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Anatole Lapine

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Anatole Lapine, 1973



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Anatole Lapine who was in charge of styling at Porsche under two disparate CEOs, Fuhrmann and Schutz, looks back on quite a CV: Chevrolet Corvette, Opel GT, Porsche 928, Porsche 964. But there is a lot more to this designer whose career spans two continents and most of the second half of the twentieth century, and who for thirty years, was close to Ferry Porsche.



Le Mans 24 Hours, 15 June 1969: Richard Attwood takes a refreshing drink. Standing above is Hans Mezger (second from the

right) and Anatole Lapine (third from right in Porsche jacket)

Son of a half German half Latvian father and a Polish mother, Anatole Lapine's first years were spent in Riga, the capital of the then (and since 1990 again) independent Latvia. His father owned a furniture warehouse, but this relatively comfortable middle class existence was to come to an abrupt end in 1941 when the Russians invaded Latvia and the Lapine family fled to (German occupied) Poland. As a young teenager in Poznan, Anatole joined the Hitler Youth (membership was compulsory) and discovered the joys of design as he assembled model aircraft for competitions. This was the calm before the storm. In 1944, with the Russians advancing across Poland, the Lapines were once again forced to flee, this time into Germany and when the war ended they found themselves refugees in a village outside Hamburg. Initially they were helped by a company of the Royal Corps of Electrical Engineers (Anatole peeled potatoes for the regiment), but when the troops left, the family like most refugees endured very lean times for a couple of years. Eventually Anatole was able to go to school but had to suffer the humiliation of classes with children half his age as his German was still rudimentary. He stuck at it though with the determination of someone who one day would make his mark on society: by 1950 aged 20, he was an apprentice at Mercedes Benz in Hamburg. The following year the family was offered visas to the United States under the UN resettlement of refugee's programme. Anatole found himself in Lincoln, Nebraska. This was a pretty traumatic experience: "It was the coldest place in the world!" he exclaims and goes on to describe how he got a job maintaining snow ploughs thanks to his Mercedes experience. The US is a land of opportunity and as soon as he had completed his education, "and I had money enough to buy a decent suit," he set off for the bright lights of Detroit, the capital of the automotive world.



Nürburgring 1000 km, 1 June 1969: Anatole Lapine (Head of Porsche Design Dept.)

It was 1953 and he was recruited by a General Motors research company, Fisher Bodies, which worked on aircraft fuselage design. "Tony," as he had become known, retains his great admiration for the country that gave him a start in life. "It's the can-do mentality," he remarked, "The Americans invented the atomic bomb and they got men on the moon." Not for nothing is he still an American citizen.



Le Mans 1970: Standing outside the workshop in Teloché before the race are (from L - R) Peter Falk, Ferry Porsche (in hat and dark glasses), Tony Lapine, Huschke von Hanstein and Ursula von Hanstein

Professionally things were starting to move: his first design job involved creating a seating buck for the 1954 Cadillac. This would decide the internal dimensions and allow a clay model to be made. Lapine smiles: "The roof line had to take into account that people all wore hats in those days." Then he went to work for body development under Fred Walther, a

noted designer who had been with Gläser in Dresden before the war. This was the company which had shaped not just famous Alfa Romeos, but half the cars on Germany's roads, the Horch, the DKW, Auto Union, Wanderer to name but the most famous. It was the start of an amazing period. Reporting to styling chief Bill Mitchell, he was put to work with Larry Shinoda on restyling the Chevrolet Corvette. Mitchell wanted something altogether racier than the conservative looking original. Here Lapine also got to know Wolfgang Möbius, a young designer from Opel, sent over to Detroit to gain some US experience. He met too, and soon became firm friends with Zora Arkus-Duntov, Chevrolet's chief engineer, Belgian born, but brought up in Russia until his family fled communism to settle in Germany where he trained as an engineer. Duntov knew Ferry Porsche, and he raced the 550 Spyder at Le Mans in 1954 and 55 with significant success. It was through Duntov that Lapine first came across Porsche when Bill Mitchell invited Ferry Porsche to Detroit, and it was perhaps not surprising that the German speaking Lapine was brought into the discussions. The late fifties in GM were, he recollects, "They were colourful, exciting and sometimes even wild times, emotions ran high, I can even remember tears." It is a compelling account of a bold, exuberant period and the feeling that as designers they were really shaping not just a car, but almost society itself. Lapine had by this time become a successful young man, buying himself at the age of 29 a Porsche 356 coupé, which he still owned half a century later.



