor to this year's Geneva Motor Show (photo by Maurice Rowe, *Motor*)

An exclusive interview with Fritz Schlumpf, founder of the Mülhausen car collection.

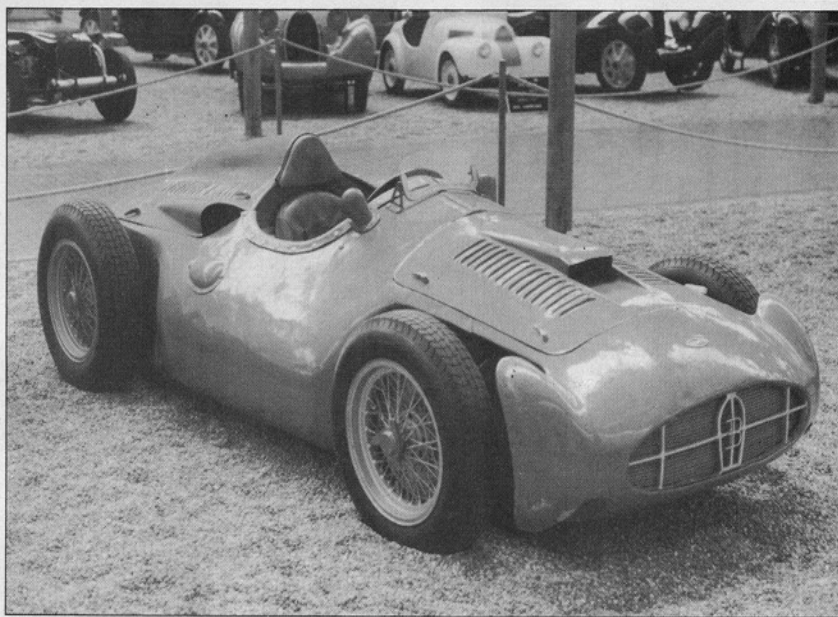
A few weeks ago, the two Swiss textile industrialists Fritz and Hans Schlumpf were sentenced in their absence by the court at Mülhausen to four and two years penal servitude and to large fines. Switzerland's weekly motoring newspaper, *Automobile Review*, succeeded in talking to Fritz Schlumpf a few days before the verdict and asked him his view about it and about his unique car collection. We are publishing extracts from this interview below. We should like to give our readers the chance to hear the comments of the main actor so that they can form their own opinions about his case.

AR: Mr Schlumpf, how did your career as a textile industrialist start?

FS: I entered the textile business in 1924 at the age of 17½. From 1934 onwards, my brother Hans and I were buying shares in the wool spinning firm at Malmerspach in Alsace, whose manager I became on October 1, 1938. A year later I was made president and managing director of this firm which I managed together with my brother, until June, 1967. We resigned from our jobs on June 28, 1976.

AR: What were the troubles, when did they start and what were the reasons for them?

FS: We gradually bought up spinning mills in Erstein and Mülhausen (the former firm of Heilmann, Koehlin and Desaulles) and the weaving mill of Deffrenne at Roubaix (France). In 1971 we bought the firm of Gluck & Cie at Mülhausen. In 1973 I was at the head of a textile empire of considerable size, employing about 2200 people. Everything was running satisfactorily. The shares of my firms, after deducting all liabilities, were worth about 42million francs. This did not include



One requires several visits to the Schlumpf collection just to take in the incredible wealth sheltered under one roof by the brothers. Above, Bugatti 251. Right, Alfa Romeo 1900 Spyder. Opposite above, the Rindt/Gregory Ferrari 250LM Le Mans car of 1964. Opposite below, pre-war Mercedes Grand Prix single-seater. It just goes on and on and even without the Bugattis it would be fabulous



the real estate or property, as well as about 400 flats.

In 1974, there was a world-wide crisis, which did not just affect the textile industry. Wages continued to spiral upwards without our having the chance of passing the wage costs off in the form of manufacturing costs. The competition from Germany and Italy caused increasing trouble, not to mention the dumping prices of textile products by which the Near Eastern and Middle Eastern firms captured the market. The difficulties continued to get worse. Within three years, the 42million francs-worth of assets, which I mentioned had gone. In addition, there was the bad behaviour of the management of my factory at Roubaix.

AR: What conclusions did you draw from these difficulties?

FS: After the loss of the 42million francs became evident, it was clear to me in June 1976 that there was no point in going on in these conditions. My brother and I therefore decided, before I had any real difficulties in payment, to retire from the management of our firms. I asked the court at Mülhausen to appoint a provisional management and that they should relieve us from management temporarily and bring the ship back on course.

However, these managers applied for the liquidation of my companies. They deposited the accounts at the court and sacked the entire staff. The workers were supported by unemployment insurance for two years, although they had the opportunity of taking other jobs.

I have heard that 20 to 30 of my former workers are still unemployed. Although I offered to help them, no one has asked me to do so.

