

Even the Bad Times are Good

*Love, Sweat
and Tears*



ZOFIA PUSZKAROW

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LOVE SWEAT AND TEARS**

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To Agata

CONTENTS

The 1970s.....	1
Across the cabbage field	1
Ways to purchase Fiat 126p in the 1970s.....	5
Popular destinations.....	6
Switzerland	9
Applying for a passport	15
Life in Poland in the 1970s.....	15
Radom 1976.....	19
Summer One in Sweden.	20
We hit the road.....	27
Ann, our third friend, dies aged 32	30
Winter of the Century	31
Explosion in the very heart of Warsaw	32
Flying University	34
Pope John Paul II on his first visit to Poland.....	35
Summer II in Sweden and elsewhere.....	36
My Yellow Bahama Fiat 126p.....	42
LOT Flight 7 Crashes in Okęcie on March 14, 1980.....	43
The 1980s.....	47
Spring and summer 1980.....	47
1981: January – December.	49
Sweden December 7-12, 1981	51

Martial Law	64
Ration cards.....	65
1982	68
Peter	69
Death of the student	71
1983 – the Pope visits Poland	73
The Nobel Peace Prize for 1983	74
Oslo, October 5, 1983 (The Guardian)	75
Hungary	78
Istanbul	81
Even the Bad Times are Good	83
The Solidarity Movement Priest	87
Summer 1984.....	90
Chernobyl	97
1987 – LOT Flight 5055 disaster.	100
England	102
The 1990s.....	107
A Brand New Fiat Uno.....	113
Salad Bar	116
Destination Odessa.....	118
Mom dies 1996	119
Millenium Flood	121
March 1999 – Poland joins NATO	124
The cats	125
Danka.....	127

World Trade Center Attacks.....	131
Eagle Job Search Agency	133
The Pope dies	137
Falenica	138

FOOTNOTES.....	143
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THE 1970s



Across the cabbage field

We meant it to be a short “get away from it all” trip to Masurian Lake District. There were three of us in the car, a so-called small Fiat, or “Maluch”, and Maryla’s mongrel dog, Lobo. It was well after 2 p.m. because it took us longer than usual to leave Warsaw, and we were driving along a winding road, to a lovely spot by a lake we remembered from our summer sailing adventures.

Les, who took turn to drive, was whistling some tunes of “Jolka, Jolka,” a trendy song everyone knew, I was sitting half-asleep in the rear seat of this tiny car next to the restless dog, and Maryla seemed to be counting tall trees on the right of the road. I was just beginning to float off into a dream when I heard a high-pitched scream: “Stop!!! Stop immediately!!!”

Les braked with a screech of tires and looked at Maryla with amazement, his face pale.

“Why? Why on earth did you want me to stop?” he uttered.

“Not you! Him!!!” she pointed at Lobo busy with a pillow trying to make love with it. She grabbed the sinner and dragged him onto her lap.

“We can drive on now,” she said in a sweet voice, pressing the dog hard, so he could not escape her grip. “He will calm down soon.”

“You are lucky you bought the new tires, otherwise we might have skidded off the road and crashed into that tree.” Les remarked in a gloomy voice and pointed at an enormous oak tree at the side of the road.

“But we didn’t. Let’s go.” And off we went.

Les was right to mention the tires. In the 1970s and 1980s, buying new ones bordered on a miracle. If you wanted to face the challenge, you had to do a lot of detective work before the purchase. It was a must to call all car accessories stores to find out where and when there would be, say, twenty tires on sale. Next, if you belonged to the farsighted ones, you might fetch a blanket and a pillow, (some would even take quilts) and spend a night in your car in the car park in front of the most likely store you decided to choose. When you noticed other cars parking next to yours, it meant your choice was good. At around four a.m., the sleepy shoppers would emerge to the open and form a queue so everybody could see them well and no one new could dare cut in a line in front of them.

Maryla and I met all the requirements and managed to buy two sets of Fiat 600 tires, one for each of us. However, I was not proud of them for a long time. One night, at around 2 a.m., I went to the kitchen to get a bottle of mineral water from the fridge and I looked through the window. To my horror, I saw four individuals, their bodies crooked, busily unscrewing the wheels of my Fiat.

I dashed onto the balcony yelling, "The police are on their way! I know who you are."