Colleagues in the Porsche Design Studio stand with a scale model of the Porsche 917 in 1970. Anatole Lapine stands at the right shoulder of the lady in red, with folded arms

GM was very conservative and would not permit its subsidiary to engage in motor sport. Lapine describes how Chevrolet got around this by assisting Jim Hall's Chaparral which

allowed Chevrolet to go racing by proxy. Later Penske Racing would get similar support, but Lapine's latter day involvement in racing was ended when he was despatched to Rüsselsheim in 1966. Here the atmosphere was more restrained, but once again, Mitchell's intention was to liven up Opel's staid brand image and the styling department at Rüsselsheim was to become the high temple of advanced design techniques. Here Lapine, together with Shinoda and Möbius was behind a number of exercises to rejuvenate the Opel range and the trio's best known work was the stylish Opel GT, which took many design cues from their earlier Corvair Monza GT concept.



Anatole Lapine stands outside a prototype helicopter made by the Wagner company in Friedrichshafen in March 1970. Sitting inside the cockpit is F.A. 'Butzi' Porsche (left) and Hans Epple (right), the owner of the company. Wagner was looking at producing these helicopters, but the project never got off the ground

It was at this stage that Anatole Lapine encountered Ferry Porsche again. Mitchell had invited Porsche to come and admire the styling set up at Opel and it was during the subsequent convivial dinner that Lapine understood that there was a potential opening for him in Stuttgart. Today he says that there was a certain destiny about his joining Porsche: "I knew, even in the 1950s, that I would be working for Porsche one day. I already knew Ferry Porsche well and when I did join (in 1969) it was like a homecoming." After three years at Opel, he met the Porsche boss again: this time the offer was more specific. Ferry was 59 and planning to stand back and let his eldest son Butzi become managing director. Lapine could take over Butzi's design position. The alternative for Lapine was to stay with GM and be repatriated to Detroit or be sent to Holden in Australia. Neither option was attractive: he was settled in Germany and his three children were in school there. Porsche would be his future.



Nürburgring 1000 km, 31 May 1970: Vic Elford stands on the Armco barrier as teammate Kurt Ahrens crosses the finish line in first place in the Porsche Salzburg entered #22 Porsche 908/3. Anatole Lapine stands to the left

He recalls his first office at Zuffenhausen: “It was Butzi’s old place, right next door to the machine shop with all the heat and noise.” This was a provisional arrangement, for Ferdinand Piëch’s spectacular new facility at Weissach would be ready in a year or so, enabling engineers and designers to work together with sight of the test track. One of Lapine’s first recruits was his old friend, Wolfgang Möbius, and together they worked on the joint project with VW (it was income from design and development for VW that largely financed Weissach) coded EA1966. This was the design which would furnish the basis of both a successor to the Beetle and a new Porsche. Lapine pulls out a book from the shelf behind him and we pore over photographs of a neat, rear engined two door hatch back, visually not unlike the Golf that eventually emerged. But then VW did a complete about face, tore up the agreement with Porsche (which was mostly an unwritten understanding between Ferry Porsche and VW’s chairman Heinz Nordorf who had died in 1968) and cancelled the project. This had two effects. It meant that in the medium term, Porsche was more committed to the 911 than ever, and that a fresh start to find its successor would have to begin.



