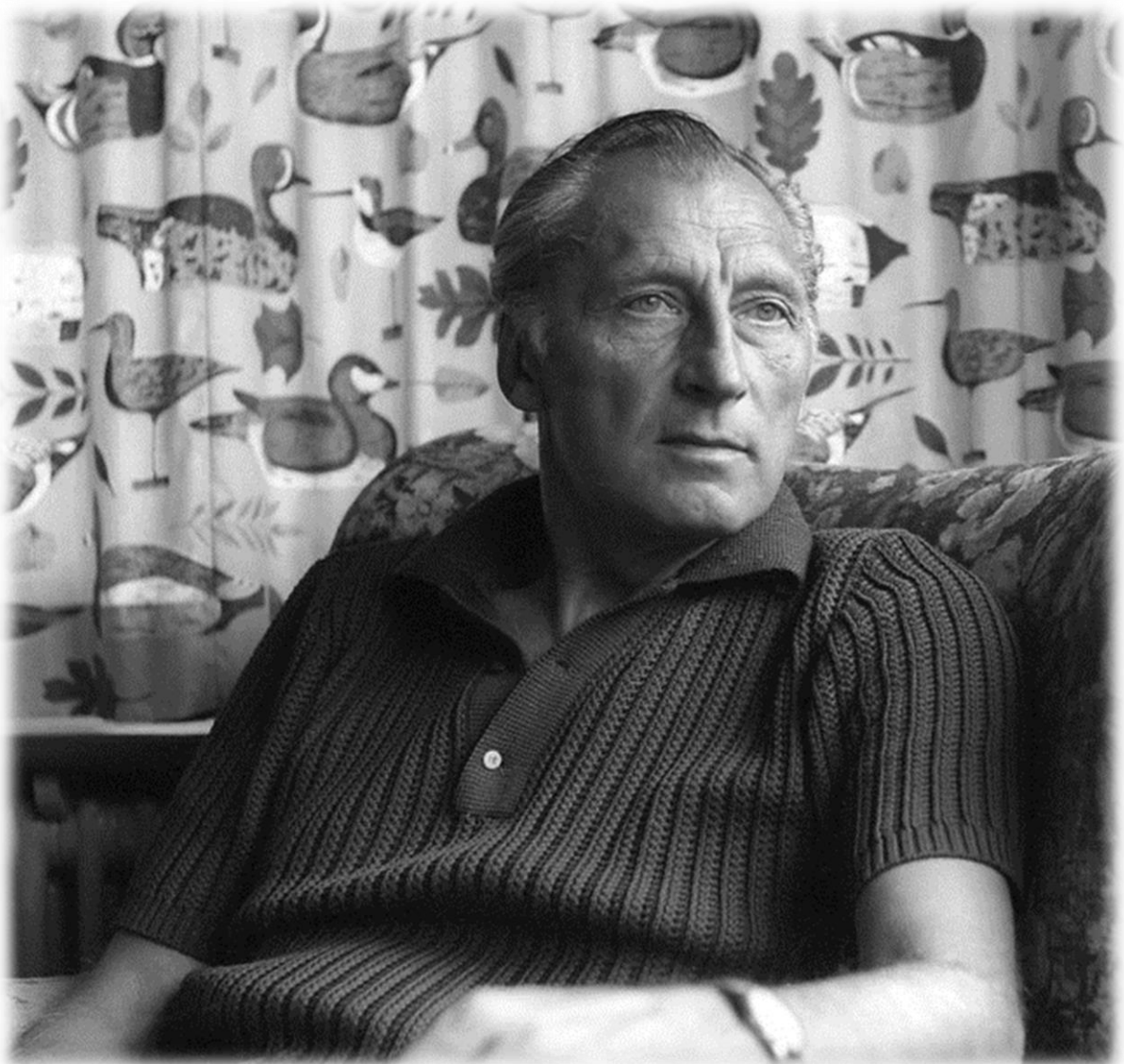


Hans Ruesch: Interwar motor racing ace-turned-author who became an antivivisection champion

by Richard Williams

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Hans Ruesch, the Swiss racing driver, best-selling author and pioneer of the antivivisection movement, born on May 17, 1913, died on August 26, 2007, at the age of 94 of cancer in Lugano. He was the last surviving grand prix winner of the interwar "golden age" of motor racing. Two of his novels were made into Hollywood films, and his subsequent publications helped give impetus to the international antivivisection movement.



