

# Seniors' Meeting

WEDNESDAY 14th March '12  
Report back by Brian Hogg

**T**he Seniors' meeting was treated to a very interesting and amusing presentation by Felix Firtak on his journey through life with a 1975 Lancia Beta including an expedition down the length of Africa. Felix illustrated his talk with a series of slides extracted from a collection of hundreds of slides.

Felix's association with the Lancia started as a boy in Germany when his father bought the Lancia Beta coupé in 1975 for his mother to use. After several years of Mother's use for which the Lancia was not ideal due to its Italian quirkiness in colder climes, the car was sold to assist with payment for Felix's university fees. Felix then took various "after hours" jobs in order to raise sufficient funds to buy the car back which he succeeded with 1 100 Dm after much wrangling with the "new" owner, much to his father's annoyance. The car was then seven years old.

Felix, with the Lancia then moved to UK to continue his studies and gradually, over the years, the Beta was displaced by other Lancias and fell into a state where lots of TLC was required so a Trailer was used to transport the car to Cardiff for renovation. Unfortunately, probably due an imbalance in the weights of the towing car and the trailer plus Lancia, there was a massive accident as the trailer overtook the car which resulted in the Lancia suffering major damage such that it was taken to a scrapyard. Felix vowed to repair the Lancia so armed with a hammer, tape and red paint he set about removing damaged parts and fitting used/new parts such that after some time (at night) the resulting "illegal" car was driven to Manchester where he was studying.

Thereafter any remaining bent bits were removed with an angle grinder and replaced, the existing (19735 Lancia Beta weak point) 1mm thick floor pan was replaced with 1.5mm pan to which the rear axle sub frame was attached. A roof was supposed to be fitted but at short notice the roof did not appear so it became an open tourer. Whilst enjoying a couple of steins of Bavaria's best, Felix accepted a \$500 bet that he could not make it through the Sahara desert by the end of the year (it was then October). After frantic activity he and a friend set off in December (mid Winter in Europe) and drove the open car, well wrapped up, down to Geo and took a boat to Tunis. Africa at last. The route took them across Tunisia to Algeria



Above:  
*The Lancia stuck in the sand*



Left:  
*Felix Firtak, adventurer*

where they took the traffic free Trans Sahara Highway (tarmac) many hundreds of kilometers south to Tamrasset where they won the bet and had a dated photograph to prove it. Felix thought that as he and the Lancia had got this far they may as well carry on traveling south. After Tam the tarmac road terminates and sand starts so he tried to join overland groups in 4x4s who did not want to know this mad German in a two wheel drive open Lancia with no expedition equipment. Eventually he met up with a similarly ill equipped German owned Passat and after some major preparatory work they set off through the sand desert towards Niger. Numerous difficulties ensued

with mechanical problems and stuck in sand problems including the Passat having to make regular water stops. Felix had no food, facilities etc so did all the mechanical work on the Passat in lieu of catering.

The clutch on the Lancia gradually decided not to disengage which necessitated starting with a push start and double declutching gear changes but they made it through to a strange mid desert border post into Niger then to Agadez and on to Nigeria where he managed to have the clutch replaced in Kano. It transpired that the clutch mechanism was bunged up with sand stopping it from disengaging. Felix's companion then had to fly back to Germany



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from Nigeria so he carried on alone. The route took him from Nigeria through Chad, the Central African Republic to the Congo (DRC) (ex Zaire). The clutch again gave problems on the dusty roads so this time, suitably anchored to a 4x4 he submerged the front end of the car in a river and operated the clutch mechanism until it worked again. His logic was if the sand/dust can get in, with the help of water, it can get out again. What he didn't reckon on was that the clutch release bearing would seize up due to the immersion but that was not until Kariba. In the Congo he decided to take the car up the Congo river on a ferry (along with about 1 000 passengers one of whom was fed up that this car had taken her "space" so proceeded to deposit all her goods and possessions on the car). On arrival at Kisangani (Stanleyville) he was advised that there was a "Trans Jungle Highway" down to Tanzania/Zambia but after some 1 000 km of traffic free beautiful tarmac the road suddenly deteriorated into almost impenetrable mud, potholes, rivers etc. Felix had picked up a passenger who was a local student who proved to be very helpful as liaison with the local population who were variously needed to push the car through mud, lift the car over rivers/ponds etc etc. In one day only 10km was achieved. Eventually they managed to arrive at Lake Tanganyika where the Lancia once again embarked on a ferry which took them down to Zambia. The ferry boat was the ex gunship of the German East African territory which had plied its duties on Lake Tanganyika during the first World War. The boat had been built in Germany, sailed out to Dar es Salaam then been dismantled, the parts transported overland to Lake Tanganyika where it was reassembled and was still running as the ferry.