A Porsche exhibition in the foyer of the bank 'Girokasse' - in the foreground is the #22 Le Mans winning 917 K from 1971, further

back is the #12 908/03 from 1970, while in the background is the #17 Gulf 917 LH from 1971. In the group on the right stands Helmuth Bott, Anatole Lapine and Herbert Staudenmaier

However, there was also Porsche's consultancy role to consider: the Russians had tendered for a car that could be built under licence in the Soviet Union (the car that eventually emerged was the Lada). Lapine and Möbius were duly despatched to Togliati, deep in central Asia. It is an episode which nicely illustrates our Latvian's sometimes irreverent and laid back approach and which makes him such entertaining company. He remembers Wolfgang's disbelief at the camels grazing unperturbed beside the runway only yards from their plane as it landed. There was more fun to come. Discussions took place in German with an interpreter, their Soviet opposite numbers making frequent asides in Russian. After a couple of hours, Tony Lapine, a native speaker, suddenly addressed them in Russian. Their consternation was comic to behold as the Russians tried desperately to remember what they might have said that had not been intended for their guests. Porsche subsequently built a model for Togliati, but nothing further came of the talks and the contract eventually went to Fiat. However, fifteen years later, the Lada Samara, the east Bloc's first front wheel drive car had a Weissach designed engine and transmission.



Anatole Lapine - Head of Porsche Design Dept., ca. 1973

An even more unusual design challenge arrived in the early '80s. Airbus Industrie, urged on by one of its German engineers and pilots who was a secret Porsche fan, contacted Stuttgart with a view to having Porsche design the cockpit for the A310. Porsche after all had a

history in aviation engines and designed cockpits for cars. It was also neutral, not having any connections with larger industrial groups like Daimler Benz. Lapine took Dick Soderberg with him to a reception at Toulouse which was positively regal in its lavishness. Tony Lapine was evidently at his best at times like this and the pair returned to Stuttgart with a substantial contract. Essentially, Airbus had suppressed the flight engineer's seat at the back of the cockpit which allowed six more passenger places. What Lapine's team had to do was reconfigure the entire instrument panel for pilot and co-pilot only. "The extent of the task became apparent when we looked out of the window and saw this enormous truck complete with police escort coming through the gates at Weissach with the entire front end of an Airbus on the back!" It was a great moment, and typically, Lapine is still laughing about it. But the episode also said much for Porsche's and Weissach's reputation as both an engineering and industrial consultancy.



Design Chief Anatole Lapine (front-centre with white shirt) with colleagues in Zuffenhausen in front of Werk 2, ca. 1973

But the 911 had undoubtedly got to be sorted out. Said Lapine: “The suspension was always a bit of a mystery on the fifties Porsches. It was Chevrolet engineer and Porsche racer Zora Arkus-Duntov who urged Ferry Porsche to fit anti roll bars.”

We asked Lapine about the 911. “Ah the 911. My first impressions were a mild disappointment,” said the man who had been driving a 356 for ten years. “It wasn’t anything specific, it just had no romance.”



Chief Designer, Anatole Lapine (second from left) in the Design Dept. with colleagues and a Porsche model, ca. 1973

He was also unhappy about the handling. The early A series cars could be treacherous, but the B series with its longer wheelbase and wider tyres was better and reflected the immense

pressure Ferdinand Piëch had been putting on his engineers to improve the 911. Lapine's default position was to talk about people rather than inanimate objects. He goes on: "I have no difficulty in admiring Piëch for what he was," Piëch's rigorously scientific approach was already legendary, "but it was a hard life if you didn't meet his standards. If he could sustain 48 hours without sleep, he expected everyone else to. He had a set of bathroom scales in his office: every component had to be weighed in front of him. That's how he got unsprung weight down!"

It was Duntov who urged Ferry Porsche to fit anti roll bars." Unless carefully controlled, swing axles have tendency to self-steer and Lapine is utterly scathing of a Chevrolet management which allowed their use on the "unsafe at any speed" (the title of the book by US lawyer Ralph Nader) Corvair.



