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**A 'GREAT CHANGE', OR, THE POLES'
UNFULFILLED DAYDREAM
ABOUT HAVING A CAR (1956-7)***

Abstract

The political 'Thaw' of 1956-7 was in Poland a period of thorough political as well as cultural and social change. While the political liberalisation came to an end rather soon, the team of Władysław Gomułka, the newly-appointed First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party [PZPR], in power since October 1956, cared much for maintaining and reinforcing their pro-social and reformatory image. The leadership team's assent for a more sophisticated consumption, part of which was owning a car, helped alleviate social tensions. The models were drawn from the West of Europe and from the United States, which for the Polish society were the major points of reference, as well as from the other socialist countries – particularly, East Germany (the GDR) and Czechoslovakia, where the political and societal significance of motorisation had already been appreciated. On the other hand, offering private individuals an opportunity to purchase a car was meant to be a remarkable tool used to draw the 'hot money' down from the market, thus preventing inflation. Cars, imported or Polish-made, began being (relatively) freely traded, at very high prices. This did not limit the demand, as acquiescence for private business operations contributed to the growing of the group of affluent people. While this incited the citizens to develop their own strategies of acquiring cars – not infrequently colliding with the law; the authorities began gradually reinstating the rationing. All the same, the number of private cars quickly increased, to 58,600 as of 1958, up from some 24,750 in 1956. Public discussion started around popular low-capacity (small-engine) cars – whether licensed (Renault, Simca, Fiat) or (to be) made in Poland. However, in spite of the raised expectations the authorities decided that it was still too early for a mass motorisation: this was made possible only in the early 1970s.

Keywords: Poland, socialist countries, Thaw of 1956, motorisation, automobile, consumption

* This essay has been written as part of the National Science Centre-funded project no. 2012/07/B/HS3/01108 – 'An inter-October Revolution: The Year 1957 in Poland'.

I

INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXTS OF 1956–7

“What is going to happen, and how?”: the well-known man-of-letters Jerzy Zawieyski posed such question on the first day of the reflection-triggering year 1957. “What Poland witnessed in the last year heralds not much of a stabilisation? On the contrary: everything is uncertain, dynamic, and conflict-imbued. There is one certain thing to all that: the previous style and habits will not be reinstated. Some irreversible facts have occurred.”¹ Indeed, the totalitarian character of Stalinism had contributed to the fast pace and vast extent of the transition that affected and involved, in 1956–7, virtually all the social, professional or ethnic groups. The scope, intensity and variety of manifestations of the society’s activity and (self-)mobilisation is potentially comparable with the time immediately after the Second World War or with the early days of the transition that occurred after 1989.

There is no doubt that the processes that took years in other countries occurred in Poland literally within a dozen months, in late 1956/early 1957. It happened so because of a unique coincidence and accumulation of internal and external factors. On the one hand, the ideologisation of the political, social, economic or cultural life under Stalinism had developed a backup for a potentially quick and thorough abreaction – all the more so that there were societal actors ready to go and do it: be it hibernated members of the former elite or the new generation, for whom the field of action was radically expanded owing to the breakthrough. The years of isolation had fostered the so-called ‘fire victim complex’, characteristic of those who “have lost all their property ... in a conflagration and now are endeavouring to have it rebuilt, following the patterns developed in mass consumption societies. These patterns penetrate into this country with films, television, press, illustrated magazines, tourism, family visits, and so on.”² Albeit the sociologist Jan Szczepański wrote so in the middle of the 1970s, his diagnosis perfectly illustrates the situation of two decades earlier, when the citizens finally obtained the opportunity to

¹ Jerzy Zawieyski, *Dzienniki, i: Wybór z lat 1955–1959*, ed. by Agnieszka Knyt (Warszawa, 2011) [a diary], 333.

² Jan Szczepański, ‘Zagadnienia konstruowania i realizacji modelu i wzorów konsumpcji socjalistycznej’, in *idem* (ed.) *Badania nad wzorami konsumpcji* (Wrocław *et al.*, 1977), 33.

experience a catharsis after the futile Stalinist years. The fact that the communist party apparatus and the surveillance forces (Civic Militia, courts, prosecutor's office, economic control bodies) was debilitated, temporarily but drastically, was enormously important.

Also the international conditions were beneficial. The change in Poland would not have been as deep (had it occurred at all!) without a thaw that was taking place in the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet *otpepel'* ('warming') did not last long, part of the society did not resume the 'hibernation'; especially members of metropolitan intelligentsia 'got warmed up and thawed out'.³ However, for a mean resident of the People's Republic of Poland in the mid-1950s was not really the 'thawing' USSR but rather the United States and the West of Europe, which had finally parted with the Second World War: the pace and range of changes the Western Europe experienced were so enormous that the slogan 'The Golden Fifties' became considered obvious in as early as by the end of the decade.⁴ The years 1955–7 were critical politically as well as economically (West Germany allowed to join the NATO; Treaties of Rome executed, laying the foundation for the EEC) and socially; the period was ground-breaking for a new landscape of Poland⁵ on the one hand, resumption of bourgeois traditions and habits

³ Elena Zubkova, *Russia after the War. Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945–1957* (Armonk and London, 1998), 201. Cf. Egor V. Demičev, *Reforma upravljenija promyšlennost'ju i stroitel'stvom 1957–1965 gg. v kontekste specifički otečestvennoj istorii* (Moskva, 2011); Deborah A. Field, *Private life and communist morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (New York et al., 2007); Martin McCauley (ed.), *Khrushchev and Khrushchevism* (Houndmills, 1987); William Taubman, *Khrushchev. The Man and His Era* (New York, 2003); Melanie Ilič and Jeremy Smith (eds.), *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev* (London and New York, 2009).

⁴ Axel Schildt, *Moderne Zeiten: Freizeit, Massenmedien und "Zeitgeist" in der Bundesrepublik der 50er Jahre* (Hamburg, 1995), 16. More generally on the change occurring in Europe: Hartmut Kaelble, *Sozialgeschichte Europas: 1945 bis zur Gegenwart* (München, 2007; English trans.: *A Social History of Europe, 1945–2000: Recovery and Transformation after Two World Wars* [New York and Oxford, 2013]), extensive references incl.

⁵ For a discussion of the global significance of the year 1956, see Simon Hall, *1956: The World in Revolt* (London, 2016). An original view of the 1956–7 transition is proposed in the collections of studies: Jerzy Kochanowski and Joachim von Puttkamer (eds.), *1956. (Nico) inne spojrzanie. Eine (etwas) andere Perspektive* (Warszawa, 2016); also Alexander Gallus and Werner Müller (eds.), *Sonde 1957. Ein Jahr als symbolische Zäsur für Wandlungsprozesse im geteilten Deutschland* (Berlin, 2010). The significance of 1957 as a limit point is identified, among others, by

was observed, whilst on the other, Europe was getting increasingly Americanised, in terms of mass culture as well as consumption.⁶ Deep modernising processes were of course the most conspicuous in the better-developed countries, those unaffected (Sweden) or slightly affected by the war (United Kingdom), and those damaged, destroyed, and pauperised because of the war (West Germany).