Hans Ruesch in 1967

The son of a German-speaking Swiss father and an Italian-speaking Swiss mother, Ruesch spent the first 13 years of his life in Naples, where his father owned a textile mill. Schooled in Switzerland, he studied law briefly at the University of Zurich before leaving at the age of 19 to pursue his interest in fast cars.

His first competitive drive was in 1932 in an MG, but before long he could be seen at the wheel of more potent machines from Alfa Romeo and Maserati. Third place in an Alfa in the 1500cc category at the 1932 Brno grand prix at the Masaryk-Ring in Czechoslovakia was followed by victories in various hill climbs in the Swiss Alps. In his second year, he acquired a three-litre Maserati, with which he picked up further hill climb trophies and set a new world speed record for the standing-start kilometer, averaging 88.33 mph at the Montlhery autodrome outside Paris.

Ice racing on frozen lakes was a popular sport at the time, and in 1934 Ruesch and his Maserati 8CM won events on the Titisee and the Eibsee in Germany. The following year, in a smaller Maserati, he won further hill climbs and finished third in the Norwegian grand prix in Oslo.

For the 1936 season he purchased another Alfa Romeo, this time a powerful Tipo 8C-35, built for the Scuderia Ferrari and raced by the great Tazio Nuvolari. It was this machine that Ruesch took to Donington Park that autumn for the second running of the Donington grand prix, inviting the 23-year-old Richard Seaman, Britain's most promising driver, to share the wheel of what was reckoned to be potentially the fastest car ever raced on a British track. Ruesch had seen Seaman's quality earlier that season when the Englishman won the Coppa Acerbo over the demanding Pescara circuit in Italy, with Ruesch finishing third.



Racing driver Hans Ruesch in 1936

Organised by the Derby and District Motor Club, the Donington race was held over 120 laps of the 2.5 mile circuit. Seaman set the fastest lap in practice, four seconds faster than the car's owner, but Ruesch started the race and had established a comfortable lead when he handed

over to his co-driver midway through. All Seaman had to do was cruise round to claim victory in a race that, while not representing the pinnacle of interwar competition, was nevertheless a precursor of the modern British grand prix.

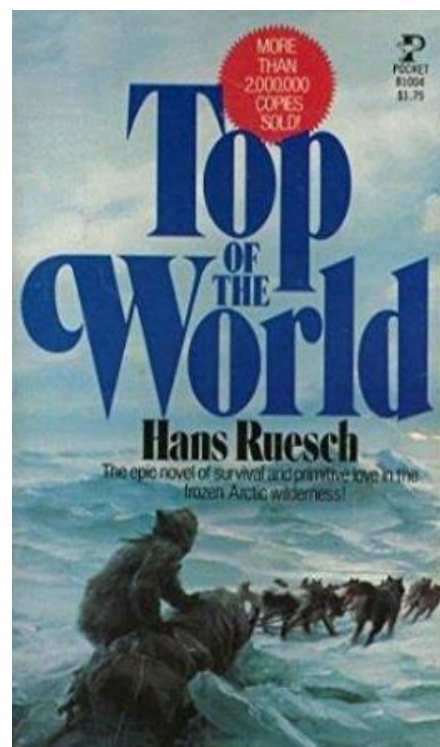
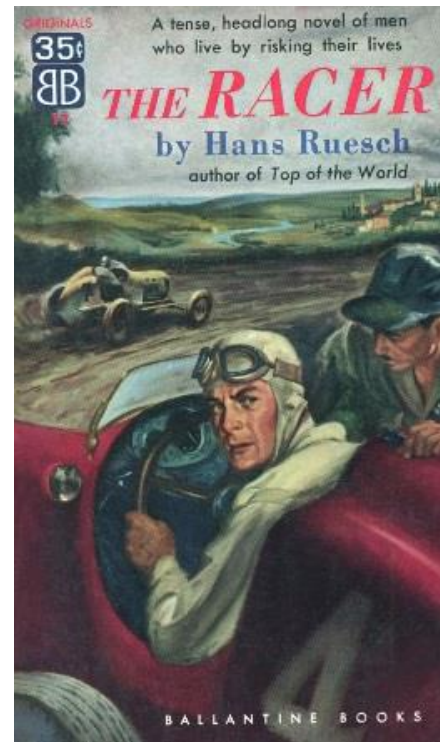
Ruesch returned to Britain in 1937, winning the mountain championship at Brooklands. His other victories in the big Alfa included the Bucharest grand prix, the Grand Prix des Frontières in Belgium, and the Bremgarten grand prix in Switzerland, as well as other lesser races and hill climbs.