Chief Designer, Anatole Lapine (second from left) in the Design Dept. with colleagues and a Porsche model, ca. 1973

The repercussions of “Unsafe at any Speed” had poisoned the atmosphere between Detroit and Congress and combined with exhaust emissions legislation, created considerable uncertainty about the future of an air cooled rear engine 911. Porsche’s newly appointed

managing director, Ernst Fuhrmann, took the logical route: he set out to wring as many sales as could be had from the 911 by creating a flagship model, the Turbo. This programme would run into the late seventies or as long as legislation permitted, by which time, a 911 successor and above all one which could be sold in the US, would be well established. This was the background to the creation of the 928.

Designers are usually at pains to explain that car styles are mostly a collegiate effort, but the lines of Porsche's 928, conceived under Anatole Lapine's guidance, will always be associated with Wolfgang Möbius.



Anatole Lapine's 911 2.4 S Coupé - model year 1973

It was natural that Porsche should turn to men like Lapine who knew the US market and its tastes, as America would make or break the 'new 911' (read 928). And it is fair to say that in essence the 928 was intended to be a vastly improved and refined Corvette: "That's what

Americans would buy,” said Lapine. Then, going off at a tangent, recalling the flop of the Corvair: “There was no need to air cool the engine or put it in the back: people just wanted a practical, cheap car. Even in 1959, the Corvair was needlessly radical. A conventional design (like the rival Ford Falcon) would, and did, sell far more.” This was the thinking behind the 928.



Anatole Lapine's 911 2.4 S Coupé - model year 1973

The 911 had offered more cabin space than the 356, the 928 with its 9-inch longer wheelbase, was a further improvement in this. The 928 was of course a total *volte face* for Porsche: it looked stunningly modern with its smooth, "soft" front and rear, a feature which became standard on virtually all cars two decades later, and again closer to what Americans could buy from Ford or Chevrolet. "Americans park by ear," explained Lapine, "so you have to have a design that will put up with that."



This photo shows the Porsche 924 Turbo at its introductory celebration which was held outside the hexagonal building at Weissach in 1978. The photo shoot was set up for

marketing purposes, and the man spraying the champagne is from the marketing department, and is not a racing driver - the racing overall was merely for effect! Standing second from the left is Jürgen Barth, who had won the 1977 Le Mans 24 Hours. Anatole Lapine is standing to the viewer's right of Barth and towards the back

Contemporary road tests were very complimentary: with its 4.5-litre V8, the 928 was as fast as a Porsche was expected to be and much easier and more relaxing to drive than a 911 Turbo, and with its optional automatic transmission, almost serene in comparison. But by the time it was launched, rather later than planned, the world had moved on. The threat to the 911's rear engine architecture had dissolved and Porsche's engineers had got to grips with making the flat six comply with exhaust rules without loss of power and throttle response. The 928 also came out at a time when the 911, in its racing 935 guise, had become one of the most successful racing cars of all time and the Alméras 911 had just won the Monte Carlo rally. The 928's Car of the Year award (not attended by Ferry Porsche) was to no avail and the 928 was destined to a lonely, if very long career at Porsche. It sold well enough initially, with 22,000 produced between 1977 and 82, (compared with 32,000 of the 911 SC) and by any standards, it was a superb car. Unfortunately for the 928, it was made and marketed by the wrong company. Porsche's entire image militated against this conventional yet highly sophisticated GT.



Porsche 928 study: Wolfgang Möbius (3rd from right), Anatole Lapine (4th from right), Eberhard Schulz (5th from right), Peter Reisinger (6th from right), ca. 1978

Tony Lapine left Porsche almost a quarter of a century ago (at the time of this interview) and the heat and dust of partisan arguments have long died down. He does not defend the 928, though he does feel that the 928 was *his* contribution to Porsche. In fact, he is reluctant to talk in detail about it, and there is no doubt that a certain disappointment lingers. But people and relationships are more important to him than designs, and Lapine talks warmly of most of the cast of characters who populated Porsche during his time. Ferry Porsche could never bring himself to accept the 928 (and this set the tone for his colleagues) but this did not affect the esteem in which Lapine held him.



