

Renzo Rivolta

Born 1908. Designer of the Isetta bubble car.
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1. Introduction

The following chapter was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from SportscarsTV website at www.sportscars.tv.

Renzo Rivolta was born in Desio, Italy, on Sept. 5, 1908, and grew up in the family's lumber business. In 1940 he began manufacturing refrigerators under the name Iso Thermo, from which the present firm name derives. He had a passion for cars, motorcycles and inboard, boats and raced them all in his youth; he won 1st overall and three 2nds in the Pavia-Venezia boat races. He used to say, "At the wheel of a car I enjoy myself only above 120 mph."



Renzo Rivolta (right) in an Isetta.

Italy's postwar economic recovery made possible the motorization of the country for the first time and in 1948 Rivolta began manufacturing scooters, light motorcycles and light 3-wheeled trucks under the name of Iso. In 1953 the industrialist conceived and began producing a vehicle which he described as "half motorcycle and half car." This was the Isetta, a thorough failure in Italy. But BMW acquired the manufacturing rights to the design and some 250,000 of these motorized eggs were sold, chiefly in Germany and France.

In 1961 Rivolta conceived the idea of a fine, 4-passenger GT car which would combine the best of Italian coachwork and roadability with an American mass-produced power train. He reached an accord with Chevrolet and with former Ferrari engineer Giotto Bizzarrini as the

designer and with Bertone providing the bodies, the first of the Iso-Rivolta GT cars appeared in 1962.

Renzo Rivolta was a hard-driving businessman who combined hobby and career in the creation and production of a very wide range of highly original motor vehicles. He was well educated, urbane and multi-lingual. His estate at Bresso, a Milan suburb, is a Bugattiesque melange of palatial villa, parklike formal gardens and sprawling factory buildings. One of these is the modern, efficient plant in which Iso-Rivolta cars are assembled. He was generous, and engaged in many philanthropies, devoting much of his time and energy to the Bressa Children's Asylum of which he was president.

Rivolta died of a heart attack in 1966 at the age of 58.

2. The Story of Iso Rivolta

The following chapter was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from Roadster Life. It was written by Matteo Licata in April 2023.

Several boutique European manufacturers have exploited the “American muscle in a coach built body” formula over time, with Milanese firm Iso Rivolta creating some of the finest among such trans-Atlantic crossbreeds: here’s their story.

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The Iso Rivolta 300 GT and Grifo (picture from the Author)

Several boutique European manufacturers have exploited the “*American muscle in a coach built body*” formula over time, with varying degrees of success.

But if there’s been a company that, perhaps above all others, truly mastered the art of blending new-world horsepower with old-world sophistication, that’s Iso Rivolta: possibly the coolest automaker you’ve never heard of.

Humble beginnings

Our story begins in the town of Bresso, near Milan, in 1948.

That’s when the industrialist Renzo Rivolta, whose company Isothermos had been producing home appliances since the late 1930s, decided to tap into the country’s strong demand for basic, inexpensive transportation with a new line of scooters and small-displacement motorbikes.

Following the sales success of models like the Iso 125 and Isomoto, Rivolta soon went for the logical next step: marry the simplicity and affordability of the scooter with the weather protection of an automobile.

Birth of an icon

Conceived by the engineer Ermenegildo Preti, the impossibly cute Isetta bubble car was presented at the Turin Motor Show in 1953.



The striking Isetta was perhaps too far ahead of its time (picture from the Author)

The diminutive vehicle, powered by a 250cc engine derived from Iso's motorbike production, created a lot of interest at the show due to its unique appearance, characterized by the single large door placed at the front so that the Isetta's driver could directly step onto the sidewalk once parked.

However, the Italian buying public largely shunned the Isetta, of which Iso only managed to build around 1400 examples before giving up on the project in 1955.

Thankfully for Iso's coffers, though, the Isetta went on to enjoy much greater success abroad: particularly in Germany, where BMW manufactured under license over 160.000 Isettas until 1962.

A bold step

The rapid increase in living standards during Italy's late 1950s economic boom led to an explosion in the demand for automobiles. But as more and

more people could afford a car, the market for the small-displacement ‘bikes that were Iso’s core business dwindled. Seeing clearly the writing on the wall but unable to compete with Fiat’s mass-market offerings, Renzo Rivolta took the bold step of abandoning the motorcycle industry altogether and bet his company’s future on a kind of product that couldn’t have been further from Iso’s humble beginnings.

The Iso Rivolta GT

Launched in 1962, the Iso Rivolta 300 GT was developed by the engineer Pierluigi Raggi with the collaboration of Giotto Bizzarrini. The car’s strong steel unibody structure offered ample space inside for four passengers, while power came from the same 327 ci. Chevrolet V8 used in contemporary Corvettes.



