

# Hair-raising Herald Adventures

Andrew Z Szydlo looks back on 33 years of ownership

Never, as a child, did I dream that one day I would own a motor car, let alone seven, all at the same time. This story is about my first car, a white Triumph Herald 13/60 saloon, registration UGU 188F, which I bought from a friend, Henry Grala, for £250 in July 1975 shortly after I passed my driving test.

I had never thought that I would need a car, since all my friends in West London, where I grew up, were within cycling distance. However, when I got my second teaching job at the prestigious Highgate School in North London in January 1975, I realised that cycling from Highgate, where I then lived, to Acton to meet my friends every day, would consume too much time and effort in the long run. So a car had to be purchased.

On 24 July 1975, I proudly took possession of my new acquisition. To this day I remember the thrill of reaching 40 mph as I pushed my foot on the accelerator pedal, going westwards on the A40 from Shepherd's Bush to Acton. It was a truly remarkable feeling – doing so little and going so fast! I knew nothing at all about cars at this stage, so I had the car serviced. I paid £70 for this and as my eyes scanned the list of jobs which had been done, I felt embarrassed about how little I knew: *change oil, oil filter, spark plugs, distributor cap, points, condenser, rotor arm. Set ignition timing, adjust valve timing, change brake shoes and adjust handbrake, replace brake pads, grease front swivels and water pump, bleed brake system, top up carburettor dashpot, differential unit and gearbox.* It all seemed like a pile of mumbo-jumbo. But at least I knew where to pour the petrol in and so I started going on excursions.

In October of that year, a good friend of mine, Charles Jonscher, suggested that we go to Poland for a short winter holiday during the Christmas period. This, of course, was a daunting challenge in those times: Poland was part of the Soviet Bloc and, as such, it was administered by a communist, totalitarian government. A visa was required to enter Poland and since the route to Poland included East Germany, which was also part of the Soviet Bloc and which was heavily guarded to prevent people from escaping from it, we also needed a transit visa for East Germany.

This enabled one to travel, on motorways only, from Helmstedt in West Germany to Swiecko in Poland. In



the event of a mechanical breakdown, one had to be towed, at a huge expense, to the nearest border. If you accidentally strayed off route, you were liable to be arrested and put into prison on suspicion of spying for the 'West'. As you crossed the border into East Germany from West Germany, there was a 300 yard stretch of no man's land. This was to ensure that anyone trying to escape from the East to the West could easily be spotted from one of the numerous observation towers and ruthlessly machine-gunned down, to set an example to others. As the border was crossed from West to East Germany, machine-gun-brandishing police would search the car for any contraband: radios, guns, drugs or people trying to illegally enter the country. Mirrors were wheeled under cars in order to see if

someone was clinging to the underside. No, East Germany was not a pleasant prospect for a motor car traveller to Poland! And then there was the Polish border – crooked officials who would try to extort 'customs duty' for oranges or washing powder, or other presents (necessities) which were carried. Attempts would be made to buy black market dollars, for which there was a huge demand. And with dollars and black market zlotys, Poland was so very cheap. One could live like a king! So yes, a motor car trip to Poland sounded like just the perfect holiday for us!

Naturally, I was concerned about the condition of the car. Since I knew nothing about car mechanics, I dreaded the prospect of a mechanical failure in East Germany and being locked up in a



Club Torque



cell, accused of spying for the West and being forced to pay some extortionate sum of money to get to the West German border. So I asked Charles, my travelling companion, whether he knew anything about cars? "No," came back the answer. He didn't feel it was necessary to know anything about cars, since, in the words of his own simple reassuring logic – if the car can get from Highgate to Shepherd's Bush, it will get from London to Warsaw. Charles also invited his student friend from Cambridge University, John Moore, to come on the trip. Although John was also no car mechanic, he did know some German. So at least he *might* be useful in case of problems in Germany.