"Shut up, you bitch," one of the thieves roared. They must have known the police were nowhere around. However, the noise woke my neighbors up, who, one by one, appeared on their balcony or in the window, dressed in pyjamas and nightgowns. Seeing so many eye-witnesses the robbers thrust the two wheels they had already unscrewed into the boot of their van and drove away, leaving me with a more serious problem I had had before. The task was buying new wheels.

We hit the road again. It was early September, and the days were already shorter than in summer. The day was cloudy, and we wanted to get to the lake before it got dark.

"Sophie, pass me the map, please," Les said to me "It's behind you, by the rear window." He studied it for a while and then had an idea.

"Look, girls," he pointed to a dotted line on the map, "There is a good short-cut here. We'll get to the lake in no time at all."

"Are you sure you know what you are doing?" Maryla asked.

"Sure, I do. Don't you worry, woman," was the reply. Les used to call her "woman" when he wanted to get on her nerves.

The short-cut appeared to be a narrow field path which led to a huge cabbage field and made its way across it. Also, the field spread down a hill and seemed endless, contrary to the path which ended abruptly somewhere in the middle of the cabbage kingdom. We immediately realized we got stuck in a miry place, between the two rows of green heads with weeds growing between them and blocking the way out. We could not go backwards to the main road because it was too far and the grooves we had made got filled with water, we could turn nowhere, so we had to drive on.

“A nice short-cut,” Marla murmured maliciously, “I wish I had never met you.” She added with disgust.

“You should’ve stayed at home instead of going to the wine-vault.” Les smiled with satisfaction.

“You’re right. I should’ve gone anywhere, but not there!”

I put an end to their happy chatting for fear it might turn into a row.

“You’d better look at that house over there,” I said in a quiet voice, “They’re bound to notice us any moment now and chase us with pitchforks.”

We got in and started struggling across the rest of the field, destroying some cabbages on our way, with the car tilting to the side like a yacht on a stormy sea.

“Dear ladies,” I caught a twinkle in Les’s eyes in a rear-facing mirror, “We are going to roll down the hill so beware of breaking your neck.”

“Don’t even dare, you bastard!” Maryla went red in the face, “Drive faster! Now!!!”

And he did. Somehow, it worked, and we left the field, undisturbed by its owners, leaving a trail of mud on the asphalt road across the forest, all the way to the lake.

It was dark when we turned left onto a narrow path which led to the turquoise lake we remembered from our last year’s summer holidays. We put up a tent feeling happy that we had found the quiet spot we wanted, next to the water and far from the civilization. Hoping to see the swans and ducks at sun-rise, we crawled into our sleeping bags with Lobo lying on his back between Maryla and me, his four paws up, halfway to the tent roof.

No sooner had we fallen asleep than we heard someone unzip the tent with no scruples, or mercy. The intruder searched the inside of our shelter with his torch and wheezed:

“You’re right in the middle of the round-the-lake path! Get out of here, or I’ll call the police!”

He was a forester on his morning patrol-walk.

Ways to purchase Fiat 126p in the 1970s

The history of Fiat 126p in Poland dates back to 1973. The government launched mass production of a friendly priced family car in Bielsko-Biala and Tychy. I meant it to be the car everybody could afford. The Polish license version of the Italian *centoventisei* became the most popular model on the roads until September 2000, when the last vehicle left the factory assembly line. Recently, Tom Hanks visited Bielsko-Biala factory and got enchanted by the Fiat 126p story. A few weeks later, when he was back home in California, he received a present from Poland. One of Bielsko citizens, Monika Jaskolska, had raised the money to buy Tom a Fiat. The famous actor became the owner of a white compact car tied up with a red ribbon during the event which took place in the residence of the Polish consul in Los Angeles at three p.m., on December 2, 2017.



There were four ways to become the owner of this dream vehicle. The lucky ones could get a voucher from the management of the company they worked for as a reward for doing a good job. The rich ones had no problems because they could pay in dollars

without waiting for their turn for months. The rest of those willing to drive had an option to purchase a second-hand car in open-air markets. Choosing this option meant they agreed to pay at least twice as much as the official price for a used car was, with no guarantee it was safe to drive. And finally, the last way one could take was to earn enough money to buy one.

As it was highly unlikely for young people in Poland to afford to buy a dream car in their country, thousands of job seekers rushed to Western Europe to try their luck. However, they had to take part in a long-distance obstacle race before they put their foot on a foreign land.