The Iso Rivolta 300 GT (picture from the Author)

The GT’s elegant lines were penned by none other than Giorgetto Giugiaro, then working under Nuccio Bertone. While there’s no denying the similarity with some other Giugiaro designs from the period, like the Gordon Keeble or the Alfa Romeo 2600 Sprint, in my eyes the Iso Rivolta 300 GT is the best looking of them all.

Yet that’s nothing compared to what came next. The Iso Rivolta Grifo

Shown as a prototype in 1963 but produced from 1965, the Iso Rivolta Grifo is a truly gorgeous two-seater based on the 300 GT’s floorpan and underpinnings but with a shorter wheelbase.



The stunning Iso Rivolta Grifo (picture from the Author)

Much like the 300 GT it derived from, the Grifo was as fast as it was luxurious, but that didn't stop Giotto Bizzarrini from designing a more extreme derivative aimed squarely at motorsport, presented as the Grifo A3/C and wearing a completely different body.

However, when Renzo Rivolta showed no interest in funding a racing program, Bizzarrini left Iso together with his project, which ultimately became the short-lived [Bizzarrini 5300 GT](#).

While the Grifo's blend of stunning looks, speed, and comfort caught the attention of the international jet set and boosted the company's image, sales of Iso Rivolta's amazing cars remained low and hardly covered the costs.

Somewhat counterintuitively, it seems that using a mass-produced Chevrolet engine put off more American buyers than it attracted, mainly because folk spending Ferrari money on a boutique Italian sports car valued the cachet and exclusivity of a bespoke engine over ease of maintenance and dependability. Nevertheless, the Grifo remained a staple of the Iso Rivolta catalog until the firm's demise and remains the most coveted and recognized Iso model to this day.

Doubling down

Following the sudden death of the company's founder Renzo Rivolta in 1966, his son Piero inherited the firm. Contrary to what many expected,

given Iso's precarious financial situation, he set out to build no other than the world's fastest four-door sedan.



The Iso Rivolta Fidia (picture from the Author)

Initially known as the Iso S4, then later relaunched as the Iso Rivolta Fidia following some production issues with the early cars, the Fidia followed the same formula as previous Iso Rivolta models: sharp, elegant Giugiaro lines and a sumptuous leather-lined interior, all powered by the trusty Chevrolet small-block V8.

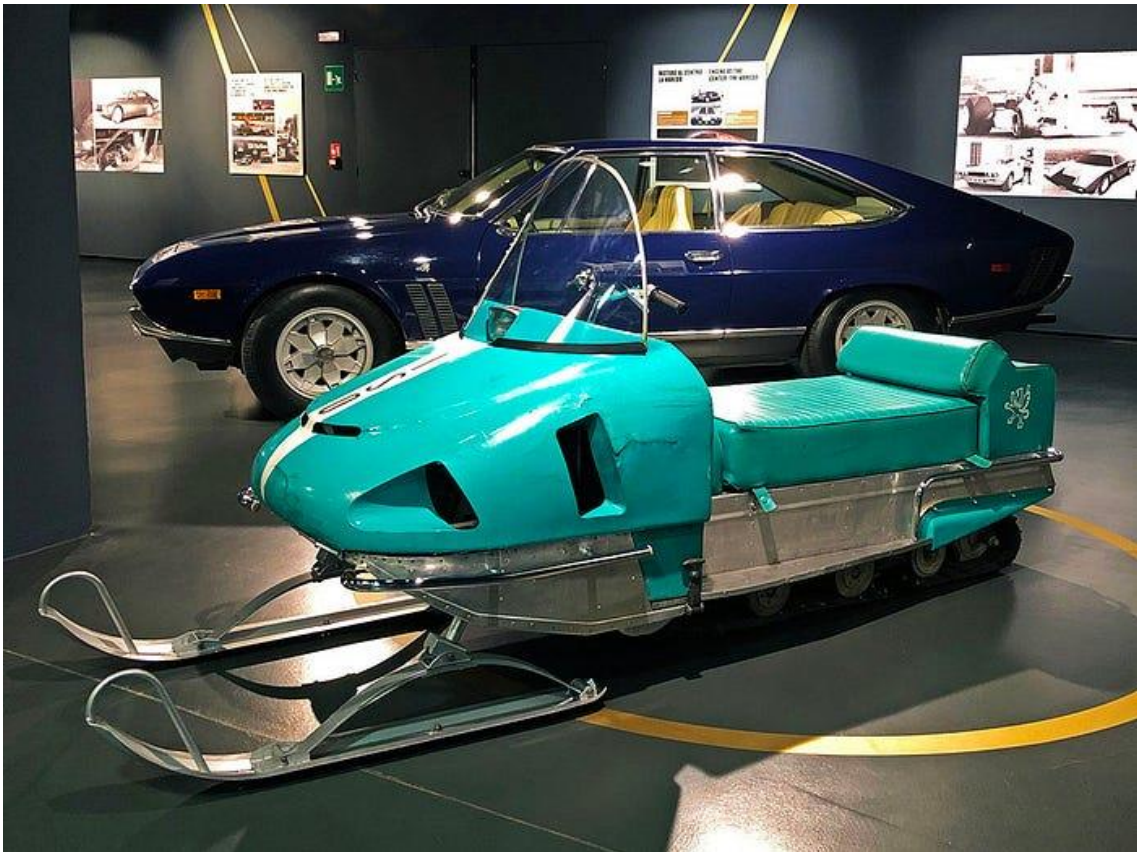
What's in a name?