A car, a TV set or a refrigerator was becoming a standard not only for the middle class of decent means.⁷ While motor cars (of which more is said afterwards) increased the society's mobility, pushing the people out of towns and the country, the television chained them to their sofas – the number of TV sets seeing an increase that remarkably outpaced that of motor vehicles: West Germany had 84,278 subscribers at the end of 1954 and 1.2 million 3 years later, with 18 producers offering as many as 130 types of television sets. As a result, trips to cinema were less and less popular, while the quantities of alcohols consumed at homes grew.⁸ A well-equipped kitchen area began epitomising modernity as well as the reappearing middleclass *Gemütlichkeit*. Fridges and cabinets absorbed increasing amounts of high-processed products whose handling called for less time and energy. Such goods were now rarer bought at the local corner shop, and more frequently in self-service large-format stores. Contrary to the 'hungry' first post-war years, food was not hunted for merely to enable the people to survive

David Kynaston, British social historian, author of *Tales of a New Jerusalem*, a six-volume history of Britain between the end of the Second World War and Margaret Thatcher's appointment as Prime Minister in 1979. From our stand point, the most relevant are vols. ii: *Family Britain 1951–1957* (London et al., 2007) and iii: *Modernty Britain: Opening the Box, 1957–1959* (London et al., 2013).

⁶ See Alexander Stephan (ed.), *The Americanization of Europe. Culture, Diplomacy, and Anti-Americanism after 1945* (New York and Oxford, 2006); *idem* (ed.), *Americanization and Anti-Americanism: The German Encounter with American Culture after 1945* (New York and Oxford, 2005); Alf Lüdtke (ed.), *Amerikanisierung. Traum und Alptraum im Deutschland des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart, 1996); Lars Koch (ed.), *Moderonisierung als Amerikanisierung? Entwicklungslinien der westdeutschen Kultur 1945–1960* (Bielefeld, 2015).

⁷ For more on these aspects, see Sabine Hausteil, *Vom Mangel zum Massenkonsum. Deutschland, Frankreich und Großbritannien im Vergleich, 1945–1970* (Frankfurt and New York, 2007), references incl.

⁸ Knut Hickethier, 'Der Fernseher. Zwischen Teilhabe und Medienkonsum', in Wolfgang Ruppert (ed.), *Fahrrad, Auto, Fernsehschrank. Zur Kulturgeschichte der Alltagsdinge* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993), 162–87; Schildt, *Moderne Zeiten*.

but was now acquired as a pleasure, a 'placebo for the soul'. The home menu, fast-preparable and 'healthy and spicy', promoted a larger share of salads, vegetables and fruit to keep the consumer slim and fit, as the trend had it. The array of meals was getting ever more cosmopolitan from the middle of the decade onwards: experiences, meals and spices of other national cuisines, then still primarily European (particularly, Italian), were utilised.⁹ This was about to change too, as the Western societies began increasingly differentiating ethnically. In the colonial countries – particularly, in Britain – Africans or Asians were no rarity in the earlier time period, either; however, since mid-1950s, adult males, who had overwhelmingly prevailed in those immigrant populations, ceased being their almost-only representatives: complete families arrived more and more often ever since. The comers from the West Indies, India, or Pakistan were not visitors or guests anymore: they became neighbours.¹⁰

Clearly, it may be disputed to what extent or degree the parallel occurrence of the Thaw in Poland and the change, if not transition, in the west of the continent actually contributed to the modernisation leap observed in the country on the Vistula in 1956–7. In a number of areas – to mention science, industrial design, sports, cultural life, openness to the world and the way it was perceived, the hatching of a modern social structure, private sector, rural areas, ecology (at its inception), the sphere of ideas, (day)dreams and concepts – the change was so extensive and so thorough that it might be stated that within this short time, the foundation was poured for modernity – and, indeed, for the societal life in the form that lasted, virtually, to what was named the political-system transition of three decades later.

In the great pursuit of the West, on which Poland (and the entire Eastern Bloc, Soviet Union included) embarked on in the middle of the 1950s,¹¹ not all the determinants of consumptive prestige raised similar emotions in this country. Television was not yet regarded, in

⁹ Michael Wildt, *Am Beginn der "Konsumgesellschaft". Mangelersahrung, Lebenshaltung, Wohlstandshoffnung in Westdeutschland in den fünfziger Jahren* (Hamburg, 1995), 105, 126, 145–6, 162–71.

¹⁰ Kynaston, *Family Britain*, 449.

¹¹ David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, 'Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe', in Susan E. Reid and David Crowley (eds.), *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford and New York, 2000), 1–24.

1956–7, as one of these determinants;¹² other household appliances did not cause accelerated heartbeat, either. The real, usually unattainable, but certainly the highest valued, determinant of social prestige *and* modernity was motor car. The authorities seemed to be accommodating the society in this respect, quitting for good the perception of the owners of cars as enemies to the system – and, efficiently draining their pockets – and retreating fairly quickly.

II

MOTORISATION, OR, A TWO-SPEED EUROPE

“Here is where the Western drivers’ dream may come true”, a German journalist wrote in the second half of the 1950s, having Warsaw in mind. “A city of a million, with no problems with parking your car, no thicket of road-signs, no jungle of one-way streets”.¹³ The residents of the capital city and of the other Polish towns would have probably not shared this view and would indisputably prefer to be stuck in traffic jams – as long as they drove a car of their own. Most of them became successful in this respect several decades later.

While at the beginning of the twenty-first century the term ‘Europe of two speeds’, or ‘double-speed Europe’, used in international discourse, has been mostly metaphorical or symbolical, it had a completely literal meaning long after the finish of the Second World War, when the Iron Curtain divided the continent also in terms of automotive industry and motorisation. In the West, where car was a rather common sight already before the war, production of cars for mean consumer was treated as an important factor of economic development shortly after the war as well. The decade of 1949–59 was very much a turning

¹² Established in 1952, The Polish Television was in its experimental stage at least till 1960; the Thaw did not change its position as a mass medium – far behind the press and the radio. The authorities tended to perceive the television as a means of education and artistic expression, rather than a propaganda carrier. Television sets were still a rarity, with some 10,500 households having one in 1957 – this being a few times less than private automobiles; domestic manufacture of TV sets started in 1957. See Katarzyna Pokorna-Ignatowicz, *Telewizja w systemie politycznym i medialnym PRL. Między polityką a widzem* (Kraków, 2003), 52–3; cf. Maciej Wojtyński, *Telewizja w Polsce do 1972 roku* (Warszawa, 2011).