We reached Poland without any trouble. All the border guards let us through, no awkward questions were asked by

customs officials, and all the paperwork was in order. However, the car did develop a peculiar rumbling sound, nothing too serious, somewhere from the rear, when it freewheeled. There was no sound when we were driving down the motorway, but the rumbling was apparent between gear changes – clearly something was loose. Our arrival in snowbound Warsaw naturally caused something of a sensation among our friends there. (Both Charles and I are fluent Polish speakers and had established some personal friendships in Warsaw, as well as having relatives there.) Very few people had cars in those days and very few cars from the UK ever travelled to Poland. So the Triumph Herald was certainly viewed with a great deal of interest.

One of my Warsaw friends, Roman Domanski (a lecturer in engineering from



Warsaw Technical University), suggested that we go hunting to the Kampinowska Puszcza (Kampinos Forest), about 50 km west of Warsaw. We were naturally delighted to be asked to take part in such an unusual adventure. Roman also brought another friend with him and so the five of us set off, in deep snow and freezing conditions, dressed in fur coats and with a boot full of guns and winter picnic equipment, in the tiny Triumph Herald. The forest was amazing – snow lay all around and we went for a brisk walk. Although a few shots were fired, these were mainly to make a loud noise – no suitable animal targets presented themselves. So our hunting trip ended rather uneventfully that afternoon.

As we drove towards the outskirts of Warsaw on the return journey however, the rumbling sound at the back of the car turned into a distinct knocking sound which gradually grew louder and louder. Until, finally, there was a loud mechanical bang, the car lurched heavily to one side and rapidly ground to a halt. A wheel had obviously become detached from the transmission. Oh dear, I thought to myself, this must surely be the end of the car. I always panic in such situations and assume the worst possible outcome. So I had fleeting visions of leaving the broken car in Poland, having it impounded by tax officials and paying a huge sum of money to have it transported back to England, even though I did have 5<sup>th</sup> insurance cover. (This was a special kind of insurance which meant that, in the event of a breakdown, our car would get towed back to England free of charge and that we could stay – also free of charge – in an hotel while the car was being repaired, or transported.)

However, neither my Polish friends nor my English friends were unduly concerned – they believed that even in this seemingly hopeless situation, a solution could be found. We all got out of the car, which looked in a very sorry state, listing badly to one side. Roman and his friend went into the nearest block of flats about 30 yards away and five minutes later emerged with a man who suggested that we push the car over a pit, where he could examine it. (The man was not a mechanic, of course, but he did own a car.) After examining the underside of the car for three minutes, he came out, saying that the car would be easy to repair, but that he had to go upstairs to his flat, to get four nuts and bolts. I could not believe that this was going to be possible. Nevertheless a few minutes later, he came out with the nuts and bolts, went under the car and, using

basic tools from my tool box, fixed the car. I was absolutely incredulous – a seemingly terminal failure of the car had been fixed simply and efficiently, by someone 'off the street'. Most impressive, I thought to myself. Naturally, I was very keen to see what the fault had been. The gentleman invited me to the pit and explained to me from the underside of the car, that a loose universal joint in the rear axle had caused a fracture of the four bolts which hold two flanges together. When I get back to England, he informed me, I should get the universal joint changed (not an expensive job) and the car would be as good as new. I was both amazed and delighted with this outcome. "Oh, and by the way," he added, "do drive carefully and make sure that you avoid any sudden changes of speed, since the four bolts could shear again. Should that happen, install a fresh set of bolt, and they should get you home." I thanked the man profusely for his advice and we all drove on. The whole episode cost us one and a half hours in time. I reflected on this later on – how extraordinary that a car which was completely and utterly useless at one moment due to a major fault, could be repaired by the first person whom we met, in a distant foreign country. Amazing, but true!