Presented in 1969 but produced from 1970, the Iso Rivolta Lele replaced the original Iso GT and sported a sharp fastback design [penned by Marcello Gandini for Bertone](#). The name Lele may sound unusual, but it was a romantic choice, as it was Piero Rivolta's affectionate nickname for his wife, Rachele. Under the new body laid the previous model's running gear, including the Chevrolet V8s: first the usual 327 ci. then the larger 350 ci.

However, that changed in 1972, when Iso Rivolta was forced to switch to Ford's "Cleveland" 351 V8 due to GM imposing new and less favorable terms for their engine supply.

The inevitable demise

Piero Rivolta's enthusiastic, bold efforts to project his company into the future, which included branching out with a range of snowmobiles produced between 1970 and 1973, all proved fruitless and the firm ultimately folded in 1974.



Iso “Flying” snowmobile and the Iso Rivolta Lele (picture from the Author)

Despite their high retail prices, the company hardly made any money with its luxurious GTs, even at the best of times. This left Iso Rivolta a small and undercapitalized firm, ill-equipped to weather the increasingly challenging business environment of the 1970s.

3. BMW Isetta Models 1955 - 1962



BMW Isetta 250 Standard

With the BMW Isetta BMW conquered in the fifties the hearts of many former motorcyclists. She earned a great deal of sympathy for the BMW brand and shaped an entire era in automotive history. Originally developed by the Italian company Iso Isetta in Milan was built in 1955 by BMW under license. First, with the 250-cc motorcycle engine from the BMW R25 3 offered /, advanced BMW in the autumn of 1955, the engine range is a 300-cc version..

General data

Construction.....1955 - 1957

Number produce26.647

Price.....DM 2,550

Specifications

Motorart.....1-cylinder

capacity in ccm.....247

Rated power.....12 PS bei 5800 U / min

Maximum speed in km / h.....85

Dimensions (L/H/B) in mm.....2285x1380x1340

Weight in kg.....359

BMW Isetta 300 Standard

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General data

Construction.....1955 - 1957
Number produce15.339
Price.....DM 2,890

Specifications

Motorart.....1-cylinder
capacity in ccm.....295
Rated power.....13 PS bei 5200 U / min
Maximum speed in km / h.....85
Dimensions (L/H/B) in mm.....2285x1380x1340
Weight in kg.....359



BMW Isetta 250 Export

End of 1956, BMW introduced a modified Isetta "export" before. The now

solid as a coupe roof line allowed the installation of sliding windows and let the Isetta appear slimmer and sleeker. With the well-known 250 cc or 300 cc motorcycle engines equipped, brought the "Export" new momentum in the Isetta business. She was one of the most popular scooter vans that time.

General data

Construction.....1956 - 1962
Number produce47.636
Price.....DM 2,750

Specifications

Motorart.....1-cylinder
capacity in ccm.....245
Rated power.....12 PS bei 5800 U / min
Maximum speed in km / h.....85
Dimensions (L/H/B) in mm.....2355x1380x1340
Weight in kg.....350



BMW Isetta 300 Export

End of 1956, BMW introduced a modified Isetta "export" before. The now solid coupe roof line allowed the installation of sliding windows and let the Isetta appear slimmer and sleeker. With the well-known 250 cc or 300 cc motorcycle engines equipped, brought the "Export" new momentum in the Isetta business. She was one of the most popular scooter vans that time.

General data

Construction.....1956 - 1962
Number produce51.826 (plus 20,456 Dreiräder)
Price.....DM 2,860

Specifications

Motorart.....1-cylinder
capacity in ccm.....298
Rated power.....13 PS bei 5200 U / min
Maximum speed in km / h.....85
Dimensions (L/H/B) in mm.....2355x1380x1340
Weight in kg.....350



BMW Isetta Cabriolet

In the years 1956 and 1957, BMW offered two body styles of the Isetta to: the BMW Isetta Cabriolet and deduced loads Isetta, BMW Isetta also called pick-up. The convertible was available with 250 cc or 300 cc Motor. Auf based on the Isetta Standard occurred during the course of 1956, only 15 convertibles, based on the Isetta Export a maximum of 50 copies.