¹³ Hansjakob Stehle, ‘Die Furcht darf nicht wiederkehren’, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* [hereinafter: FAZ] (18 Jan. 1958).

point, with the number of cars increasing three and a half times, on average, in the west of Europe; West Germany saw a sevenfold growth (7 into 69 per 1,000 inhabitants). France had a growth of 37 into 123, the UK – 42 into 96; Belgium – 26 into 78; Italy – 6 into 32; Norway – 18 into 55; Sweden – 28 into 145. The retarded countries of the South saw an increase too: Greece had 1 into 5, Portugal – 7 into 16, Spain – 3 into 9. The launch of popular and relatively inexpensive models, such as the Volkswagen Beetle (whose millionth specimen rolled off the assembly line in 1955), Renault 4CV, Citroën 2CV, or Fiat 500 has increased the availability of motor vehicles to the lower strata, workers included, thus efficiently changing the social habit.¹⁴ Consequently, Erich Kästner could observe in 1956 that “we are almost living in a motorised Biedermeier”.¹⁵

Meanwhile, on the other side of what was to become the Iron Curtain, cars were a rarity before 1939, save for Czechoslovakia and the eastern part of Germany; the war and the first post-war decade completed the automotive retardation. The reconstruction of the country, strenuous industrialisation and coerced collectivisation of agriculture all contributed to determination of the living standard of average citizen at a level where a private car was an extravagance. A scarce commodity, car was a privilege of those in power and of their favourite; the others, if they needed or wanted to move around or travel, were condemned to use public transport.¹⁶

In terms of motorisation and automotive industry, Poland had a rather poor record already in the two decades between the World Wars, when it lagged behind Europe; the importance of this particular branch of industry, as a potential flywheel of economy, was appreciated too late. During the war, some conspiratorial organisations prepared plans to redevelop the sector, trying to avoid the previous errors: “Thinking about motorisation, we have to embrace the whole of it, bearing the principle of harmony in mind”, a 1943 (?) study compiled

¹⁴ Hausteijn, *Vom Mangel zum Massenkonsum*, 7–8, 122–5.

¹⁵ Schildt, *Moderne Zeiten*, 23.

¹⁶ Luminita Gatejel, *Warten, hoffen und endlich fahren. Auto und Sozialismus in der Sowjetunion, in Rumänien und der DDR (1956–1989/91)* (Frankfurt am Main and New York, 2014); Corinna Kuhr-Korolev and Manfred Grieger (eds.), *Towards Mobility. Varieties of Automobility in East and West* (Wolfsburg, 2009); Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades. The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca, NY, 2008); *idem* (ed.), *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc* (Ithaca, NY, 2011).

at the Home Army (Pol.: *Armia Krajowa*, AK) Headquarters stated. “We have never remembered about it. What we have been was an old manor to which some laicistic handyman annexed something pointlessly every once in a while.”¹⁷ Regardless of the political system that overwhelmed the country, Poland remained after the war an automotive *tabula rasa* which could be filled in freely. Inasmuch as the country in ruins could built factories, it proved incapable of providing adequate, state-of-the-art technologies, and thus making use of foreign experiences became inevitable. Various concepts were considered; one of them was setting up within Poland a General Motors assembly plant. Long talks were held with Fiat of Italy; finally, a licence agreement was signed with the latter company, in April 1948, and an automotive factory (*Fabryka Samochodów Osobowych*, FSO) was constructed in the Warsaw district of Żerań with the Italian vehicles in mind. The first cars were released in late 1951; instead of a Fiat, though, they turned out to be the (already then) old-fashioned, gas-guzzling Soviet Pobiedas, which locally were given a familiar-sounding name Warszawa M-20.¹⁸

Although the press admired the new product, the chance that it would make Poland a motorised country – say nothing of the communist authorities’ critical attitude toward private-owned cars – was virtually null. In the first year of its operation, FSO’s output was 75 vehicles, with approx. 8,800 manufactured by the end of 1955. Those automobiles could make no radical change to Polish streets and roads; most of the 40,000-or-so vehicles that could be seen in this country in 1955 were continually a survey of international civil and military automotive output of the recent few decades.¹⁹ Only a half of the passenger cars were owned by private individuals, and the authorities did what they could to make their lives bitter: the petroleum

¹⁷ Warsaw, Central Archives of Modern Records (*Archiwum Akt Nowych* [hereinafter: AAN]), Home Army Headquarters (*Komenda Główna Armii Krajowej*), 203/III-24, a study entitled ‘Regarding motorisation’.

¹⁸ Hubert Wilk, “Nawet samochodów nie ma, zostały graty po Niemcach” – motoryzacyjny punkt startu – Polska 1944–1949’, *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały*, xii (2014), 301–30.

¹⁹ An estimated “more than 40 per cent are pre-war vehicles, whilst approx. 18 per cent are vehicles from the first five years after the war (including a considerable share of Soviet cars), this not making them premium-quality in raw-material terms, their design flaws proving pretty numerous”; Herder-Institut Marburg [hereinafter: HIM], Pressearchive P-63221, Item 5372/57, *The Polish motor industry: 40 per cent of private cars are pre-war*, September 1957.

was much dearer for them than for state entities; mileage limits were imposed on them, and so on.²⁰ The very fact that somebody had a car on their own was suspicious enough, and the operation of purposeful camouflaging and antiquating of cars, described in Leopold Tyrmand's novel *Zły* (published 1955), was nowise the author's poetic licence.

III THE 'AUTOMOTIVE THAW'

A considerable part of Poles (in fact, urban residents) daydreamed about having a car, realising that the chance for their dream to come true was rather vague. Their frustration was even severer considering the fact that – putting aside the mythical 'West' – the adjacent socialist countries, including Czechoslovakia (with its traditionally stronger industrialisation) and the GDR, had earlier on come to the conclusion that a popular automobile could be used as a means of efficiently persuading the citizens that socialism was all right. 1955 saw the Mladá Boleslav factory release the first Škoda 440 car, commonly known as the Spartak, while the East Germany's Zwickau-based plant made AWZ P70, a prototype of the Trabant. In Warsaw, a decision was made in mid-1953 that "a popular means of transportation ought to be built, which would save time whilst performing official duties or relaxing; such a product would be designed for rationalisers, labour leaders, activists, scientists, and leading representatives of the intelligentsia".²¹ The design work was commenced indeed, but to save the resources, possibly many elements of the Warszawa car would have been 'preserved'. At last, the first Syrena cars were assembled at the FSO only in March 1957. Two-hundred pieces manufactured

²⁰ Jarosław Abramow-Newerly, who owed his rather prestigious (and moneyed) social position to his father, the well-known author, experienced his first conscious contact with a private automobile at the age of twenty, in 1953: "It was in Łąck that I first-ever saw a private car. Mr. Forbert, the operator, arrived with his small cabriolet. I was certain it was a company car, and I did not believe when they told me it was private. 'Owning things on a private basis is forbidden', I told them. 'He bought it with a coupon he received from the minister, based on a special permit', I was explained. It was an IFA 2, the 'glued plywood' thing, as they named it: the former GDR-made *dekawka* [DKW car]."; Jarosław Abramow-Newerly, *Lwy STS-u* (Warszawa, 2005), 49.

²¹ Karol J. Mórąwski, *Syrena. Samochód PRL* (Warszawa, 2005), 17.

by the end of the year as well as some 3,000 made in 1958 had more of a propaganda than a real quality, particularly as far as the suddenly raised hope for a universal motorisation is concerned.²²

The 'automotive Thaw' was felt, indeed, across the Eastern Bloc, which in the middle of the decade was still a far cry from Western Europe in terms of automobilism (the figures specified below are illustrative enough).

