



Martin Buckley

BACKFIRE

I don't read many car books because they tend to be unwieldy things to negotiate in bed, but I made an exception recently in the form of Geoffrey Goldberg's *Lancia and De Virgilio: at the Center* – a slightly awkward title for a superb read. Francesco De Virgilio was, of course, father of the company's V6 and not only worked alongside Vittorio Jano but also married into the Lancia clan – a link that didn't always have a positive effect on his career.

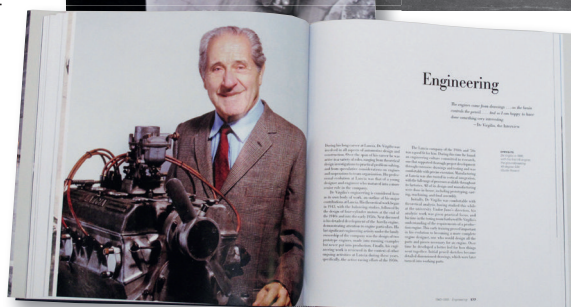
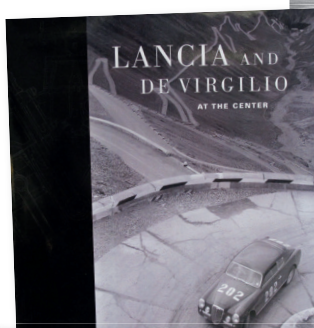
The book charts De Virgilio's time at the firm from 1939-'75 (and beyond, as a consultant) through unique access to his personal archive, and includes a fantastic collection of technical drawings and pictures. Many of the latter are relaxed family snaps of 1950s Italian life, but there are also candid shots from his days in the racing department. There's even one picture of Gianni Lancia attempting some welding, and in many ways it was the promise of learning more about this mysterious figure that encouraged me to pick up the tome in the first place.

Goldberg's text is scholarly but also straightforward and readable (with extensive reference notes at the end of each chapter – always a classy touch). He takes a broader view of the social and industrial background to De Virgilio's working life and to the nature of Lancia as a company, rather than the usual narrow appraisal of the vehicles – a trap into which too many books fall. The politics (of which there were a lot) and the people are equally as interesting as the cars.

I liked the fresh thinking on the firm's collapse in the mid-'50s and the sell-out to the cement tycoon, Carlo Pesenti. Goldberg doesn't accept that it was Gianni's racing obsession alone that bankrupted the company, but rather a combination of factors including his investment in the 16-storey Palazzo Lancia, the first high-rise building in Turin when it was finished in 1956.

Perhaps it would have been wiser to invest in more modern production facilities. Ones that allowed, for instance, for more than one body press. The woeful lack of tooling after the war and into the '50s raises the question of how well or badly the firm did out of the Marshall Plan. The Americans disapproved of Gianni's left-leaning affiliations, although the company ledgers say Lancia received more than \$3million

Bedtime reading: author Goldberg reckons that Lancia's financial woes weren't only down to cars such as the D50 (here with Ascari at Monaco in 1955)

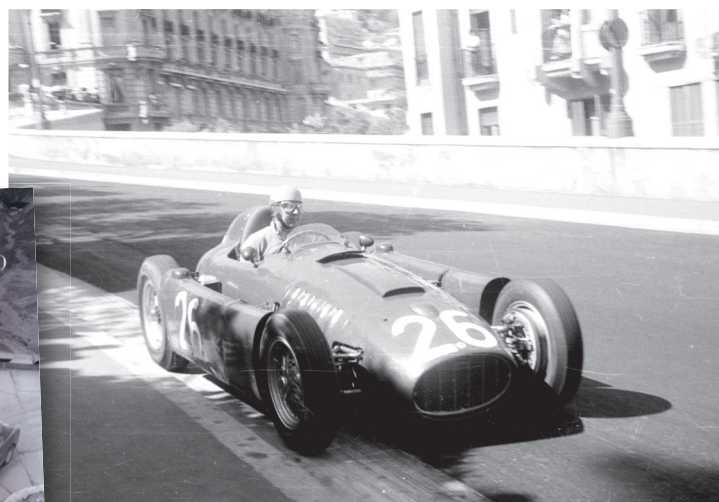


'The company ledgers say that Lancia received more than \$3million, but what did Gianni spend it on?'

rather than the \$800,000 sometimes quoted.

If that's the case, what did Gianni spend it on? Probably making cars that were too nice – and too expensive – for the people who wanted to buy them. Also, Goldberg recognises that much of the underlying problem in the 1950s seemed to boil down to the fact that the revolutionary Aurelia saloon (surely central to Lancia's upmarket ambitions) just didn't sell that well.

It's often been said (usually by me) that Lancia's saloons were the best engineered and most sorted of the range, but it's equally true to



say that the market didn't always see it that way. The various special-bodied Flaminias vastly outsold the four-door, for instance, and the success of the Fulvia Coupé just about kept Lancia alive before Fiat took over in 1969. It would be interesting to speculate what might have been if Lancia had concentrated on building sports and GT cars in bigger volumes and left Fiat to make saloons for the masses.

I suppose the only thing this book lacks is much detail about my beloved 'F' cars, the Flavia, Fulvia and Flaminia. The reason for this seems to be that De Virgilio didn't get on very well with Professor Antonio Fessia (nobody did, really) so Franco was 'relegated' to designing engines for Lancia's heavy trucks. He seems to have been too dignified a character to complain about it.

At least the Gamma gets a mention. In 1970, De Virgilio did an alternative engine proposal for the car – an intriguing 120° V6 that would surely have had more showroom appeal than the 'four'. As a complete aside, Goldberg has put a name to the architect of the Gamma engine: where are you now, Zaccane Mina?

As for the Palazzo Lancia, it still straddles the Via Vincenzo Lancia, although Fiat sold it off in 2005 and the current owners filed for bankruptcy two years ago. It's now due to be auctioned off, a sad fate that chimes with that of the company itself in recent times. 