General data

Construction.....1956 - 1957

Number produce15 als Standard, ca. 50 als Export
Price

Specifications

Motorart.....1-cylinder
capacity in ccm.....247
Rated power.....12 PS bei 5800 U / min
Maximum speed in km / h.....85
Dimensions (L/H/B) in mm.....2285x1380x1340
Weight in kg.....359



BMW Isetta Pickup

In the years 1956 and 1957, BMW offered two body styles of the Isetta to: the BMW Isetta Cabriolet and deduced loads Isetta, BMW Isetta also called pick-up. The payload of this little "transporter" was as high as 250 kg. Available was the loads Isetta with 250 cc or 300 cc engine. The production was well below that of the convertible, but a definite identification of vehicles delivered is not possible.

General data

Construction.....1956 - 1957
Number produceUnknown

Price

Specifications

Motorart.....	1-cylinder
capacity in ccm.....	247
Rated power.....	12 PS bei 5800 U / min
Maximum speed in km / h.....	85
Dimensions (L/H/B) in mm.....	2285x1380x1340
Weight in kg.....	359



BMW Isetta tricycle special / Special three-wheeler

Mainly for export to Austria, Switzerland, Holland and the Scandinavian countries is produced in Munich, a three-wheeled variant of the BMW Isetta. This Isetta special tricycle was built between March 1959 and January 1960 in 1,605 copies based on the BMW Isetta 300 Export. Noteworthy is the high additional CKD and SKD production of three-wheeled BMW Isetta. About 20,000 vehicles originated in this way until 1964. The most important location for this production was in England, near the seaside resort of Brighton.

General data

Construction.....	1959 - 1960
Number produce	1606 (plus 18,850 aus CKD Production)
Price	

Specifications

Motorart.....	1-cylinder
capacity in ccm.....	298
Rated power.....	13 PS bei 5200 U / min
Maximum speed in km / h.....	85
Dimensions (L/H/B) in mm.....	2355x1380x1340
Weight in kg.....	350



BMW 600

The BMW 600 is the link between the BMW Isetta and BMW 700 dar. order emerging to mid-fifties, increasingly, to oppose conventionally built small car something was this gleichspurige vehicle with front door and side door on the right. Despite the high quality, good handling and spacious interior of the BMW 600 was, however, sentenced to outsiders existence, the motorist longed for a modern-looking small car.

General data

Construction.....	1957 - 1959
Number produce	34.813
Price.....	DM 3,890

Specifications

Motorart.....2-Zylinder-Boxermotor
capacity in ccm.....585
Rated power.....19.5 PS bei 4500 U / min
Maximum speed in km / h.....100
Maße (L/H/B) in mm.....2900x1400x1375
Weight in kg.....565

4. The Story of BMW Isetta

The following chapter was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the www.bmw.com website.



Isetta

When Germans think of the 1950s, some of the most iconic images that spring to their minds are women wearing voluminous petticoats, living rooms with kidney-shaped tables and BMW's Isetta bubble car traversing – among others – the streets of post-war Germany and beyond.

Today, the BMW Isetta is a highly coveted vintage car (→ [Isetta buyer's guide](#)) that would probably be classified as a micro mobility vehicle now. But back in its day, the Isetta was a complete car. The little car from Munich combines a clever concept with understated charm. How it came to be is an interesting story that proves the old adage that necessity is indeed the mother of invention.

The Isetta: from stopgap to icon

BMW was on the brink of bankruptcy in the mid-1950s. Motorcycle production was declining. Luxury vehicles like the 503 and the 507 were so expensive to produce that BMW suffered losses on these models. “So the number one priority was to put a car into production that would make us money right away,” explains Axel Klinger-Köhnlein, an expert at BMW Group Classic.

BMW needed a new model – one that would not require a lot of development costs. BMW found its solution at the 1954 Turin Car Show. At the Iso Rivolta booth, an Italian maker of refrigerators and mini cars, there was a three-wheeled car with a huge door (which looked surprisingly

similar to a refrigerator door) in the front. It was called the Iso Isetta. The BMW delegation acquired the licensing rights for the Isetta and for the production equipment as well.



First, BMW had to “refine” the motor and the chassis of the Italian bubble car, as Klinger-Köhnlein puts it. Even after it was modified by the BMW developers who were used to designing performance cars, the technical specifications seemed rather modest. At the start of production in 1955, the BMW Isetta 250 was redesigned to take a modified version of the 250 cc four-stroke engine from the R25 motorcycle. The single cylinder generated exactly 12 hp.