Table 1. Number of persons per motor vehicle in Europe, as at 1 Jan. 1956.

| Country | Persons per car, in total | Persons per passenger car |
|----------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Sweden | 9.5 | 11.6 |
| France | 10.2 | 14.4 |
| UK | 11.0 | 14.4 |
| West Germany | 22.7 | 32.0 |
| Austria | 32.6 | 47.5 |
| Finland | 29.4 | 49.3 |
| Italy | 39.2 | 55.0 |
| Czechoslovakia | 73.3 | 117.5 |
| Spain | 132.0 | 260.0 |
| Greece | 174.0 | 490.0 |
| Poland | 207.0 | 642.0 |
| Romania | 610.0 | 1,133.7 |
| Yugoslavia | 434.4 | 1,504.0 |
| Bulgaria | 439.6 | 1,577.0 |
| Hungary | 600.0 | 1,745.4 |

Source: 'Przyszłość polskiego samochodu', *Trybuna Ludu*, 284 (19 Oct. 1957).

These data show not only quantitative but also structural differences: whereas in the West the proportion of passenger cars *versus* trucks or lorries averaged 3:1, the ratio was reverse in the East. Most of the vehicles used in Eastern Europe were motorcycles (see next table),

²² *Ibidem*, 18–20, 30–2. It was observed in as early as the late 1950s that "the car almost fully meets the requirements of individual motorisation"; cf. M. Piłacki and L. Mikołajków, 'Samochód – narzędzie pracy czy luksus?', *Wiedza i Życie*, x, (1959). The 'almost' word made a difference indeed.

which were commonly regarded as an intermediate degree in the evolution of motorisation. Cheaper and easier to make, a motorcycle could better cope with the local roads, whose quality left rather a lot to be desired. In Poland and, likewise, in Hungary or Romania, automobiles were basically part of the landscape of large cities and their close vicinities, while agricultural areas were often a motor-vehicle desert. As of 1957, of the total of 44,790 passenger cars registered in Poland, 8,200 were filed for Warsaw, 7,167 for the Voivodeship of Katowice, 4,127 for the Voivodeship of Warsaw, 4,019 for the Voivodeship of Cracow, 3,886 for the Voivodeship of Poznań, 2,601 for the Voivodeship of Gdańsk – the Białystok Voivodeship having a mere 731.²³

People of the Bloc countries expected that the political ‘thaw’ would extend to motorisation as well – especially that the right to dream of an own car was accepted even in the Soviet Union, although some of the ideas proposed by Xruščev’s team – like hiring cars from the state (through special-purpose institutions), rather than owning them – did not much delight the drivers-to-be.²⁴ All the same, the hopes were raised. Hans Rogger, professor with the University of California, Los Angeles, an expert in Russian affairs, paraphrased, in the title of his reportage from the USSR of the early Xruščev era, the 1928 Republican campaign slogan “A chicken in every pot, a car in every garage”, specifying that ‘car’ actually meant Moskvíč in the local context.²⁵

While the Polish ‘motorisation Thaw of 1956’²⁶ caused frustration, it also instilled optimism. The frustration was reflected in a considerable number of press articles as well as in the letters sent to the Radio or the authorities. Among the responses to the questionnaire on the possible ways to a fast and cheap motorisation of the country, published by the trade periodical *Motoryzacja*, those containing “not-for-print phrases targeted at the actors responsible for the present-day condition of the local motorisation” prevailed over the proposed solutions.²⁷

²³ Olgierd Budrewicz, ‘Cuda na kółkach’, *Przekrój* (16 June 1957).

²⁴ Gatejel, *Warten, hoffen*, 32–5.

²⁵ Hans Rogger, ‘Complacency, Conformity, and a Moskvich in Every Garage’, *The Reporter* (17 Oct. 1957), 31–4.

²⁶ Hubert Wilk, ‘Samochód dla towarzysza Wiesława. Dyskusje nad kierunkiem rozwoju motoryzacji indywidualnej w Polsce 1955–1970’, *Polska 1944/45–1989. Studia i Materiały*, xi (2013), 277–96 (esp. 287).

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 289.

On the other hand, though, the situation in Poland, while worse than that in Czechoslovakia or East Germany, was better than that in Hungary, Bulgaria, or Romania, with some symptoms of improvement. “A Great Change took place in the years 1956–1958”, journalist Krzysztof Wolicki wrote in 1962 with regard to the motorisation in Poland. “The contributing factors include: the living standard of the society as a whole being conspicuously increased; a shift in the consumption fund, from collective into individual; profuse contacts with the West; a relaxation with respect to private initiative in urban areas and the new agricultural policy; and, the new economic thought, with its central function of material stimuli.” As a result, a “consumption model with a dominant role of private mechanical means of transport” has apparently been disseminated.²⁸

IV

AUTOMOBILITY À LA POLONAISE, 1956–7: WHAT, WHERE, AND HOW MUCH?

The team ruling the country since the autumn of 1956 also seemed to understand the demand; Władysław Gomułka, who remained critical with respect to a ‘sophisticated’ consumption, was initially generous with his enthusiasm and support.²⁹ The FSO factory located in the Warsaw area of Żerań embarked on upgrading the Warszawa series already in production and the planned Syrena cars.³⁰ The forms of sale were altered: the coupon-based distribution system – which offered the opportunity for merited artists or journalists (or, at times,

²⁸ Krzysztof Wolicki, (in collaboration with) Jerzy Szejnach, ‘Droga do rajju’, *Polityka* (11 Aug. 1962).

²⁹ Wilk, ‘Samochód’, 295.

³⁰ As already mentioned, their manufacture was meant to be based on the heavy and uneconomical Warszawa. This idea abandoned, Syrena would be a “four-passenger vehicle, heated inside, fit for tourist purposes (unfoldable backrests enabling the user to sleep), its shape aerodynamic, equipped with large curved panes at the front and at the back, the bodywork made entirely of sheet-metal. It is equipped with a two-stroke 27 hp engine (the previous model had 18 hp).”; ‘O żerańskich “Syrenach” i nowych “Warszawach”’, *Życie Warszawy*, 180 (30 July 1956). In parallel, *Po Prostu* magazine observed that “the Syrena cannot satisfy the hunger for motorisation, nor will it disseminate automobiles across Poland; instead, it will be too expensive to buy and operate, its production will not become mass enough”; Rajmund Sosiński, ‘Zmotoryzowane kłopoty’, *Po Prostu*, 33 (12 Aug. 1956).