The next few days in Poland passed by rather uneventfully as far as the car was concerned. But bearing in mind the fact that I was going to have to go to a garage in London to have a universal joint repaired and knowing nothing about the way in which a car works, I decided to try and learn a bit more about my particular problem, i.e. the universal joint. So on the motorway (the only motorway in Poland at that time) between Poznan and Warsaw, I called into a garage with a 'free advice' facility. The car was placed on a ramp and the garage mechanic explained to me exactly what a universal joint is, how it works, what was wrong with my one and what needed to be done. So, by then, I did have a good idea of what would be repaired and I felt that I would be able to talk to an English car mechanic with some level of confidence – having translated into English all the new technical terms which I had learnt in Polish, that is!

Spirits were high as we crossed the border from Poland into East Germany on the following day. But just as I accelerated into fourth gear on the cobbled German slip road, there was a loud mechanical bang, the car lurched violently to the right and, yes, you've guessed it, the same four bolts had snapped again. Apart from the potentially disastrous consequences

of being stranded in East Germany without the relevant paperwork, we were reasonably confident that a repair could be effected. There was just one problem – we didn't have a spare set of four nuts and bolts. Fortunately, our breakdown had occurred about 100 yards from a boiler house which constituted part of the border buildings complex. We knocked on the door and after a few seconds an East German boiler mechanic in oily overalls opened the door. Using a combination of gesticulation and broken German, John Moore explained our dilemma to the man. He invited us downstairs into his workshop where he rummaged around in his equipment until suitable bolts were found.

The car was jacked up, relevant manoeuvres of its various suspension members were carried out and within an hour the bolts were securely in place. We returned to the mechanic to thank him warmly for helping us out in a very difficult situation.

We gave him a packet of cigarettes and two dollars as a gesture of our appreciation – he was absolutely delighted. Just as we were going upstairs to leave the building however, there was a loud rat-a-tat-tat on the door. The mechanic moved quickly upstairs and opened the door – we were amazed to see a black-leather-overcoat-and-fur-hat-clad, sub-machine-gun-wielding German border guard standing there. He was not a happy man. He motioned us out of the building, slammed the door shut as we left and was clearly about to do some nasty business with our newly found friend. Our broken down car and visits to the boiler house had clearly been spotted by the ever vigilant border guards from one of their many watchtowers. The penalties for contact with Western 'infiltrators' were severe, since in the eyes of the communist government, such a person could easily become corrupted and become a 'Western' spy. We drove off in a hurry shortly afterwards, profoundly saddened by this event and praying silently that the man wouldn't pay dearly, with machine gun bullets through his chest for example, for his contact with three young English gentlemen in a Triumph Herald.

The rest of the journey went by without a hitch. We returned to London safely and told all our friends about our motoring adventures behind the Iron Curtain. Next came the question of the universal joint repair. Close to one of my friends in Ealing,

Ed Magiera, there was a garage whose owner agreed to take on the job. "That'll be £12.50 sir, for a universal joint repair on the rear half shaft of a Triumph Herald," he told me. Fine, I thought, that sounds reasonable. So I left the car at his workshop at 36, Florence Road, Ealing and came back to Highgate by Underground. The car was left on a Tuesday afternoon and the man told me that it would be ready on the next day at 4 pm. But he advised me to ring him at 2 pm, just before I set out, just to check that the job had been done. So I did just that.

"I'm very sorry sir," he said, "but there was some corrosion on the joint and we haven't quite been able to finish the job today. But we'll definitely have it done by tomorrow."

"Very well," I said, "I'll give you a call tomorrow at the same time". Bearing in mind the fact that I had seen the joint myself and there were no signs of corrosion, I thought it was a little odd that the man should be mentioning problems at this stage. Clearly though, there may have been something which I hadn't spotted.

The next day at 2 pm, I rang him again. "Ah, there you are sir!" his voice rang

out, "I have some good news for you and some bad news. Which would you like to hear first?" I went for the first option.

"I am delighted to tell you that the universal joint has been successfully repaired."

"So what is the bad news then?"

"Well I am afraid to tell you sir, that while we were repairing the universal joint, we noticed that your propshaft has a hairline fracture." A hairline fracture in the propshaft. I thought to myself, what on earth does that mean? I didn't have a clue.