BMW kept the bubble car’s original Italian name: Isetta is the diminutive form of Iso. Contrary to what the name change might suggest, they actually added another tyre so that the German car had four tires compared to the

Italian's three. In 1956, the Bavarian factory put out a version with higher performance - the BMW Isetta 300 with a 300 cc engine and 13 hp. Both versions could reach speeds of up to 53 mph (85 km/h).

The BMW marketing department came up with the term “motocoupé” for the bubble car. In Germany, the Isetta was affectionately known as a “Knutschkugel” (cuddle coach). There was no better car for zipping around in a city or for short distances. Because it was 7.5 feet (2.28 m) long and weighed a mere 770 pounds (350 kg), it was more manoeuvrable than almost any other car. And two adult passengers could sit next to one another just like in a “regular” car. The Isetta was the only microcar where that was possible.

Since the door opens to the front and the steering wheel and steering column swing with it, it's easy to get in and out. Luggage goes on the outside on a luggage rack that mounts onto the back. Buyers knew what they were getting: the Isetta was no mini sedan – it was a new kind of car. It was the right kind of car for the 1950s.

Not many changes were made to the Isetta while it was in production. The first series had a larger back window than the second, and the window that opened to the side was replaced by a sliding window. All Isettas had a canvas roof, similar to today's sunroof. Not because of customer demand, adds BMW Group Classic Expert Klinger-Köhnlein, but because an emergency exit was mandatory since you entered the car through a front door.



The motocoupé became a much-needed best seller. At only 2,550 German marks (about 1,450 US-dollars or 1,300 euros today), the Isetta was a car

most people could afford. And Isetta drivers didn't need an expensive car licence, all they needed was a motorcycle licence.

With 10,000 cars sold in the first year, the Isetta was found all over Germany and then later in other countries. Over the eight years it was in production, 161,728 Isettas were sold. Today, it remains one of the most successful one-cylinder cars in the world. When production stopped in 1962, the era of the bubble car came to an end. By that time, the standard of living had improved and people wanted full-size cars.

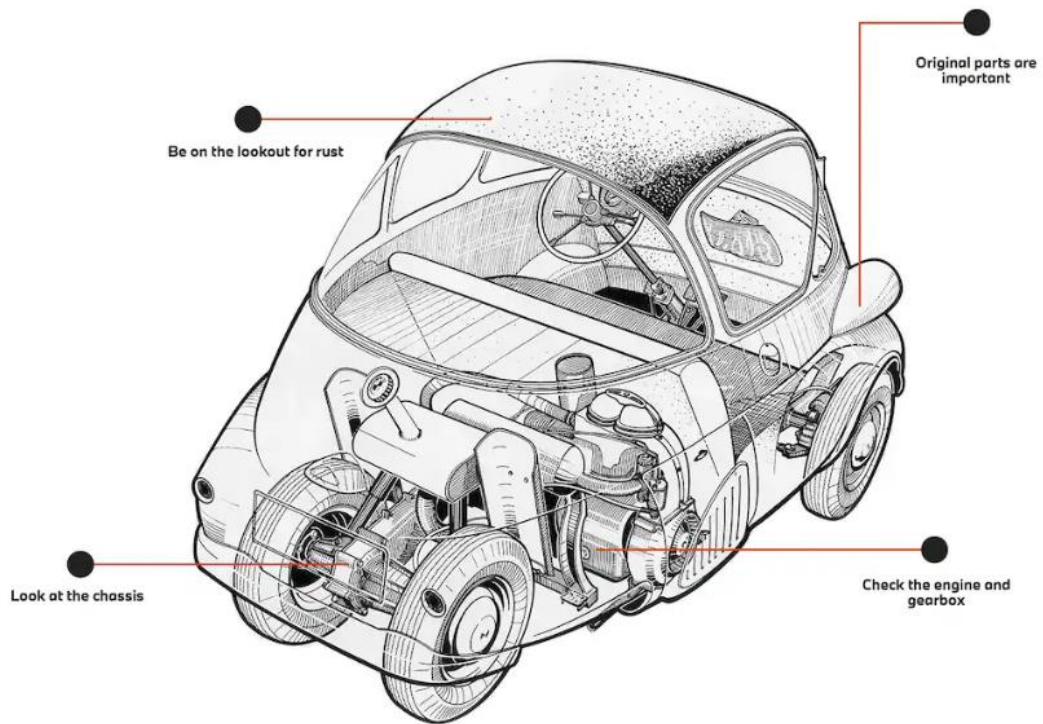


The BMW Isetta would look more at home on the narrow and ancient streets of some Italian city than on a German autobahn. But it was actually more successful in its adopted country of Germany than in its Italian homeland, although many did find their way back to Italy when Germans went on holidays there. They drove their little Isettas over the Alps to spend time soaking up the sun and enjoying the dolce vita. Even today, the BMW Isetta has lost none of its fascination and still stands for a certain lifestyle. “At the [BMW Welt](#) in Munich (below) the Isetta is the most

popular exhibit” says curator Klinger-Köhnlein. Quite a few visitors even take it for a spin to get the full 50s nostalgia experience.