miners or iron-founders, as a means of propaganda), was mostly quit. Released for free sale were now some home-produced and imported cars.³¹ What was really decisive in this respect: the will to calm the mood or to 'drain' the citizens' monetary resources (a career-making notion in early 1957), in order to lay the ghost of inflation to rest, is not pretty clear. Whatever the case, the latter move proved much more successful. In a longer run, a new housing policy was to serve the purpose: this included the people's participation in the cost of construction of residential units (the state having been the only funding source so far), along with a more lenient attitude toward single-family housing.³² A solution of this sort needed time to be implemented; the attempts at liberalising the housing policy faced barriers in terms of shortages in construction materials (in spite of their prices having risen drastically), which led to mass-scale thefts and exacerbating corruption and nepotism. The new instruments that would have been fastest used for depleting, or draining, the purses and wallets were the 'mobile' determinants of luxury – automobiles in the first place: these goods helped draw money from the most affluent.³³ "Importation of cars tends to drain the income", Professor Michał Kalecki, a renowned economist, argued; "the man [i.e. consumer] would have nothing to spend the money on, were it not for the purchase of a car. He would have kept the money with him. Should the cars be made at a cheaper price, like for a doctor and so forth, it being determined in some reasonable way and, besides, a price rise admitted [*sic*], and the man would buy the car along these lines, then drainage will occur. ... Cars stand out to the foreground! [*sic*]"³⁴

The prices of automobiles were increased, some of them radically – as in the case of the GDR-made Wartburg, whose 1956 price

³¹ In line with the new guidelines, those willing to buy a car had to apply with Motozbyt and then wait till they were advised about the date they might receive the car; this implied the obligation to pay, as of that date, 20 per cent of the price, the rest remaining payable in instalments until the car was delivered; HIM, P-63221, item 934/57, *Poles will buy more private motorcars*, Jan. 1957.

³² For more on the new housing policy employed after 1956, see Dariusz Jarosz, *Mieszkanie się należy ... Studium z peerelowskich praktyk społecznych* (Warszawa, 2010), 226–56.

³³ AAN, Office of the Council of Ministers (*Urząd Rady Ministrów*), 22/11, Shorthand reports of the meetings of the Economic Council Surveying Committee, 1 June 1957, c. 76.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

(in the coupon system) was 12,000 złoty but by spring 1957 it rose to 83,000 złoty – a sluice-gate price for most citizens. The prices of Polish products also saw a rapid rise, the Warszawa car being priced at over 100,000 złoty.³⁵ Thereby, at the car price averaging 102,400 złoty as of 1957, it required as much as 80 average nominal pays (1,279 złoty) to get one.³⁶ All the same, those willing to buy and having the disposable income – whether legally or illegally earned, or saved – much outnumbered the available vehicles. Motozbyt, the enterprise holding the monopoly for trading in automobiles, used a mere two days to sell to individual consumers a total of 70 Simca Aronde cars, in spite of the apparently prohibitive price of 125,000 złoty each. Those willing to possess their own four wheels were so numerous that in as early as January 1957, Motozbyt withheld the receipt of applications for purchase of imported small-engine cars; in end February, the same concerned the Polish-made Warszawas. No surprise: at best, some 7,700 vehicles were earmarked for sale, against 134,000 applications enqueued.³⁷

It would have taken almost two decades to handle them with the existing procedures and supply. There was no way to increase the available pool of cars; hence, a comprehensive discouraging action was undertaken – at least from mid-1957 on,³⁸ with a climax in November, as an instruction came from the Minister of Communication regulating the rules of sale of cars to individual consumers.³⁹ The buyers from each of the voivodeships became attached to one of the nine regional branches of ‘Motozbyt’ Automotive Equipment Supply Enterprise – in Warsaw, Łódź, Cracow, Poznań, Lublin, Wrocław, Katowice, Gdańsk, or Olsztyn. The capital city (funnily enough; *Warszawa* standing for Warsaw in Polish) held the monopoly for sale of the Warszawa cars.

³⁵ HIM, Communiqué re-interception of Radio Free Europe, 122/1957, 2 April 1957 (Warsaw I: a discussion on profiteering).

³⁶ Zdzisław Krasieński (ed.), *Rynek motoryzacyjny* (Warszawa, 1980), 89. Added to that were high operating costs. It was estimated, in 1959, that for Syrena these costs equalled 33,000 *per annum* whilst for Warszawa, 44,000 p.a. (2,750 and 3,680 per month, respectively); cf. M. Piłacki and L. Mikołajków, ‘Samochód’.

³⁷ ‘Kupujemy więcej towarów przemysłowych’, *Trybuna Ludu* [hereinafter: TL] (21 Aug. 1957).

³⁸ TL, 217 (8 Aug. 1957); TL, 294 (29 Oct. 1957).

³⁹ Instruction of the Minister of Communication of 29 Nov. 1957 ‘on the sale of new passenger automobiles to individual buyers’, *Monitor Polski* [Official Journal of the People’s Republic of Poland] (1957), No. 98, Item 572.

The prospective car owners had to produce an official certificate from the “institutions competent with their profile of operations at the voivodeship or central level, stating that an own car is indispensable for them to perform their official duties or professional, societal, sports-related, or other actions”. Those owning a car for the preceding three years were bound to resell it to Motozbyt or present a certificate confirming its complete wear-and-tear. New vehicles have been excluded for three years from private trading, and could only be resold to Motozbyt. Upon placing the order, a ‘down-payment’ was payable to cover the entire price, with an obligation to settle the difference, if occurring.⁴⁰ Failure to pay the entire amount or to accept the car within fourteen days made “the prospect deleted from the list of purchasers”. This was a convenient solution to the situation (which was commonplace before then as well) where the buyer, regardless of the application submitted, was forced to get interested in what one could see available at Motozbyt’s parking site the moment one eventually got there.

Albeit painful to the pocket, buying a car in this way still paid back better than using a free-market offer; the specific ‘bonus for the privileged’ equalled, in mid-1957 from 17,000 to 20,000 złoty, one and a half of the average annual salary.⁴¹ No wonder, jumping into the appropriate position in the queue for the cars caused corruption and black-market dealings, whilst also inciting to make use of social networks, including parliamentary interpellations. For instance, in April 1957, Michał Zajac, MP, addressed the Prime Minister regarding the Wartburg cars assigned in 1956 to physicians active in Katowice: the priority was placed, once again, on miners and metallurgists; agreeing to receive their cars in the spring of 1957, the doctors could not foresee that the price would get doubled by then. Mr. Zajac appealed for a discount or, at least, that the payment be arranged in instalments.⁴² The outcome was probably similar to what happened to a fired member of the communist party apparatus who wanted to earn his living as a taxi driver: the price of Warszawa grew faster than he could raise

⁴⁰ It was made overt in the commentaries that this particular point might discourage the prospects; TL, 5 (5 Jan. 1958).

⁴¹ Heinz Brestel, *Polen heute. Eine Bilanz kommunistischer Wirtschaftspolitik*, FAZ, 137 (15 June 1957).

