In the spring of ’54, I spent a few weeks in Poland. The newspaper I was working with, the ‘Evening Standard’, together with the editor that had published 1984 five years earlier, had commissioned me to come up with a report on the satellite city that was springing up on the outskirts of Krakow. The newspaper and the editor took care of the bureaucratic formalities for my visa and passport at the Polish embassy in London. I didn’t know whether they’d read my reports in the ‘Evening Standard’, the ‘Manchester Evening News’ and the ‘Observer’ in Moscow or Warsaw, but I wasn’t really worried. The customs officials probably wouldn’t make the connection between my real name, Eric Arthur Blair, and George Orwell the writer. My readers must be asking themselves why they chose me of all people. I can think of two reasons, both of which are plausible, and to some extent complimentary. The first is the fact that I’ve spent my entire life trying to turn political writing into an art form. Animal Farm was the first book in which I tried to combine political and artistic meaning, which is something I repeated with 1984. And now we come to the second reason. In statements by Polish communist party officials and Tadeusz Ptaszycki, the architect commissioned to build Nowa Huta, both the editor-in-chief of the ‘Evening Standard’ and the publisher of the book sensed there was something similar to the society I’d described in 1984…”

People from the West are so fascinated by the world that disappeared with the falling of the Berlin Wall that a young businessman from Krakow came up with the idea of constructing a fully-fledged business around it. It’s called the Communism Crazy Tour, which consists of accompanying tourists to Nowa Huta in a Trabant and a Fiat 126.

Nowa Huta: a symbol of real socialism

Text and photos by Massimiliano Di Pasquale
George Orwell became interested in socialism through his experience in the Spanish Civil War, in which he participated not only as a reporter, but also as a combatant fighting side-by-side with the Spanish workers. He subsequently broke with socialism when the atrocities of Stalinist regime were discovered. Thus, he would have been the journalist who was most qualified to report on the experiment in social engineering that began in the early ‘50s in Poland: the creation, from scratch, of a socialist urban development project built around the Lenin steelworks and right next to the imperial, bourgeois city of Krakow. In the minds of its creators, the new development would transform the most majestic city in Poland into an outpost of the working class. The experiment, which was conducted by the local communist party and their rulers in Moscow, was supposed to duplicate (and if possible, to perfect) the socio-economic model that was already widespread in some areas of the USSR, such as Donbass in the Ukraine.

The incipit attributed to this apocryphal Orwell, who discerning and disenchanted readers have probably already unmasked (the English writer actually died in 1950), was not intended as mere journalistic witticism, but rather as recognition of the extraordinary similarity between the totalitarian society of 1984 and the utopian or dystopian (borrowing a term that was dear to Wells, Huxley and Orwell himself) project for a godless City founded on manual labour and heavy industry, which was designed to be transplanted into the social fabric of cultured, bourgeois, Catholic Poland.

But a crisis of rejection ensured. Whereas Orwell’s dark novel concludes with the surrender of hero Winston Smith – who after being reduced to a mere shadow of a man, and a physical and moral wreck, declares his love for Big Brother – Nowa Huta’s workers became the main bastion of the struggle against General Jaruzelski’s communist regime in the mid-1980s.

**An exceptional reporter**

But Ryszard Kapuscinski did write a report on Nowa Huta. In 1956, the man who would soon become the most famous reporter in Poland published a disturbing article on the proletarian alter-ego of Krakow in “Sztandar Mlodych”, a local paper. Drawing upon eyewitness reports of residents, Kapuscinski painted a grim picture of the socialist city. Drunkenness, brawls between locals and gangs of goons, murders, lack of recreational activity, an extremely high number of abortions, young mothers thrown out of public housing because they had to look after their children and had thus failed to
reach established production quotas… The dossier, which tore away the veil of silence over Nowa Huta, won a prize for the brilliant reporter and a pink slip for the editor of the newspaper. In any case, it did help stir things up, the living conditions improved considerably in only a few years. This was partly due to the strength of the Catholic community. Despite the triumphant proclamations of local newspaper “Budujemy Socializm” (“We’re building socialism”), which referred to Nowa Huta as “a city of considerable transformations, of people and citizens in new conditions, of new economic and social processes”, by the early ’60s, party bosses realised it was impossible to build a socialist city without God.

On April 27, 1960, an enormous crowd of religious believers attempted to substitute a steel cross for a wooden cross in one the city’s churches and were dispersed by police. The incident clearly demonstrated the extreme unity of the Catholic community, which was to play an increasingly important role in the years to come.