Anatole Lapine with the 928 at the awards ceremony at the 'Style Auto Turin' 1978

“He [Ferry] really came of age after his father died. At last he could stay in bed another half hour or have a second cup of coffee.” This idea of not being at the beck and call of someone else, of being an independent spirit, recurs in Tony Lapine’s narrative. “Ferry was a diffident, self-effacing character, easily offended by forward people. He spent his first forty years dominated by his famous dad so what he achieved in the next forty years is admirable, incredible.”

In his dealings with people, Ferry could be disarmingly effective: “He had a very soft voice and you had to listen hard not to miss anything. He would suddenly stop in the middle of his sentence, leaving you to finish it: a very potent way of putting you in his power. And he had a mysterious Mona Lisa smile. Like a sphinx. You didn’t always quite know what he was thinking. He had no formal education beyond secondary school, but he was very clever. I used to think Porsche had an aura, equalled perhaps only by Ferrari.”



Anatole Lapine stands in the middle (holding glasses) with his colleagues from the Design Dept. on the occasion of the completion of the Porsche 924 Carrera GT (1980). On the extreme right in the jersey is Peter Reisinger

In the 1990s, veteran engineer Peter Falk was to say that they had worked to develop the

928 because it was their responsibility, but they worked on the 911 with their hearts. This was the company that Ferry had assembled, “Porsche is a philosophy which happens to build cars,” said Lapine.

A short time after he came to Zuffenhausen, the governing Porsche and Piëch families withdrew and appointed fellow Austrian Ernst Fuhrmann to manage Porsche. “He was a brilliant, but abrasive character,” recalled Lapine, “I got on with him but he had a difficult time at Porsche.” Fuhrmann was the driving force behind the 928, a venture fully supported by Lapine, but he ultimately fell out with Ferry Porsche. His replacement, Peter Schutz was a very different individual. Lapine liked him on a personal level, but less as someone he had to report to. Effectively, Lapine found himself demoted, having to answer through Bott who was head of development. “It meant I wasn’t a party to many of Schutz’s schemes: cars like the 959 emerged first via Bott’s engineers rather than the design studio.”



At the retirement party for Peter Reisinger on 29 April 2005 in Weissach: (from L-R) Peter Reisinger, Anatole Lapine, Harm Lagaaij and Michael Mauer

“Schutz rapidly understood that what Ferry Porsche really responded to was praise. He used to go and say nice things to him three times a day. Schutz was an embarrassment. Those of us around Ferry told him to beware of his new MD, but he was completely taken in by him for a couple of years. Peter Schutz was a charlatan,” Lapine concluded with sudden emphasis.

A harsh judgment perhaps; Schutz was instrumental in getting the company behind the 911 again, turning the racing 924 GT into a proper entry level Porsche, the 944, and in breathing new life into the racing programme. If some of his ventures were unwise and costly such as the aero engine project, or ultimately caused Porsche to over reach itself with the ambitious Formula 1 engine, the collapse the dollar was the real reason for his downfall.



At the retirement party for Peter Reisinger on 29 April 2005, design colleagues Anatole Lapine, Grant Larson and Harm Lagaaij, enjoy the festivities

But with Fuhrmann's *verbot* on 911 development lifted by Schutz, the Carrera could be updated, the main change being the introduction in 1983 of the 3.2 engine. At this time too, plans were laid for the 964. This was a real challenge: Lapine's mission was to reform the 911 for four-wheel drive and to update it without changing anything of its shape above the upper level of the bumpers.

"Our main concern was to deliver the required complex product which would continue to maintain the company's profitability," admitted Lapine in a rare defensive lapse into company speak. "Also, the car would go for 20 years, so the design would have to last."

Always sceptical of the value of the whale tail, the 964 was a chance for Lapine to have his

team produce a 911 without appendages and in this, the discreetly yet totally re-engineered 964 was an undoubted success. Norbert Singer planned the aerodynamics, and Möbius and Dick Soderberg penned most of its lines.



