

Zora Duntov

The Godfather of Corvette: Zora Arkus-Duntov

Last week marked the 106th anniversary of Zora Arkus-Duntov's birth. Without Zora's persistence, expertise and passion, it's hard to say where America's Sports Car would be today. In honor of the man dubbed the Godfather of the Corvette, Mid America Motorworks takes a look at the life of Zora Arkus-Duntov.

Early Life

Born Zachary Arkus on December 25, 1909 in Berlin, Zora was the son of Russian-Jewish parents. His family moved to Berlin in 1927, where Zora's mother remarried. Zora's father still lived with the family and, out of respect for both men, Zora and his brother Yura adopted the name Arkus-Duntov.

In Berlin, Zora wanted to be a streetcar driver and began tinkering with motorcycles. His first vehicle, a 350 cc motorcycle, gave him the speed that he sought and that his parents feared. To appease them, he purchased a Bob, a cycle-fendered car with no front and weak rear brakes that was set up for oval track racing.

Zora graduated from Berlin's Charlottenburg Technical University in 1937 with a degree in mechanical engineering. He began writing and publishing papers on topics such as the benefits of four wheel drive and steering for racing.

Elfi Wolff, a dancer at Paris' Folies-Bergere, soon came into Zora's life and the two were married in 1939. Around the same time, Zora and Yura joined the French Air Force as pilots. When France surrendered, Zora, Elfi, Yura and their parents fled to the United States ahead of the advancing German armed forces.

Ardun Mechanical

Zora settled in New York, where he and Yura started Ardun Mechanical. Originally established to produce war materials, Ardun soon became known for the Ardun Head, an aluminum overhead valve cylinder head initially designed to remedy an overheating problem of Ford V8s used in the military. Zora and Yura soon discovered that their cylinder heads gave the flathead Ford V8 a 200 hp power increase, to 300 hp. The Ardun heads became popular among hot rodders, but few sold due to a hefty \$359 price tag.

Ardun Mechanical closed shop and in 1950, Zora returned to Europe, where he worked with Sydney Allard to develop the Allard J2 racecar. Zora raced in the 24 Hours of Le Mans in 1952 and 1953, co-driving Allard's entry. He also consulted with Porsche during that time, which earned him the driver seat of a Porsche 550 RS Spyder, where he won his class in both 1954 and 1955.

1953 Motorama

Between his trips to Le Mans for Allard and Porsche, Zora returned to the U.S. where began working for Fairchild Aviation and attended the 1953 Motorama at New York City's Waldorf-Astoria Hotel. It was then that he came face-to-face with Chevrolet's concept for the Corvette.

He was so taken with the potential of the Corvette that he penned a letter to Chevrolet Chief Engineer, Ed Cole, expressing his earnest desire to work on such a beautiful car and providing a paper that proposed an analytical way to determine a car's top speed. Zora made quite an impression on Ed Cole and it wasn't long before he left Fairchild Aviation to become an Assistant Staff Engineer for Chevrolet.



Daytona, where he set a flying mile record going 150 mph in a Corvette. As Corvette solidified its place as a sports car, Zora was promoted to Corvette Engineering Coordinator.

Zora continued experimenting with different engines and systems, including the fuel injection system. Together with fellow engineer, John Dolza, Zora developed the first production-based passenger engine with a horsepower equal to its cubic inch displacement.

In 1957 Zora was promoted again to Director of High Performance Vehicles. That year he developed the Corvette SS, intended for Le Mans. The car never reached France, dropping out of the 12 Hours of Sebring after 23 laps due to bad suspension and mechanical problems. Even with the trouble, the Corvette SS set a lap record and reinforced Corvette's image as a performance vehicle.

CERV I

In 1960, Zora began another pet project, designing and engineering Chevrolet Engineering Research Vehicle (CERV) I. The mid-engine Corvette was unveiled at Riverside International Raceway during the Automobile Manufacturer's Association band on racing. While not able to compete, CERV I still received plenty of attention and became a powerful promotional and research tool. Read more about CERV I [here](http://image.mamotorworksmedia.com/production/Website/emailArchive/cv/newsletters/2015/cerv/cervStatic.html).

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Grand Sport and CERV II

The Grand Sport and CERV II conceptualized in the early 1960s and came to life with Zora's design and direction. The Grand Sport Corvette was created to compete with the Shelby Cobra, but due to the racing ban, production was stopped at only 5 cars. Still, those cars were sold and raced by private owners.

CERV II was designed as part of a separate line of racing Corvettes, with the intention of competing with Ford's GT40. Zora developed CERV II with the technologies he thought were necessary for a good racecar, including four wheel drive and a monocoque chassis.