⁴² AAN, Chancellery of the Sejm (*Kancelaria Sejmu*), 185, c. 239: Michał Zajac to Prime Minister J. Cyrankiewicz, 30 Apr. 1957.

the money, so he asked the authorities – the Chairman of the Council of State through to the Prime Minister and the Party’s Central Committee – to help him conclude the transaction soon: “Help me out, Comrades, in positively settling my request with Motoszbyt”. The Committee responded they were incapable of influencing the sequence at which the cars are sold.⁴³

The most exasperated holders of considerable cash could buy a car – an expensive and severely worn one, to be sure – in the free market or from abroad: preferably, from Belgium, since Antwerp had developed into a European centre of trading in second-hand cars: the prices were thrice cheaper than in Germany and four- to five times lower than elsewhere in Europe. Even Scandinavians bought their cars in Antwerp (Norway, for example, kept its limits imposed on purchase of cars for private until 1960!⁴⁴), so did French and, since 1956, Polish customers. The undertaking was profitable as one could get themselves for 150–200 USD a car that was priced in Poland at 70,000 to 100,000 złoty, which was few-fold higher even when applying the prohibitive black-market exchange rate.⁴⁵ Polish sailors specialised in the practice: they had the hard currencies and free-of-charge transport opportunities. Jan Woźniakiewicz, Director of the Polish Ocean Lines (*Polskie Linie Oceaniczne*, PLO), issued (lawlessly and, in fact, illegally) a circular in January 1957 releasing ‘his’ sailors from paying the freight for import of one automobile per three years. The Ministry of Navigation responded fairly quickly, but before they did, the regulation had been in force for more than six months. Apart from the sailors, administrative staff, secretaries and persons not employed with PLO had taken advantage of the privilege, this contributing to the ship operator’s loss on freight incurred at approx. 20,000 USD as at end June 1957. The cost of adjusting the stopovers and routes of the vessels to the requirements of the ‘importers’ cost manifold more: every so often the ships stopped at a completely unplanned port in order to take away a sought-after vehicle. On the way back, “the

⁴³ AAN, Central Committee of the Polish United Workers’ Party (*Komitet Centralny Polskiej Zjednoczonej Partii Robotniczej* [hereinafter: KC PZPR]), Organisational Section, XII-2590, Jan Miedziński, [of] Piotrków Trybunalski to the KC PZPR, 10 Jan. 1957.

⁴⁴ Grażyna Szelągowska and Krystyna Szelągowska, ‘Historia Norwegii w XIX i XX wieku’ (typescript shared by the authors).

⁴⁵ Olgierd Budrewicz, ‘Belgia samochodami płynąca’, *Przekrój* (1 Jan. 1957).

vessel is supposed to arrive in Gdynia but here it goes – straight to Szczecin, as it is there that it has to get the cars unloaded”.⁴⁶

The ‘team’ was soon (retroactively) encumbered with tax charges;⁴⁷ the customs duty on imported cars was radically increased as well. The critical response was but a voice crying in the wilderness. “The rise of the customs duties will not only radically inhibit the penetration of imperialistic vehicles into this country, whilst also increasing their free-market prices”, an issue of *Po Prostu* weekly, confiscated by the censors, commented. “And right they are: at last, just any doctor, hack or scribbler will stop hoarding his pennies to buy a car of his own – to satisfy his snobbish fancies. ... At last, cars will be purchased by the determined people who, causing no additional trouble to the State, will pay 150,000 or 200,000 złoty for a used car. So, let us bow down before the brains of economy!”⁴⁸

As a result, the market operation principles worked properly: with an enormous demand and poor supply, the situation evolved where – as Stanisław Lem (soon to become a world-famous science-fiction author) put it –

⁴⁶ AAN, KC PZPR, 237/V-253, Shorthand report of the session of First Secretaries of the Voivodeship Committees, 28 Sept. 1957, cc. 144–5; *ibidem*, 237/XXXII-14, Gdańsk, Tadeusz Markowski, Provincial Assistant Public Prosecutor, official note, 20 Nov. 1957, c. 54. Incidentally, the Tri-city of Gdańsk-Sopot-Gdynia (primarily, Gdynia) was the only place in Poland where cars were owned by unemployed people – the sailors, who had brought them along when still in service: resulting from a breakdown of Polish foreign trade 1957, some of those men were made part of the so-called inland paid reserve. Having no sufficient funds to cover the maintenance costs, many of the sailors sold their cars. Thus, “jobless sailors are turning into the regular unemployed, with no cars anymore”; Stefan Bratkowski, ‘Skok przez pięć miast: bezrobocie’, *Świat* (11 May 1958).

⁴⁷ As a Polish sailor reported in late 1957 to a Radio Free Europe journalist: “Gomulka once promised that the sailors would be admitted to buy abroad, with their own money, whatever they wanted. I bought an old Opel car while in Bremen, somewhat crashed, paying 120 dollars for it. Back at home, it got mended and made serviceable. I paid 12,000 złoty of the duty, and then sold the car for 75,000. Now, I have received a notice to appear at the MNC [Municipal National Council] (*showing the notice*) ... So I went there and was told that I would be charged with an ‘enrichment’ assessment and now have to pay 25,000 złoty. The sailors who have bought a car abroad have all received an identical notice.”; HIM, P-542, item no. 6730/57, *A Polish seaman’s views: “Gomulka has cheated”*.

⁴⁸ AAN, KC PZPR, 237/XIX-234, cc. 27–8 (‘Uwaga: automobilizacja. Żerań w niebezpieczeństwie’).

as a matter of fact, there are no vehicles in Poland, whether old or new, dated 1935 or 1955, which would be available to a man of modest, or even 'not-too-bad', income. Each car is fortified with an astronomical price. Hence the phenomenon that the price span reflecting the real difference in the values of the cars is not to be encountered in the local reality; I have never heard that the most expensive automobile may cost more than threefold the price of the cheapest, whereas in the West the difference is expressible as a twelvefold multiplier.⁴⁹

V

DREAMING OF A 'PEOPLE'S CAR'

The price of cars supported the authorities with the argument that the time had not come yet for mass motorisation. This view, peculiarly 'Calvinistic' as it was, was visible also in how the need for a fairly small and inexpensive but at least moderately modern vehicle – the issue of critical import to mass motorisation – was tackled. "One should think about a tiny, cheap and economical car", journalist Andrzej Wróblewski exhorted in November 1956. "I believe that producing it would not call for activating some grand establishments. Individual parts might be manufactured by various wrench industry plants, as part of their side output. The odds-and-sods – by co-operative plants, field industries, handicrafts. A number of parts from the motorcycle sector could be made functional. All it needs is initiative."⁵⁰

There was a plenty of initiative indeed, at first glance. On 7–8 January 1957, a National Motorisation Conference was held in Warsaw, described by a *Motor* journalist as a 'parley of Polish automobility'. Many a bitter word was uttered in respect of the past, alongside a whole lot of postulates for the future. It was understood that the funds invested in the Warszawa or Syrena automobiles had been too large to discontinue their production; yet, the need to incessantly perfect them was emphasised, and the idea of a new popular car maintained. Building upon the Western models was suggested, though; more importantly (as it seemed to the attendees), it was decided that a Motorisation Council be set up as a body meant to show

⁴⁹ 'Stanisław Lem o polskiej drodze do motoryzacji', *Przekrój* (18 Aug. 1957).