The BMW website has a section giving advice on buying a classic BMW car. It includes this cutaway drawing of a BMW Isetta, noting things to look out for:



5. An Isetta escape from East Berlin

The following was archived in 2024, with acknowledgement and thanks, from the BMW website at www.bmw.com.



The Bornholmer Street border crossing in the 1960s. The bridge separated East and West Berlin.

May 23 1963. A gloomy and rainy evening. In front of the border crossing at Bornholmer Street sits a BMW Isetta. The driver wants to cross the heavily guarded border between East and West Berlin. A line of cars is backed up, waiting at the border checkpoint on the East German side. The nervousness of both the drivers and the soldiers is palpable. Guard dogs bark. After more than an hour the Isetta finally pulls up to the barrier. Grim-faced border guards check papers and inspect the car. Every moment is agony for the young driver – and even more so for the stowaway passenger hidden in the Isetta's tiny engine bay. Muffled voices from outside drift through the air to his cramped hiding place. Only a few millimeters of metal protect him from the searching eyes of the guards. Suddenly the engine hatch door opens and a flashlight shines inside. He holds his breath... If the guards find him now his attempted flight to freedom will earn him a one-way ticket to an East German jail.

Klaus-Günter Jacobi – 6 foot 5 with a mane of white hair – sits at a round table with a green granite top. The 79-year-old welcomes us into his 322 square foot apartment in Berlin for the interview. It's furnished with wooden wardrobes, cane chairs covered with sheepskins and a small, old and dusty tube television. From the balcony you can just make out

Teufelsberg in the distance. Teufelsberg, or Devil's Mountain, was a spy station during the Cold War where the US listened in on and jammed the radio signals coming from the Eastern Bloc controlled by the Soviet Union.



Klaus-Günter Jacobi was born in Pankow, a borough of East Berlin, in 1940. His father was an army officer and his mother was a housewife. After the war the East German Communist Party came to power and dictated the modest existence of the family. “We always hoped it would get better,” says Jacobi, “but it never did.”

In October 1958, as the Party did away with ration cards and those who criticized the system were increasingly denounced as enemies of the state, the Jacobis packed their bags and fled. From their new home in West Berlin they watched as things grew worse – how East Germany was taking away its citizens' freedom of movement by putting up stone walls with barbed wire; how East Berliners were digging tunnels or trying to ram trucks through what East Germans called the “Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart” to get to freedom; how the escape of many East Germans failed, landing them in prison. At least 140 people died at the Berlin Wall, many of whom were shot by the East German border patrol.

While the Jacobis fled, Manfred Koster chose to remain. The two boys had played together in the street when they were children and attended the same school. Maybe Manfred Koster hung onto the idea of socialism a little longer; maybe he just didn't want to leave home. But he certainly remained in the Soviet Occupation Zone too long after his friend left.

In November 1962, a little over one year after the Wall had gone up, Manfred Koster was drafted into East Germany's National People's Army. He was to report for duty on June 1 1963. As a staunch pacifist he felt anything was better than that – and decided to defect. He had had enough of East Germany, the way it spied on and suppressed its own citizens. They had taken his freedom away, so there was nothing left for him but to leave.

The newly built wall made escape almost impossible. The risk of climbing over it, being discovered and shot was too high. Koster would have to find another way out. Then he remembered his old friend Klaus-Günter Jacobi. Maybe he would have an idea. But how could he reach him in the other part of the city? And how could they plan escape in secret?

Koster quickly decided he needed to pay a visit to Jacobi in West Berlin. He had to find a way to sneak out. Manfred's brother Hans had already gone to live in the West at that point. So when Hans came to visit him, Manfred took Hans' West German ID and used it for one night to get across. As the brothers looked almost like twins, Manfred had no problem going to West Berlin. He showed up completely unannounced at Jacobi's door. And that is the night when Jacobi hatched the plan to use his BMW Isetta to smuggle his friend through the border.

Just as Klaus-Günter Jacobi's life is part of Germany's post-war history, so too is the BMW Isetta, at least in that of West Germany. In those days, only two percent of the German population had the means to buy a car. So when the tiny car first hit showrooms in 1955, priced at only 2,550 German marks (about \$1,450 today), most households could afford one. And even though it only had a 13 hp engine and a maximum speed of 50 mph, it could still run – and does to this day, as classic car collectors.

Jacobi saw his first Isetta (also known as a “bubble car,” and a “cuddle coach” in Germany) in 1961 in the showroom window of a dealer right next to his favorite bar, The Bathtub. He paid just 1,500 marks to drive away in the little red and white BMW Isetta.