Getting a passport was Obstacle One. There will be more about it later because it is a long and complex story. In those days, Poland belonged to the countries behind The Iron Curtain which was the imaginary boundary dividing Europe into two separate areas. In order to leave it, you had to have an invitation from somebody who was a citizen of France, the UK, or any other western European country, had a permanent job and declared to cover all the expenses and the cost of medical help if needed. If you were lucky enough to have such a friend, and if they promised to give you accommodation, you were half-way abroad.

Money was Obstacle Number Two. You needed to have much over one hundred and thirty American dollars you could legally buy in a bank. In order not to be penny-less in a foreign country, you had to smuggle your fortune or take some products you hoped to sell. This obstacle was too difficult to overcome for many of those who were not risk-takers. Obstacle Three was finding your first job abroad.

Popular destinations

In the early seventieth, Swedish farmers welcomed anyone willing to work black for them on their fields and in greenhouses. They would wait for Polish ferries in Ystad harbor, and there

were always more employers than potential farm hands to bargain agreements. Once the terms were agreed, the two parties drove directly to the farms. Both the sides were in a win-win position, even though the newcomers from Poland were unskilled to work on farms, as they recruited from among teachers, journalists, engineers and students. Swedish farmers were happy to have cheap workforce; the Poles loved the idea to earn actual money. The farmers paid between ten and fifteen Swedish crowns per hour, and it was a lot of money. Mind you; the Polish zloty was not convertible in those days, and black-market exchange of the US dollar rocketed to unbelievably high rates.

However, Obstacle three was no longer an obstacle if your overseas family found a job for you before you arrived. Maryla's aunt, for example, ran a pub in Chicago, and she invited her niece to stay with her family for a year, officially to study English in the States. My friend swears that at the time (1971), Polish authorities allowed travelers to take only ten dollars as pocket money. The shoes she liked cost twenty-eight. She remembers that well because she is a size 40 and it was not possible to buy such big shoes in Poland as nobody made them. Such circumstances forced her to make do with a 39, but it resulted in blisters and "tearing skin off her heels", as she used to put it. To make things worse, too tight shoes pushed her toes together, made her walk "toe-out", and hiss with pain.

Maryla stayed in America for a year, survived pub boozers, their primitive jokes, and her aunt's husband's soldier-like courtship. She also met Dorothy, a young journalist from Warsaw, and made friends with her. When the two of them returned to Poland, Dorothy hired a large goods vehicle and set for the harbor. Maryla said that the steering wheel was so big that her friend had to lean on it whenever she wanted to turn.

They sailed back on the Batory, a trans-Atlantic liner, and they enjoyed every minute of the cruise. This shiny, new colossus was

160 meters long and several levels high, complete with seven decks, guest cabins, dining halls, dance halls, three bars, a pool and a gym. The ship's interiors had a light, modern elegance, and were decorated with pieces by Jan Cybis, a famous painter, draughtsman, educator and journalist, who was a leading representative of Colorist movement of the 1930s and in post-World-War II Art in Poland. Aerial photographs of the works by Zofia Stryjenska, a major Polish female artist of the inter-war period, decorated the cabin walls of the liner.

The ship was called the floating art showroom. It featured tableware from the best Polish factories. The most important thing about the liner's pre-war history was the kitchen (there were over 500 dishes on the lunch menu alone) and the ship's first captain, Eustazy Borkowski. People say he was a real salty old sea dog. He spoke a dozen languages, drank cognac like water, and was the life and soul of the vessel. His officers joked that if he ever was completely sober, disaster was bound to befall the ship. Passengers and journalists loved him.

When Maryla and Dorothy were on their way back home, the weather was wonderful, so they relaxed in deckchairs trying to get brown, ate in restaurants, and went dancing in the evenings. Two orchestras entertained the passengers. An octet played mid-morning symphonic concerts and evening balls in a large ballroom. A quartet entertained guests in the afternoon. The smaller bands played during dinner and evening dance in a small salon from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m. There were quite a few alcohol-drenched evening parties and quite hangover mornings with white seagulls "tramping" on the deck.

Maryla saved up four thousand dollars in the States, and no sooner had she unpacked her stuff in Warsaw than she purchased a 40 square meter apartment in which she is still living. She bought her Fiat 126p after her next expedition to her aunt, two or three years later. This time, she did not work in the pub, but took care of an elderly German gentleman who enjoyed drinking liqueur.