

# AFTER DEVASTATING FIRE, RESTORATION BEGINS ON ONE OF THE WORLD'S OLDEST BEETLES

BY RICH CARLSEN

For much of the latter half of the Twentieth Century, comedians compared the ubiquitous Volkswagen Beetle to the cockroach—both of them so hard to kill, they'd likely survive the apocalypse when nothing else did. Indeed, neither the devastation of World War II nor an extensive industrial park fire could snuff out one of the world's oldest Beetles, which is now poised to go through its second major restoration. The fire four years ago in Hamburg, Germany, sent toxic smoke pluming into the air and took out a go-kart track, furniture warehouse, and a number of small businesses. It also destroyed millions of dollars' worth of some of the world's rarest and most irreplaceable cars—Bugatti's, Maserati's, Austro-Daimlers, and a 1900/1901 Lohner-Porsche, among others—stored there by collector and Volkswagen/Porsche dealer Gerhard von Raffay. A Volkswagen Beetle might seem out of place in that collection were it not for the fact that it carries serial number 1-00003 and was built before Volkswagen's first factory came online.



Of the several dozen Volkswagen prototype and pre-production cars built before the start of World War II, a handful, commonly known as VW39s, hewed to Ferdinand Porsche's final design for the KdF-Wagen and carted journalists around for press demonstrations during the latter half of 1938 and early 1939. Built at Porsche's works in Stuttgart, they also traveled the country for display at various car shows, fairs, conferences, and in films, largely to generate publicity for the books of stamps that German citizens would use as a layaway system for the cars. Except, apparently, this one. According to the Hamburg-based Prototype Auto Museum, Ferdinand Porsche himself used chassis number 1-00003 as a demonstrator. Where exactly he demonstrated it and to whom, nobody seems to know, but it ended up in a garage in Berlin, where Porsche had an office, and where it would remain for the duration of World War II. Unlike other early Volkswagens destroyed during testing or during the war or by occupying forces that appropriated them after the war, 1-00003 survived, but just barely. It was found engineless and damaged in the rubble of the garage, now collapsed, in 1948. About the same time, the Raffay family—which had become one of the first Volkswagen distributors in 1946—announced a nationwide search for the world's oldest existing Volkswagen, a search that led them to purchase and restore 1-00003.

Whether the Raffays knew it or not, at least two other older Volkswagens had survived the war. A VW38, also with the serial number 03, had been converted to wood gas power early in the 1940s and then disassembled shortly after the war to keep it out of the hands of occupying forces. Volkswagen bought it in 1952, restored it, and has kept it on display at the company's museum in Wolfsburg since then.





So did the one-off convertible built for the factory's cornerstone-laying ceremony and later gifted to Hitler survive the war? It, too, eventually became part of the Wolfsburg collection. Regardless, as one of just a handful of prewar examples known to exist, 1-00003 remained an invaluable part of the Raffay collection, about as priceless as the Lohner-Porsche it shared space with. So earlier this week, the Prototype Museum in Hamburg announced that it had taken delivery of 1-00003—or more appropriately, the burned-out shell of 1-00003—and will begin its restoration.

According to the museum, the restoration will include the installation of another prewar demonstrator car engine (serial number 38/24) that the museum previously obtained. **No timetable for completion has been released by the museum.**

*Thank you Rich  
for another  
great article!*



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