Doubtful business?

AR: Without getting involved in details, we should like to ask another question on this subject. Did you not carry out some questionable or at least doubtful business to your own advantage or to the advantage of the museum at Mülhausen? On the one hand your firm suffered

shipwreck and on the other hand you were able to set up this unique museum. How do you explain this contradiction?

FS: One must distinguish here: I was a businessman and a collector. Both were compulsive. It is true that during the last 35 years I amassed a wonderful collection of cars, including some extraordinarily rare ones but I can assure you that I did not pay for a single one with my firm's money, although this has been repeatedly stated. The cars were paid for with our *personal* money. Only small, quite insignificant amounts came from the firm's money. I regarded these sums as advertising, as the reputation of the museum would benefit my firms.

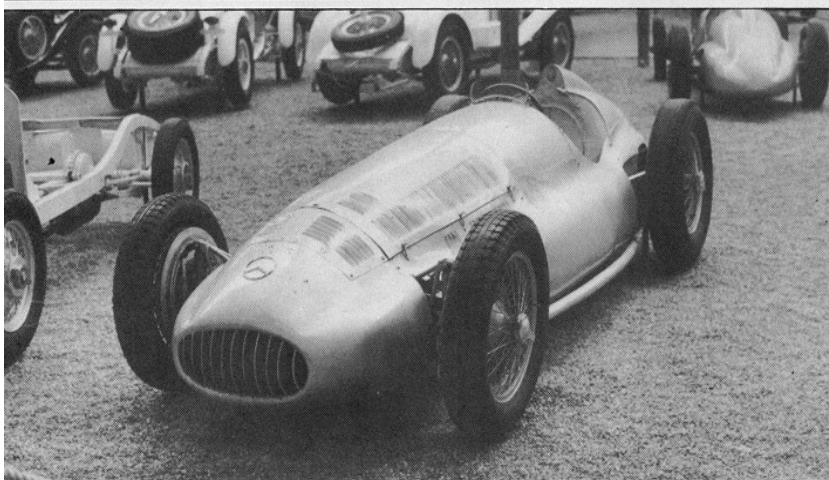
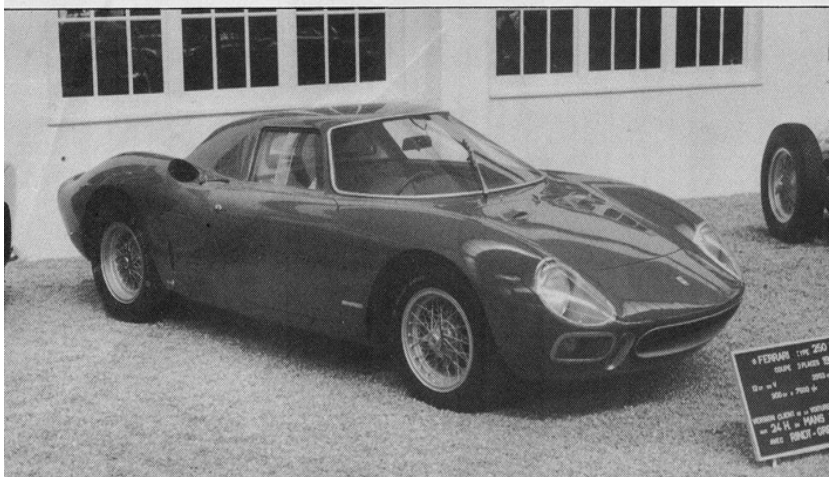
AR: You had put the money aside when your business was doing well?

FS: I am sure that you will agree that in the course of a long life it is possible to put something aside. That is what I did and I could afford the luxury of buying cars which I liked. One must not forget that I bought most of my vehicles between 1960 and 1965. At that time it was possible to buy these old cars at very favourable prices. From my documents it is possible to record the supplier, date of purchase and purchase price of each car. No irregularities were found here.

AR: You therefore regard yourself as the victim of circumstances?

FS: I have done nothing which is against the law. I was accused of embezzlement, which is completely untrue. If I had had the opportunity of appearing in front of the Mülhausen court, I could have defended my case, but I have been threatened with arrest in France since 1977 and this order has not been rescinded yet. This made it impossible for me to appear.

AR: Apart from your collection, do you have any



other real estate in France?

FS: I put my savings and my entire fortune into my firms and into my collection. I have never owned an apartment or a villa or a yacht in France. My life consisted entirely of work.

The compulsion was the start

AR: In order to amass such an extraordinary collection of cars, you need to have a passion for them. Where did this come from in your case?

FS: Other people prefer paintings or hunting but I have always had a passion for cars. I particularly like the Bugatti models as I knew Ettore Bugatti personally and was friendly with his family. One of my first cars was the Bugatti model 35B. All my Bugatti cars were restored in the Bugatti workshops which no longer exist.