Anatole Lapine delivers a farewell speech for long-time friend and colleague Peter Reisinger, on his retirement on 29 April 2005. Standing next to Lapine (from L-R) is Steve Murkett, unknown, Grant Larson, and on the extreme right is Harm Lagaaij

The 964 was Tony Lapine's last major work at Porsche: by 1987, things were changing fast: the weak dollar had made the cars expensive in the US and sales were falling off; Peter Schutz left the company and Lapine had a stroke which kept him out of the office for some time. As he recovered, he began to think in terms of a new challenge. Helmuth Bott, with whom he had always worked well, agreed to his retiring from Porsche. Indeed, it was all change at Weissach for Bott himself, his reputation diminished by huge cost over runs on

several Schutz era projects like the 959, departed too. Lapine sees his last boss as a sad figure: “Bott was a good guy and for 35 years he worked terribly hard for Porsche. I once visited him at home. He was a fossil collector and the walls inside his sitting room were grey with all the stuff he’d amassed. There was a total absence of colour. It struck me it was more of an affliction than a pastime.” It was very different from Tony Lapine’s living environment: his home today in Baden-Baden reflects his outgoing and catholic tastes. The walls are hung with pictures of horses, boats and bookshelves crammed with works on design, style, history and photograph albums. In the corner is his jazz drum kit. A nice domestic touch is the assortment of yellowing drawings and models his various grandchildren have produced over the years for him. Lapine has no regrets about quitting when he did. “People got so intense, so *German*: they wore themselves out. Komenda (who styled the 356 and had done many pre-war Porsche designs) was still there when I arrived and had survived all the changes, but he had chronic digestion problems; poor Wolfgang (Möbius) was terribly ill. I had a heart attack.” Though he claims he can enjoy his retirement doing nothing, Lapine has still managed to do things most people never achieve in a lifetime. Like his former boss, Fuhrmann, he taught for a period at Vienna University: “I ran classes on design. I would present a topic and the students would produce projects. They were impressively committed.” Design and aerodynamics are closely related and Lapine became fascinated by findings from Porsche’s aqua canal. Using water rather than airflow to assess aerodynamic efficiency is easier and cheaper - flow patterns and unwanted vortexes can be seen with a much slower rate of flow. Lapine took this knowledge off to a Dutch boat builder and had him build an aluminium hulled yacht which he and one of his sons sailed across the Atlantic. Anatole, this was perhaps a symbolic reincarnation of his original voyage to America 40 years before, which began his career.



Two old friends who had seen it all at Porsche, Peter Reisinger (left) and Anatole Lapine (right)

He was saddened by Porsche's assimilation by VW. "It won't affect the short term, but in the long term, how much of its own engineering will Porsche be allowed to keep?" In many ways, he sees this as another episode in the incredible family feud, a true soap opera which has raged between the Porsches and Piëchs since before the war. "It was always so terribly political: you could never agree to do something for Butzi, for example, without the Piëchs getting upset. If you talked to Ferdinand Piëch, then the Porsches would all be muttering suspiciously." As the transfer to VW of the Porsche Salzburg dealership empire, for decades a highly lucrative business, goes ahead over the next year, Lapine sees nothing but more vehement and bitter discord. "If you wrote it as a television script, it would be thrown back at you for being too unbelievable," he finished, with his characteristic mischievous grin.

His 356 is at his son's home in California and it is not really a surprise that there is no 911 in his garage here in Germany: "I drove plenty, but I've never owned one. I've got a 3-litre Jaguar S-type. It's a great looking car. I think William Lyons would have approved."

Coming from a designer with the credentials of Anatole Lapine, it would be impolite to disagree.

Written by: Kieron Fennelly

Images by: Porsche Werkfoto

Note:

Anatole Lapine was born on 23 May 1930, in Riga, Latvia. He died on 29 April 2012, in Baden-Baden, Germany, aged 82 years