On disembarking it was determined that there was no oil pressure in the engine, this condition may well have been applicable for some time whilst driving through the jungle as Felix had no faith in the warning lights or the gauges. The Lancia was towed to Lusaka where it was determined that the "sump guard" had not been sufficiently robust for the job and the bottom of the sump was substantially flattened which had resulted in the oil pick up pipe not being able to pick up the oil. It was also discovered that the tensioner bearing was seized.

Resisting the opportunity to visit Mozambique for a swimming holiday, Felix made his way to South Africa and after having got lost in the Karoo, eventually made it to Cape Point for a final photo session. Since being in Cape Town, Felix has been very involved with Lancia and is trying to encourage Lancia owners to revitalize the local Club.



Having recently read Derek Stuart-Findley's article on the early well planned expeditions by Citroen and Renault, it was very interesting to hear about Felix's rather "ad hoc" somewhat problematic but nevertheless successful transition of the "Dark Continent".

I am sure that we are all aware that Mugwump, Mike Stewart's 1930 Austin 16/6, made the journey some years ago in both directions, Ron Peffers attempted the trip in a Combi, Nigel Stokes drove from UK to SA in an MG Midget and yours truly with wife drove from Edinburgh to Cape Town in a Range Rover. Perhaps there are other members of the

Club who have also made the trip (or other equally interesting journeys) and if there is sufficient enthusiasm these members could be persuaded to contribute a (short) article to the Chronicle.

• John Brewster advised me that there were some 65 persons in attendance at the meeting although (as usual) he could not correlate the signatures on the register, the kitty and the number of cups used. I have been asked to remind all attendees at the Seniors' Meetings that everybody must sign the register and deposit their R10 in the kitty box - *thank you*.

## Chairman's CHATTER



I'm very proud of our Chronicle, which must be the best Old Car Magazine in South Africa by a long shot. The presentation and content of 16 A4 pages every month is of a superb quality. Thanks very much to the Di and Dave team who do an amazing job. Thanks also to the many contributors who keep on supplying them with fascinating stories every month - without these it would just not be the same.

Another big "Thank You" must go to our our advertisers. They are just as important to our magazine, as they cover a substantial portion of the ever increasing production costs. So please read the advertisements and make a special effort to support our advertisers whenever you can.

Hans Zwets continues to shine with his regular improvements to our Clubhouse. His sharp eyes miss nothing - he notices problems, which most of us are not even aware of. He fixed our chair storage cupboards, which were found damaged recently. He has managed to get our carpets perfectly clean after an unknown car left numerous oil spills on our carpet (No, it wasn't my car!). Most important, he has spotted another major problem and has managed to deal with the serious water leaking through our Clubhouse walls. Not an easy feat to approach an un-cooperative neighbour and obtain access, to find a huge pile of earth, junk and shrubs piled up against our back wall, which prevented the drainage to work and caused our water problem. It was a huge effort to clear up the problem area and we thank Hans for his

dedication in looking after our Clubhouse.

Car Clubs get approached regularly to display old cars at Church and School Fetes, which has become fashionable. This is a huge problem, so the Multiclub has decided that in order to prevent over-exposure of our cars and reduce attendance at our Big Car Shows, only three to four Big Car Shows should be supported by Multiclub members each year. Our committee decided that we support the Multiclub view and will therefore decline all Church and School Fete invitations and will no longer advertise these at our Club Meetings. This does not prevent individual members of our Club to display their cars in their own capacity.

Eddie manages to line up quality speakers and movies for our Wednesday meetings. The talk on oils was particularly interesting on who actually manufactures the oils and how they are made. How important it is that we use the correct oil for each car and how few people actually pay attention to this. So early failure of engine components is directly attributable to this oversight. In the near future we are going to have a very interesting Porsche car presentation with lots of Porsche facts you are not aware of.

We have the Swartland Rally coming up in May. If you have the competitive spirit, this is your chance. If you prefer touring, join us anyway as both will be catered for. So don't miss out on the fun and get your car ready for the Swartland!

Drive carefully - *Hans Matter*