It was in 1937, too, that he made his debut as an author with a novel titled *Il Numero Uno*, whose hero was closely modeled on the charismatic German driver Rudi Caracciola, the leader of the all-conquering Mercedes-Benz team. Retitled *The Racer* for its English publication in 1955, it remains an evocative portrait of the continental circus of the interwar years and, suitably updated, formed the basis for Henry Hathaway's 1957 film *The Racers*, starring Kirk Douglas and Bella Darvi.

In 1938, however, Ruesch was already thinking of leaving a Europe on the brink of war and made a reconnaissance trip to the US. The following year he left his home in Paris a week before the arrival of the Germans and made his way through the closed border with Spain. After being arrested in Madrid, he managed to get to Lisbon and from there sailed to New York, where he spent much of the war taking a university course in creative writing, contributing stories to *Esquire*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's* and *Redbook* magazine before returning to Europe in 1946.

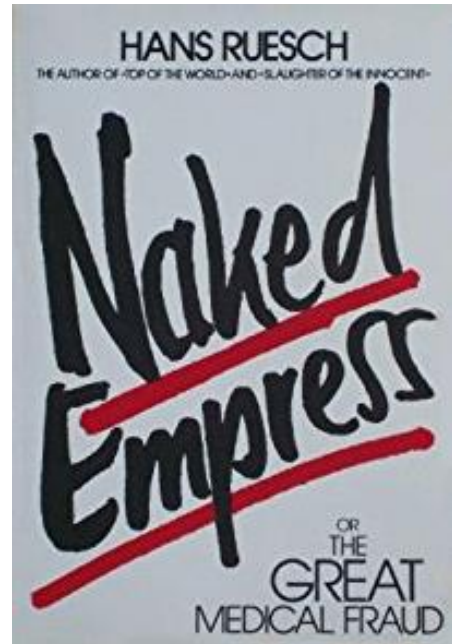
Marriage to Maria Luisa de la Feld in 1949 was followed a year later by the publication of *Top of the World*, a novel of life among Eskimos which, in the hands of the director Nicholas Ray, became a film called *The Savage Innocents*, starring Anthony Quinn and released in 1961. Ruesch's other novels included *South of the Heart* (1957).

There was a brief and ill-fated return to racing in 1953, at the wheel of a 4.1 liter Ferrari in the Supercortemaggiore grand prix, run on public roads and won that year by Juan Manuel Fangio. Ruesch lost control and spun his car into a group of spectators, killing a policeman and injuring three onlookers. It was the end of a career which had given him 27 victories. In later life his attention turned to the campaign against vivisection, his own interest having been latent since the death in infancy of his brother Konrad, apparently after being given a drug which had been cleared after tests on animals. The sight of a kitten



rescued after being mutilated in a laboratory is said to have prompted Ruesch's decision to found the *Centro Informazioni Vivisezionistiche Internazionali Scientifiche (CIVIS)* in 1974 in Klosters, Switzerland, and, two years later, to write *Imperatrice Nuda*, published in translation as *Naked Empress* and credited with giving impetus to a growing movement. It was followed by other volumes and, in 1979, by visits to anti-vivisection demonstrations in Oxford and Cambridge. He was also to become the honorary president of the *International League of Doctors against Vivisection (ILDAV)* in Milan, Italy.

In later years he moved from his postwar home in Rome back to Switzerland, which he called "the international capital of vivisection". He and his wife separated in the early 1970s. She died last year. He is survived by a daughter and two sons.



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