Corvette's First Chief

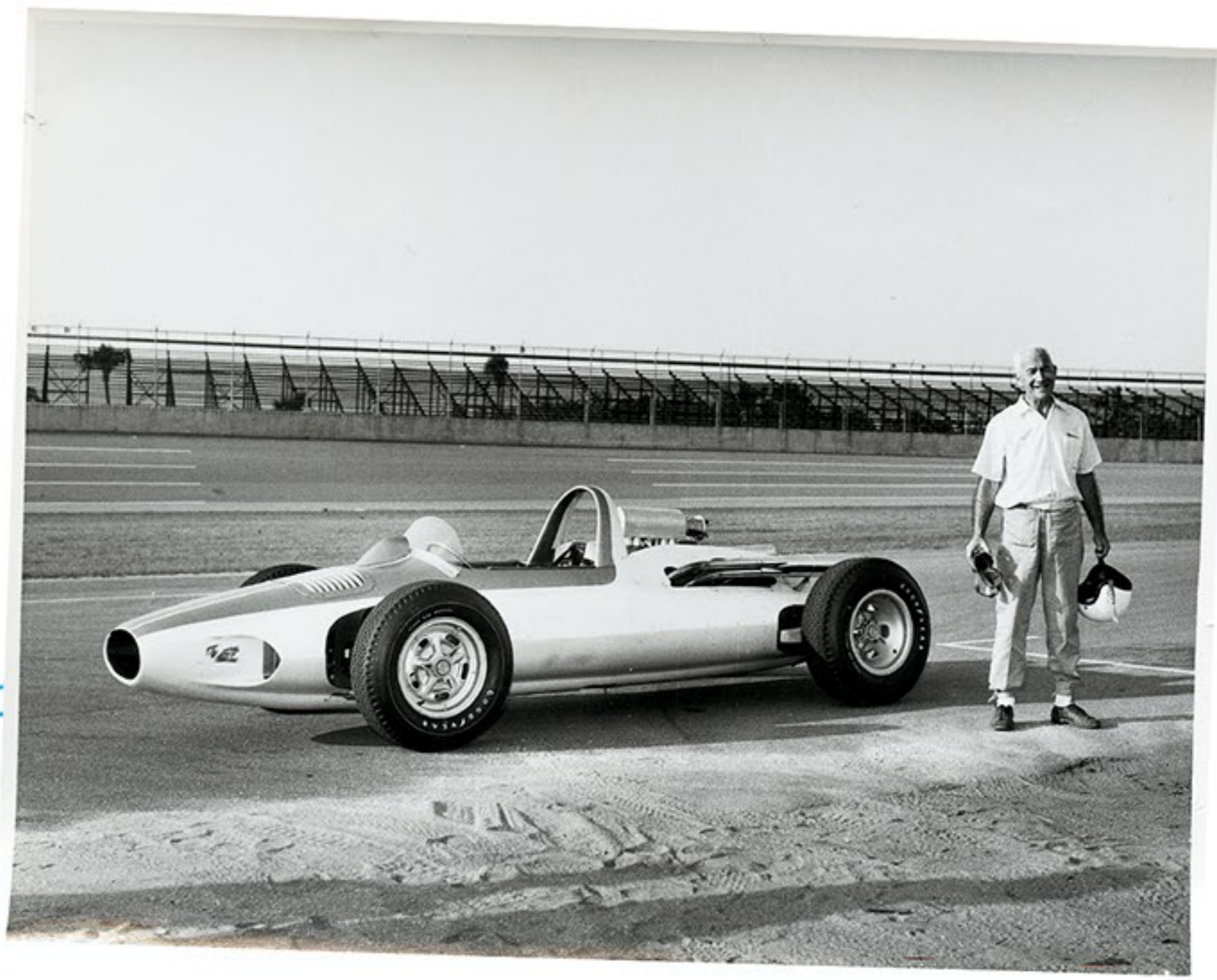
Zora was named Chief Engineer of Corvette in 1968. Before this time, Corvette had never had its own Chief Engineer. He was now responsible for the design and development of Corvette's body and chassis and began looking at the future of the Corvette. Together with Bill Mitchell, he developed the Astro II, a possible mid-engine design for America's Sports Car. The XP-882, Two-Rotor Corvette and 4-Rotor Corvette were all further designs intended to test the waters of a mid-engine Corvette. The 4-Rotor Corvette was powered by two Wankel engines, which proved to be cost-prohibitive. In 1976, the 4-Rotor Corvette received a transverse-mounted V8 and a new name - the AeroVette. It appeared at several auto shows, giving enthusiasts the idea that perhaps a mid-engine Corvette was on the horizon.



Changing the Game at Chevrolet

Though Zora was tasked with many projects as Assistant Staff Engineer, he kept his eye on Corvette. At the end of 1953, he wrote another letter to Ed Cole, this time suggesting that Corvette could be the key to securing Chevrolet in the hearts and minds of the youth market. Zora is credited with saving the Corvette, as the first year sales were low and there very likely could have been an end to further production.

By 1955, Corvettes housed V8 engines and found their place in the winner's circle on the stock car circuit. In 1956 he took Corvettes to Sebring and Daytona, where he set a flying mile record going 150 mph in a Corvette. As Corvette solidified its place as a sports car, Zora was promoted to Corvette Engineering Coordinator.



Retirement

In 1975, after 22 years with Chevrolet, Zora retired from General Motors. His passion continued well into retirement, as he and Elfi could be found at various car shows promoting the Corvette. In 1992, he attended a celebration at the Bowling Green Assembly Plant to commemorate the production of the 1 millionth Corvette. Two years later, he served as the guest of honor alongside Larry Shinoda at the first annual Corvette Funfest at Mid America Motorworks in Effingham, Ill.

Zora Arkus-Duntov was a member of the Drag Racing Hall of Fame, the Chevrolet Legends of Performance and the Automotive Hall of Fame. Those who had the privilege to know him always smile when talking about his ability to do things his way with seemingly little repercussions. While he passed away in 1996, his mark on the Corvette - and on the automotive industry - lives on.