He remembers driving the car to Paris to visit his sister, chauffeuring admiring women around and perching on the seat so he could stick his head out of the sunroof, while pedestrians and other drivers gawked at him. But the one experience that stands out from all the rest is the escape from East Germany.

Using a car that is a mere 55 inches wide by 90 inches long to defect from the Eastern Bloc was part genius and part insanity.

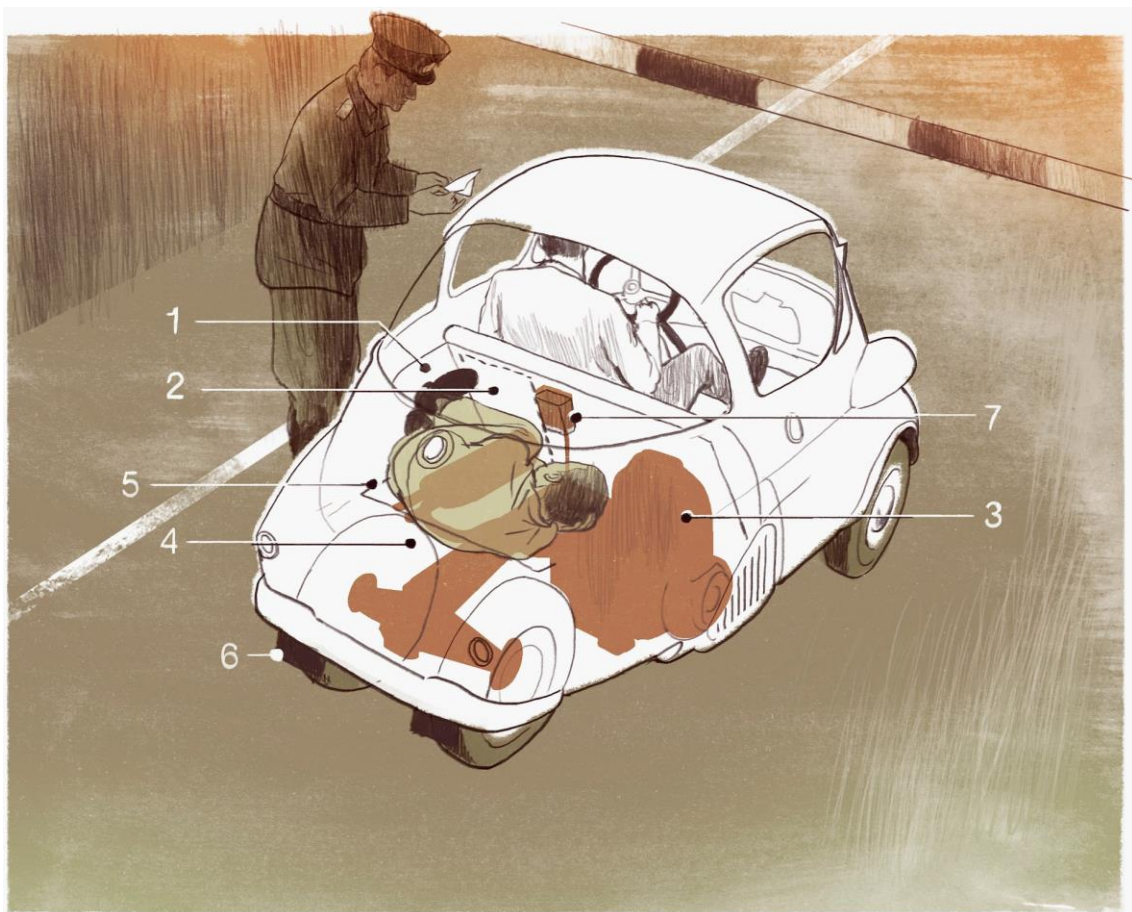
Genius because no one would ever suspect that such a little car, or the “motor with a jump seat” as it was sometimes derogatively known, would be capable of hiding a human stowaway. Larger vehicles, in contrast, were scrupulously inspected by the DDR guards, and were sometimes even measured to see whether hiding spaces had been built into them.

Insane because: how are you supposed to hide a 5-foot-7 man in a two-seater during a rigorous inspection? The guards painstakingly search the inside, and then use a mirror to check underneath the entire car. The only possibility Jacobi sees is a hollow space behind the seat that is directly next to the engine.

Luckily Jacobi had the know-how to turn his Isetta into an escape vehicle – he had trained to become a car mechanic from 1956 to 1959. He then continued his training to become a driving teacher while earning some money in the garage where he had trained. So he had a safe place to modify the car, and the garage had all the tools he would need for it: hammers, chisels, saws, and paint.