⁵⁰ Andrzej Wróblewski, 'Na przykładzie Czechosłowacji. Czym będziemy jeździć?', *Życie Warszawy*, 288 (30 Nov. 1956).

the authorities *the* road to automobile success.⁵¹ Before the Council was officially appointed in September 1957 and had its first session in January 1958, decisions were made that redirected the Polish motorisation not to a highway but into a blind alley. A number of essential initiatives and ideas, particularly with respect to a popular automobile, were merely squandered.⁵²

It is possible that one of the reasons was the awareness that the motorisation initiative was slipping out of the hands of Warsaw, the previous monopoly holder. There were circles (and talented engineers) in the peripheries that had for years been cherishing a fixed idea of constructing a 'people's car'. Their ideas were growing realistic as the Thaw set in, all the more that with a considerable reduction of the armament output a number of factories had to seek for other options; automobile seemed to be a product inviting a virtually limitless demand. The history of Brzdąc ['Toddler'], a micro-car whose manufacture was about to kick off at the Mechanical Plant 'Łabędy' in Gliwice, proved that a community's initiative, when appropriately incentivised – without even being reinforced by a powerful hinterland or funding – might have become successful, with a favourable attitude from the decision-making centre. It is hard to tell when exactly the micro-car idea emerged: in any case, in the late 1956 the concept of a 'Silesian people's car' was pretty advanced; the committee set up in order to deliver it began analysing the local potential, supported to this end mainly by the local Mechanical Engineers' Association. As it appeared, "without even expelling oneself almost beyond the limits of the Voivodeship of Katowice, one can build and assemble, without much trouble or financial outlay, more than three thousand vehicles" affordable to the average mortal "within the first year of serial production". Although the parameters of popular Western micro-cars were assumed as the basis (weight 500 kg, engine capacity 500 ccm, petrol consumption not in excess of five litres per 100 km), the design was

⁵¹ Wilk, 'Samochód', 289–91; *Sztandar Młodych* [hereinafter: SM], 6 (8 Jan. 1957).

⁵² Resolution No. 379 of the Council of Ministers of 20 Sept. 1957 'on the establishment of the Motorisation Council', *Monitor Polski* (1957), No. 81, Item 487. Not only the consultative but also quasi-legislative role of this body was emphasised: the Council was namely obligated to submit applications and, matter-of-factly, a draft scheme for the development of motorisation, and express expert opinions on prototypes. In parallel, it was tasked with coping with a number of technicalities, such as evaluation of engine oils, tyres, and other car items received.

original, well thought-over and fit for the local purposes, corresponding with the poor condition of the roads and fuel quality. The engine was devised by Fryderyk Bluemke, a renowned inventor employed with the Engine Factory Bielsko (southern Poland), the bodywork was developed by Stanisław Łukawski from Katowice, and the chassis was designed by two Gliwice-based engineers. The car would be, it was heralded, a “combined type, as is very popular nowadays in the West – which means that apart from the regular seats, it would have an opening rear wall and a space provided for larger luggage”; apart from everyday purposes, it would be of use also for touristic needs or light-duty transports. Serial manufacture was due to start in 1958–9, with 5,000 vehicles made annually as a target. The Silesian project apparently compelled no admiration in Warsaw; the Łabędy hub was so overloaded with tasks imposed by the ‘headquarters’ that it eventually lacked several hundred experts to complete the job! On the other hand, attempts made to persuade the Warsaw executives that the local team as it stood sufficed to commence the manufacture of the cars, whereas milling-machine operators or turners for central production purposes would have to be sought for outside Silesia, eventually failed. “With the resources like this, and a potential to make a Brzdąc”, the central administrators argued, “you can as well do what we order you to do”. Mediation undertaken by the Workers’ Councils ended up in failure and the concept landed on the scrap heap. Production of popular cars started in Silesia a dozen years afterwards.⁵³

Finally, a vehicle called Mikrus [‘Peewee’] was to be the only Polish-made ‘side-output’ small car. Made at the aviation plant in Mielec, the car ultimately appeared to be a failed project. With the promised output of 4,000–5,000 in the first year (subsequently, up to 10,000 yearly), a total of 1,728 Mikrus cars rolled off the line (this being a rather bombastic phrase in this context) before the process was finally discontinued in 1960.⁵⁴ Although this product

⁵³ SM, 297 (12 Dec. 1956); Roman Prot, “Brzdąc” – marzenie na kółkach’, *Głos Pracy*, 41 (18 Feb. 1957); <http://akson.sgh.waw.pl/~tw23969/prototypy/prototypy.htm> [Accessed: 18 Nov. 2015].

⁵⁴ ‘Polskie auta po 15–20.000 zł’, *Słowo Powszechne*, 4 (4 Jan. 1957); http://www.mikrus.net.pl/t_historia_mikrusa.html#; <http://moto.onet.pl/aktualnosci/mikrus-niespelniony-sen-polskiej-motoryzacji/vrvn3> [Accessed: 29 Dec. 2016]; http://admoto.pl/pub/art.asp?g=GS&n=1223&f=jd_569.xml [Accessed: 29 Dec. 2016].

was definitely poorer – as confirmed by the later, often traumatic, experiences of the users – it did have strengths, in the perception of the authorities. On the one hand, a ‘reasonable’ grassroots initiative could be put into practice; on the other, it was no competition to the ‘central-level’ motorisation plans. The latter revolved for a pretty long time around acquiring a licence for a popular and modern car somewhere in the West, as was the case in the interwar and early post-war period. Proposals came from far and wide: Renault offered to consider the production of the Dauphine model, while Simca suggested the assembly of their Aronde 1300.⁵⁵ Expectedly, the Fiat of Italy came into the picture as well. It cannot be stated for certain whether Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz, who issued in July 1957 an instruction ‘on the appointment of a commission for elaborating the issues related to production of a popular car’, considered the concept attainable. In any case, Eugeniusz Szyr, chairman of the body, was bound to submit, by 5 August, the proposed details with respect to the location of a new factory, its staffing, and so on.

Had the commission’s suggestions been accomplished, Poland would not have perhaps become an automotive superpower but would certainly have ceased so painfully lagging behind the European average. The document entitled ‘Conclusions with respect to commencement of production of a popular car’ determined the framework conditions for a Polish-made popular automobile. It was to be a four-seat car with a four-stroke 1,000–1,200 ccm engine, maximum speed 110 km per hour, consuming up to 8 litres of fuel per 100 km driven. Taking into account the home-market and export-related needs, at the ‘start-up’ stage the output was to be 60,000 cars annually, ultimately to double within five years. The vehicle would initially be assembled in one of the existing plants (the FSO, for example), but the mass-scale and really profitable production would have to be undertaken in a newly-built dedicated factory. It was decided that Warsaw was best suited for the purpose (Lublin, Poznań and Łódź were considered as the other potential locations). It was made plain that the most beneficial solution would be to acquire a licence, the offerings submitted by Renault and

⁵⁵ People’s Republic of Poland Historical Documentation Archive (*Archiwum Dokumentacji Historycznej PRL*), Eugeniusz Szyr’s collection, S III/17; P. Dreyfus, Director-General, Renault, to Minister Trąpczyński, 28 June 1957; H.T. Pigozzi, Director-General, Simca, to Min[ister] Secomski, 24 July 1957.

