

'Titch' drives home

Poland's past

By: *Jan Cieński*

A May 22, 2008 article in the *FT.com - Financial Times - UK...* Something has changed on Poland's roads and it is not their state of repair, which remains atrocious. It is the disappearance of the once ubiquitous Fiat 126p, the car that introduced motoring to Poland's masses.

The decline of the rattly two-door car, which strains to break 100km per hour, is a tangible sign of Poland's increasing wealth and modernity. It is now found mainly in the poorest parts of eastern Poland and in the hands of penniless pensioners and destitute students.

Since Poland's entry into the European Union in 2004, the Fiat 126p, known affectionately as the Maluch, or "titch", has been pushed aside by the deluge of used cars that have flooded across the border. More than 3m such vehicles have been imported from western Europe since 2004, and even the most clapped out Volkswagen or Seat is seen as superior.

The car, a mere 3m long with barely space to seat four, is nevertheless part of the motoring past of most Poles. "It was my first car, the car which gave me the most pleasure," says Wojciech Drzewiecki, head of the Samar agency, which analyses the Polish motoring market.

"I bought a six-year-old car in 1982 and I drove it for six years. I remember it as the best car I ever had, at least that's the way it seems to me now."

The Maluch was a symbol of 1970s Poland, when the communist regime tried to stifle workers' discontent by borrowing heavily in the west to supply scarce consumer goods.

It was developed by Fiat and produced under licence from the Italian carmaker by Poland's FSM between 1973 and 2000. More than 3m were produced, some for export but the overwhelming majority for the domestic market, where before the 1970s private cars had been a rarity.

Iwona Sarjusz-Wolska, a Warsaw office worker, remembers being taken by her parents in 1979 to buy a Maluch, after pulling an enormous number of strings to be able to buy the car. The only model available was green, and they took a friend who was knowledgeable about cars to inspect them and choose the one with the fewest defects. "It was one of the most exciting days of my life," she says.

Because they were so badly made, a handiness with tools was a necessity for Maluch drivers.

Marta Czartoryska, who works for Onet, one of Poland's leading internet portals, remembers having to keep a stick in the car to poke it underneath when it failed to start, as well as a roll of string to tie back the covering of the rear-mounted engine to stop it from overheating. "It was terrible, it would break down all the time, but we had a lot of fun in it," she says.

For some Poles the Fiat 126p is a symbol of the decrepitude of late communism, and they view its passing with no regret.

"Why should I miss it? It was a truly horrible car," says Pawel Zalewski, an independent in Poland's parliament who drove a Maluch in the 1980s to transport illegal underground literature. He now commutes in an Opel.

But the Maluch retains some fans. For those who have no money and do not mind the spine-tingling thrill of pattering along while frustrated drivers in heavier, faster cars hurtle past them, a model can be bought for as little as €100 (\$158, £79).

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Let us get together in a friendly atmosphere on July 13, 2008 at the Polish Parrish Hall after the noon mass for those who were deported and died in Siberia.

The Relief Committee for Poles in the Former Soviet Union affiliated with the Polish American Congress, the Committee formed through the initiative of Mr. Franciszek Kosowicz together with the people of good has existed for 19 years only because people like you with big hearts, the Committee can function and provide help.

We appeal to you again, please join us in this charitable action and support our cause to make our Day of Brotherhood a success. Our compatriots, who were not as lucky as we were, remained and living in squalor and lack of personal freedom; only after the political changes and thanks to your generosity their life is better. They now can restore churches, schools and bring to the new generation a patriotic spirit of our fathers and grandfathers even if they live far away from their motherland. Open your hearts once again and good God will reward you.

Next year the Committee will celebrate 20th anniversary. Please join the Committee's efforts, we need young compassionate people willing to help others, bring new ideas and new ways to help Poles in the former Soviet Union.

For others the Maluch has become a cult car in the same way that the Morris Mini is prized in Britain or the Volkswagen Beetle in the US.

"I'm a collector," says Michał Możyszek, a 27-year-old car salesman from the central Polish city of Łódź, who has two Maluchs and plans to buy a third. "I can't stop at a gas station without people coming over to me and telling me how they used to own one."

Carmakers have yet to seize on the Maluch's nostalgia value and produce a revamped version, however. Poland is still too poor and the change to more modern cars too recent for such a move to make much sense, says Mr Drzewiecki.

"For the Polish market a redone 126 would be a cult car. But I think we'll have to wait for quite a long while for someone to make one," he says. □

Did You Know that?

By: *Robert Strybel,*

Polish/Polonian Affairs Writer

*** Poland's principal river is the Wisła (Latin and English: Vistula, German: Weichsel) which has its origin in the Tatra Mountains down south, winds its way northwards over a distance of 1,047 km (650 miles) and empties into the Baltic around Gdańsk.

*** According to Polish folk wisdom, only marriages concluded in months that contain the letter "r" (in Polish) are said to be successful. That would exclude maj (May), as well as styczeń (January), luty (February), kwiecień (April), lipiec (July) and listopad (November).

*** As seen in the preceding entry, months of the year are not capitalized in Polish. Neither are days of the week, the names of religious orders (franciszkanin, felicjanka), city-dwellers (londyńczyk, gdańszczanin) and cars makes (ford, fiat, mercedes), unless they happen to be the first word in a sentence.

*** Poland's national anthem is called as "Mazurek Dąbrowskiego" ("Dąbrowski's Mazurka") and is better known to many by its first words: "Jeszcze Polska nie zginęła..." ("Poland has yet to perish...").

*** Poland's military personnel, police and other uniformed services salute one another with two fingers, and only two fingers are raised when taking an oath.

*** Kevlar, the DuPont fiber first marketed in 1971 and used in bullet-proof vests, was invented by Pol-Am chemist Stephanie Kwolek. Seventy years earlier, the Chicago police had tested a silk-based bullet-proof

vest devised by Pol-Am Resurrectionist monk, Father Kazimierz Zegleń.

*** Warsaw International Airport is named after composer Fryderyk Chopin, Kraków has John Paul II International Airport and that in Gdańsk bears the name of solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa.

*** The Polish-American Symphony Orchestra, based in suburban Chicago, is the only professional Polish symphonic ensemble outside Poland. Contact: 1056 North Mill Street, Suite 206, Naperville, IL 60563-2543; tel/fax: (847) 303-6285 or phone: (630) 548-0978; fax: 360-4657.

*** The "pierwsze piętro" or first floor in Poland is the one directly above the ground floor which is called the "parter".

*** Starka, a brandy known in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth since the 15th century, is made from thrice-distilled grain spirits, aged in old oak barrels with the addition of linden and/or apple leaves. Traditionally a father would distill a batch when he sired a son, and roll out the barrel on the boy's wedding day.

*** Poland's largest cities are: Warsaw, Łódź, Kraków, Wrocław, Poznań, Gdańsk, Szczecin, Bydgoszcz, Katowice, Lublin, Gdynia, Białystok, Częstochowa, Sosnowiec, Radom and Kielce.

*** The statue of a fire-breathing dragon is a major attraction outside the Dragon's Cave at the foot of Kraków's Royal Wawel Castle. Less than a third of the 270-meter-deep cave is open to tourists, and its inaccessible corridors include five tiny subterranean lakes.

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