Over the course of several weeks, Jacobi drove to the garage almost every evening. He had to hurry, since the day Manfred was supposed to report for induction was drawing near. The boss left the garage open late. Even his colleagues came by to see how it was going and to drink a beer. This was all well and good, but hopefully no one intended to turn them in!

“I have no idea how many hours I spent working on converting the Isetta. I was focused on doing just one thing - getting my buddy out of East Germany.”



Jacobi's main reason for this undertaking was to help his friend – but he also enjoyed the thrill of doing something forbidden. He wanted to make a show of resistance against an unjust authoritarian state, just as he and Manfred Koster had done when they were young before the Jacobis fled to the West. While the border was still open, the two went to the West every day to buy leather gloves, coffee, pantyhose, bananas and cigarettes. They took it all back home to the East where they hawked it “very profitably,”

notes Jacobi as a roguish look comes into his brown eyes when he thinks of his younger days. Spying on the border patrol, recording when the guards change shifts, mapping out the guards' patrols: this is what they did every day. "We were practically professionals."

But driving the car to bring his friend to freedom – this was a matter of honor. The problem was that because East Germany did not recognize West Berlin as a part of West Germany, Jacobi, as a West Berliner, was not permitted to travel into East Germany. So he had to find another driver. He found West German students who were more than willing to help organize escape attempts purely out of conviction.

At first there was a medical student who was going to drive the BMW Isetta. But she lost her nerve during the test drive across the border. The time waiting in the line at the border checkpoint seemed endless, and the guards' scrutiny frightened her. She backed out as soon as they were back in West Germany. "I don't hold it against her," says Jacobi, "but it was a real shock. It was not long before Manfred was going to be called up to the army."

Then on May 23, just a week before Manfred was supposed to report, the phone suddenly ring early in the morning. Two other students are willing to step in. They don't want to tell Jacobi their names – you can't confess something you don't know. That same day, both of the men drive to East Berlin – one in the modified Isetta, the other in a VW Beetle as back-up.

Both students meet with Koster in Pankow and drive him outside of town and down a dirt road where he can hide himself in the Isetta without anyone noticing. As Jacobi showed them that afternoon, they have to take the 3.5-gallon-tank out and replace it with the mini tank. In the failing light of the flashlight, the students take a lot longer than planned to change tanks.

The escape flounders at this point as a farmer comes by to see what's going on in his field. They tell him it's just a flat and everything is under control. Then it takes Manfred what feels like an eternity to squeeze himself into the tiny empty space. Fat raindrops beat down on the car, matching the racing rhythm of his pulse.

At the same time, Jacobi is waiting on the west side of the Bornholmer Bridge, smoking one cigarette after another. He keeps looking over to the border and then at his watch. By now it's 20 minutes past 11 and they are an hour and a half late. He stamps out another cigarette butt on the asphalt. The border closes at midnight...



Then, right before midnight, the barrier goes up and both the Isetta and the VW cross the border.

After both cars passed him, he starts to run right alongside the Isetta.

“Manfred! Manfred!”

“Klaus!” comes the muffled reply from inside the Isetta.

“We're going to get you out of there now.”

In a park on Grünthaler Street, the procession comes to a halt. It takes a full five minutes for Manfred to extricate himself from the small confines. His legs are swollen, his back is aching, but it's nothing compared to the joy he feels – free at last!

There's still a couple of drops of gas left in the tank, so Klaus-Günter takes Manfred on a victory round, this time with him on the front seat. Then they both celebrate until noon the next day.

At some point, Jacobi gutted his Isetta and sent it to the scrap heap. After the modification it wouldn't have passed inspection anyway. The only thing that he still has today is a key to the engine hatch door. He carefully rolls it around in his hands as he reflects on his role in this story. “Sometimes there are people who determine the history of the world for just a small moment.” He is no longer in contact with Manfred Koster. They grew apart and even fought. And as time went by, they went their separate ways. But the amazing escape he engineered is something he will never forget.



The key to the engine hatch door.

Jacobi says that the two students went on to continue their rescue mission. They used a different Isetta, but the same principle. It was 18 months later when one of their drivers was discovered: during an attempted escape the car, which was supposedly empty, started to wobble. The woman hiding was discovered and pulled out of the hiding place. The students went to the press. “Nine East Berliners escape in an Isetta” read the headline of the evening edition on October 27, 1964. They got the idea from Klaus-Günter Jacobi.

Even though it has been 30 years since the wall fell, Klaus-Günter Jacobi refuses to let go of the history of the two Germanies. Today he works as a guide in the Berlin Wall Museum on Friedrich Street. Of the more than 850,000 annual visitors, almost none are aware that the brains behind the modified escape car now sits staring out the top-story window at Checkpoint Charlie. But then, no one really needs to know, he thinks. The real achievement is that we are now aware that injustices were done – and that there were those who fought back.

“I had to sacrifice my Isetta, but it was worth it.”