"So what does that mean and why is it bad news?"

"Well, it means that as you are driving along, the hairline fracture may suddenly develop into a full fracture, crack the propshaft which will then come up through the floor of the car, cause the car to go out of control and kill the driver and all the occupants!" His voice rose to a high pitched scream as he shouted out these dire consequences to a petrified customer (me).

"But I have some more good news for you," he said after he had rapidly composed himself, "We can fix it for you and the car will still be ready for this evening."

"How much will that be?" I inquired. "£80 sir," was the response.

"Is the car safe to drive in its current state?" I enquired.

"Yes, provided that you drive very carefully, but remember," he continued, "the propshaft is a liability. At any stage it could crack open and cause a major accident!" I felt a little disoriented at this stage, since I had no idea what a propshaft was and only a vague idea as to what a hairline fracture might be. But then, I thought to myself, surely I am not *that* stupid. I can look things up in a dictionary, I have friends who can help me and I can try and form my own opinion on this problem.

"Thank you very much for your kind advice," I said, "but I will take the car as it is and get back to you immediately if the problem becomes unmanageable." With that I finished the conversation and immediately caught the tube to Ealing Broadway station.

I arrived at the garage one hour later and the car was ready. I paid the bill and as I drove off the proprietor gave me a final warning: "Remember what I told you sir. Your propshaft is a liability. Don't tell me I didn't warn you!" He sent shivers down my spine and I was terrified of driving the car at more than 10 mph for fear of it exploding and killing me instantly.

But I had not been idle. In the short time that had elapsed between our telephone conversation and picking the car up, I had made arrangements with my good friend Ed Magiera, who lived at 15, Elm Grove Road, very close to the garage. I drove the car straight to him. He knew what a propshaft was and together we double checked the meaning of the expression 'hairline fracture' which is basically a very small crack. We jacked up the car in his front garden on a cold January evening and together with a torch and magnifying glass, carefully inspected the entire propshaft. The conclusion was predictable – not the slightest hint of any damage, no crack, no fracture, nothing wrong at all.

This made me reflect: I, Andrew Zbigniew Szylko, am a person who has for many years successfully studied at school and at university and have passed many examinations. I am therefore supposed to be an intelligent, educated person. My specialist subject at university was engineering. And here is Mr Hills the garage proprietor, who almost certainly has no qualifications whatsoever. And he is trying to convince me, using lies and blackmail, with threats of terrible consequences if I have an accident, into paying him lots of money for something that I don't need. The car is just what I thought to myself, this is the best deal I can get. It was a lesson not to



be forgotten. I vowed that day, that I would never visit a garage again.

And indeed, today, more than 30 years later, with just three exceptions when I used the services of an honest, quiet, knowledgeable mechanic-engineer with expertise and equipment that I had no access to, I have managed to do all my own car repairs. Not only car repairs, but also repairs to washing machines, electric irons, vacuum cleaners, water polo goalposts, burst dustbins, fractured screwdriver handles, broken frying pans, electric drills, cracked crockery, smashed chairs, punctured inner tubes, worn bicycle chains and a whole variety of general building works. I always try to put into practice a most important saying of Jonathan Ryder, one of my best friends, "If man made it, man can fix it."

As a result of my perseverance and efforts during the past 30 years, I have

had not only the enormous satisfaction of extensive cheap motoring with my family in Europe and America, but have also acquired, at almost zero expense, five Triumph Herald's (13/60 saloons) and two spacious and luxurious Volvo 144DL saloons. Furthermore, together with like-minded colleagues, Paul Aston, Andy Thomson and Alistair Sursok, I have enjoyed the opportunity to establish a thriving Automobile Society at Highgate School, where on Saturday mornings we teach automobile mechanics in a most friendly atmosphere – and using, of course, a Triumph Herald 13/60 saloon as our teaching car.

Needless to say, Mr Hills and his garage at 36, Florence Road have long since ceased to exist. The propshaft from Triumph Herald UGU 188F turns every day.