Fiat were considered the most interesting. Because of the country's specific road conditions, the automobile would have to have some of its components strengthened or reinforced; moreover, 'something' had to be done about the Polish fuels whose quality was considered "insufficient in regard of all the models entering the equation".⁵⁶

The bargaining was to continue but, in face of Gomułka's resistance, no positive outcome could be made out of it (at least in terms of Polish motorisation industry). Although the First Secretary criticised the manufacturing of Warsawas at the 8 Plenum of the PZPR Central Committee and declared his support for the idea of a popular car at a convention of engineers and technicians a few months later, he would in fact never endorse the vision of mass motorisation, believing that Poland could not afford it and that there were much more urgent needs to be addressed. Anyway, Eugeniusz Szyr remarked on 1 September 1957 that 'Comrade Wiesław' was responsible for the quitting of the 'Thaw-inspired' project to construct a low-powered car factory based upon a contract with Renault or Fiat. As he noted, "[i]t was Gomułka's resistance that led to the rejection of the offer. A much worse option, to make the Fiat 125, was accepted much later on. An extraordinary opportunity was thus lost, for the terms of lending and the type of vehicle were much better compared to what was decided later."⁵⁷

VI

END OF DAYDREAM: TWO WHEELS INSTEAD OF FOUR

It is difficult to say when the vision of Poles transferring to Italian or French cars was finally thrown aside. Two contemporary opinions, both dated mid-October 1957, are characteristic: In its analysis of the future of Polish motorisation, *Trybuna Ludu* basically reproduced the findings of Mr. Szyr's commission: a licensed car as the foundation, complemented with micro-cars (such as e.g. Mikrus) and vehicles with large engine capacity (e.g., Warszawa), the latter being used mostly for business or official purposes, as field ambulances, and so on.⁵⁸ Professor Ryszard Strzelecki, chairman of the Motorisation Council, in an interview published by *Sztandar Młodych* three days

⁵⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁸ 'Przyszłość polskiego samochodu', TL, 284 (19 Oct. 1957).

later, put the dreamers into a more realistic setting: "It seems to me, though", said he, "that we should commence the realisation of these [automotive] dreams predominantly from popularisation of the broadest available vehicles, such as motor scooters, motorcycles, or even motor-bicycles, and thereby essentially satisfy, for the time being, the needs of horsepower-riding aficionados."⁵⁹

An analysis carried out in 1958 by the Press Bureau, Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party [KC PZPR], published by *Motor* weekly, was woven around the same elements. Selling 130,000 copies (with 2–3 per cent of the circulation returned to the distributor), this industry magazine was an exponent of cross-society ideas about an own car, and the desires for it. The reviewer, a communist party member, criticised the periodical's negative approach toward the motorisation policy, the relishing in the Western lifestyle (this being an "insalubrious lure for the young generation that oftentimes tends to adopt a false reckoning of life and its [constitutive] values") and, primarily, propagation of the need to own a car as a universal occurrence. "Anyone thinking logically will certainly say it is an absurd", the author argued. "Most of our citizens are presently unable to afford a woollen suit, let alone think about a car. ... Rather than giving the signal 'Every citizen has got a car', one might successfully claim: 'Everybody in Poland owns a bike with a motor', the next phase being, 'All buy a motorcycle!'. But what happens is the M[otorbike] readily leaping 'into a car'".⁶⁰

The statistics seemed to confirm this observed trend:

Table 2. Motor vehicles in Poland, 1955–8.

| Type of motor vehicle | 1955 | 1956 | 1957 | 1958 |
|--------------------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| Passenger cars; thereof: | 40,259 | 44,790 | 61,944 | 83,935 |
| Private | 20,475 | 24,746 | 40,846 | 58,580 |
| Trucks/lorries; thereof: | 73,186 | 82,780 | 93,480 | 102,436 |
| Private | 3,599 | 3,502 | 4,394 | 5,643 |
| Motorcycles; thereof: | 169,732 | 236,483 | 331,189 | 461,363 |
| Private | 163,007 | 229,885 | 325,098 | 454,164 |

Rocznik Statystyczny [Statistical Yearbook] (1959), 230.

⁵⁹ SM, 257 (22 Oct. 1957).

⁶⁰ AAN, KC PZPR, 237/XIX-224, *Motor*, 1958, cc. 1–4.

VII CONCLUSION

Although the number of cars more than doubled (tripled for motorcycles) in 1955–8, with the share of private vehicles proportionally growing, a radical ‘Great Change’ was not really the case. Well, the daydreams did change, turning from completely unreal into less unreal. The figures would not tell us much about the quality: “A car was ... well, a car”, as Krzysztof Wolicki put it. Differences were spotted and noted, but descriptions such as ‘one’s got a Fiat’, somebody else a Spartak, others still, ‘just a *dekawka* [DKW]’ were irrelevant. You had a car, *tout court*, and this was it, as far as definition was concerned. The market did not yet see private premium cars; the old ones, dating to the previous geological periods, had not died out yet. Automobiles like Warszawa were objects of desire:⁶¹ a car was still a luxury commodity, a festal testimony of prestige rather than a daily work-tool. Stanisław Lem, a knowledgeable observer and reviewer of reality, observed in the summer of 1957: “What a car does – in fact, ANY SINGLE car that is privately owned in this country – is, first of all, glistening, unrolling the peacock tail, driving the knife into the proprietor’s acquaintances’ hearts and turning it around slowly and gently. ... The car thus becomes an object of cult, to a larger measure than an object of use; it is not primarily a means of moving from one place to another: it is a miraculous device that moves its proprietor from the *hoi polloi* into the Distinguished Elitist Circle. The very owning of a car supplies the owner with sensual delights, as we can see from watching the owners celebrate their Car-Keys, Window-Pane Chamois, Every Single Door-Handle and Windscreen-Wiper.”⁶² On the other hand, although for more than another decade Poland remained part of the ‘motorcycle civilisation’,⁶³ rather than the ‘car civilisation’, the hopes for a car of one’s own were instilled so deeply that they could nowise be eradicated.⁶⁴

trans. Tristan Korecki

⁶¹ Wolicki, ‘Droga’.

⁶² ‘Stanisław Lem o polskiej drodze’.

⁶³ Cf. ‘Cywilizacja motocyklowa’, *Polityka*, 40 (3 Nov. 1959); Jerzy de Mezer, *Cywilizacja motocyklowa. Motoryzacja motocyklowa w Polsce 1945–1965* (Warszawa, 2011) [e-book].

⁶⁴ In Lem’s opinion, this was testified by “the fact that all and any possible car-driving handbooks have been absolutely [i.e. completely] bought out over the

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last months. They have disappeared from bookstore shelves, although they were certainly incomparably more numerous than the compatriots who can actually afford a car"; 'Stanisław Lem o polskiej drodze'.