AR: What induced you to build up a collection such as this?

FS: It is like collecting stamps. You start in a small way and it increases automatically. My passion for cars drove me on to buy more and more of them and to expand the collection. I restricted myself to European cars and this includes all the Bugatti models, 48 Daimler Benz right up to the Formula racing models, a total of 560 vehicles.

AR: How did you set about collecting?

FS: I had middle men all over the world who kept me informed.

AR: Do you believe the present managers do not respect the value of this collection in the same way that you did?

FS: As you know, the museum was occupied by the trade unions from 1977 to 1979 who behaved scandalously. During this period, a million visitors paid 10million francs in entrance fees. The Lord Mayor of Mülhausen promised the

trade unions in writing, without authority, that he would not demand the 10million from them.

I therefore went to the Mülhausen court, which replied: "The workers are occupying the Museum but they are not doing any damage". I appealed to the court at Colmar, where I lost again. Finally I turned to the superior court in Paris. This court made the remarkable decision, that the trade unions had to leave the museum. They then left and the trade unions demanded the sale of the museum contents in order to pay the debts. These amounted to 45million francs at that time. On June 28, 1976 (on the day when Hans and Fritz Schlumpf resigned from their jobs), my accounts were not only balanced but showed a surplus. My factories were therefore legally given away. The Gluck spinning mill was sold for one million francs, although the stocks in hand alone were valued at 12millions. This stock was sold for 2.9million francs. The same purchaser incorporated the assets into his new company but in the meantime, the value rose to 19million francs.

Finally, the vehicles had to be sold. In this, the so-called experts showed themselves to be totally ignorant as they estimated the value of the whole collection at only 50million francs. A further expert understood even less about old cars. He demanded that the bonnet of the most beautiful car in the world, the Royale Bugatti Coupé Napoleon should be opened. When he saw that the length of the engine was one metre, he was so confused that he thought the sparking plugs were the cylinders. He saw that the engine had 16 sparking plugs and recorded that it had 16 cylinders, although it was an eight-cylinder engine with double ignition.

AR: Do you have any hope of regaining possession of the museum one day?

FS: The museum does not belong to the French state, it still belongs to me even if it has temporarily been taken away. The decision of the appeal court at Colmar on June 8, 1982 is therefore wrong. The price which the French state paid for the cars was low because I was accused that I had not submitted any vehicle documents. How do these prove that the car is genuine? There were no vehicle documents before 1915, and they are of no importance anyway in my opinion.

The appeal court in Colmar declared that it was not possible to put a figure on the value of the cars, although an expert assessment was made for each individual car. The collection as a whole is worth far more than the cars individually.

The museum belongs to me

AR: You therefore still regard the museum as yours?

FS: Yes, it belongs to me. I have appealed against the Colmar verdict to the superior court in Paris. That is the present state of the case. According to my lawyers, I should win the case in a few months time. If that is not the case, there is still the European court at Strasbourg. I am sure that the verdict there will be in my favour and I shall regain possession of my museum.

AR: Why have the courts dealing with the case found against you all the time? Is it a matter of jealousy or bias?

FS: Everyone says that it is a political decision. My brother and I are Swiss therefore we are regarded as capitalists in France as xenophobia has grown in this country.

AR: Did you choose Basle as your new domicile in order to escape French justice?

FS: We were kept prisoner for 72 hours. After we were freed, we had to go abroad in order to escape the trade unions. That is what led us to Basle.

They said we had fled. I refute this accusation. We reported our leaving Malmerspach and arrival in Basle quite correctly. We have settled here because it is only 30km from Mülhausen, which makes daily contact with my friends and the Alsatian workers easier. I have received good wishes not only from my former employees but from all over the world.

AR: Do you regard yourself as Swiss, although you have spent most of your life abroad?

FS: My mother was French and so is my wife. I have lived in France for 65 years and have many ties there but I am Swiss and proud of it. We are an old family from the Canton of Sankt Gallen and have always kept our Swiss nationality.

A rich life

AR: You were once at the head of many firms. What remains of all this?

FS: There is nothing left of my textile empire. The money of my companies belongs to these companies. Naturally I made a certain fortune in this time. I still have that.

AR: You can look back on a busy life. Are you not tired of this eternal struggle?

FS: I have had a rich life but I am not tired. Everything which happened was done with passion. That applies to building up the textile firm and the amassing of the car collection. I shall continue to fight against injustice to my last breath.

AR: What means do you have, at a distance, as you cannot fight locally?

FS: I have 16 lawyers and three professors of Jurisprudence available to me. I also have the support of M Poncet, professor of international law at Geneva. We shall fight together.

AR: If you had the opportunity of doing things again, would you do them in the same way or is there something which you regret?

FS: I would do everything in exactly the same way as I originally did it. I regret only one thing, that I did not live but just worked all the time. ☹