Even though it produced 50% of the country’s iron and steel, the Lenin Steelworks was unable to develop a vanguard of workers that could uproot Krakow’s religious traditions. Most workers in Nowa Huta were by no means against socialism; however, they were profoundly Catholic and anti-Soviet. During the revolt, which was crushed by force, demonstrators sang patriotic anthems and religious hymns along with the Internationale.

**Communism Crazy Tour**

What now remains of this symbolic city of Stalinist socialism, which Lider Maximo Fidel Castro extolled during an official visit to Krakow in the early 1970s?

Joanna is accompanying me on this journey to the most famous places in Nowa Huta, along the broad boulevards that extend like the rays of the sun from Central Square, thus imitating the layout of Renaissance cities. She smiles in amusement.

“From the architectural standpoint, it’s been virtually unchanged since the ’70s”.

“But that’s its charm, if you can call it charm”, says Joanna. “You can relive the communist atmosphere of yesteryear”. At the tourist agency where she works, more and more people (mostly English and Americans) want to travel to Nowa Huta. People from the West are so fascinated by the world that disappeared with the falling of the Berlin Wall that a young businessman from Krakow come up with the idea of starting a fully-fledged business around it. Michal Ostrowski, better known as Crazy Mike, developed the idea for the Communism Crazy Tour.

The tour involves ferrying groups of tourists to Nowa Huta in a Trabant or a Fiat 126, the two cars that were symbols of communist Poland. It includes a visit to the best-known sites of the city and lunch in the Stylowa restaurant, a snack bar complete with plastic plants and burgundy tablecloths. Here, with Polish hits of the ’70s and 80’s playing in the background, waiters serve home-made specialities at a leisurely pace. And salted herrings covered with a thick layer of onions and vodka are always provided at the tables.

**Plac Centralny – alias Ronald Reagan Square**

Once your eyes have become accustomed to urban design that follows the canons of constructivist architecture, yet was revisited...
and corrected in pure Le Corbusier style, you can’t help but agree with Joanna. You get the impression of being catapulted thirty years back in time, if it weren’t for the newly named streets that were previously dedicated to heroes of socialism, and the modern sculptures that remind you of Poland’s long process of emancipation from the Russian invader. Thus, there are no more busts of Lenin; a statue of the Soviet revolutionary was sold in 1992 to an eccentric Swedish millionaire, Big Bengt Erlansson, after neighbourhood inhabitants had taken it upon themselves to blow up one of its legs with six kilos of explosives on April 18, 1979; that is, even before the historic events of the 1980s unfolded. Instead, you find artistic installations in honour of Solidarnosc and John Paul II.

At nearby Plac Centralny, now Ronald Reagan Square (which shows that Poland wants to shake off all traces of its communist heritage), the bronze and marble monument to Solidarnosc is certainly hard to miss as you travel along the endless avenue named after the former Pontiff. At the monument, the most important dates in Poland’s long road to freedom are listed in chronological order under a V for victory. It begins in 1960, ends in 1999 (the year when the sculpture was erected), and includes 1989 – the signature year in the fall of the socialist regimes.

Joanna tells how steelworkers staged a demonstration in April 1960 to demand that a church be built to allow them to gather for prayer. The place of worship, which is shaped in the form of legendary Noah’s Arc on Mount Ararat, would take the name “Our Lady Queen of Poland” and was completed in 1977. To this day, this symbol of futurist architecture located a few blocks from Central Square is a centre of social and religious life in this industrial town with some 200,000 inhabitants. A beautiful bronze Christ stands out inside the church. He is not hanging on the cross, but is about to take flight. Is this a metaphor for the freedom the people longed for?

The New Sendzimir Steelworks

“Huta im. T. Sendzimira” is the inscription that dominates the area in front of the gates at the steelworks.

In 1990, this industrial complex abandoned its original name of “Lenin” and was named after Tadeusz Sendzimir, an American engineer of Polish origin who was born in Lviv. That same year, the director of the Krakow Department of Ecology decided that production should not exceed 3 million tons per year, for environmental reasons.

Now, after a long period of renovation and privatisation, the Nowa Huta plant (which is part of the Mittal Steel Poland group) no longer operates in the red. And it finally uses environmentally friendly production methods.

From the top of a small hill just a few kilometres from the plant, you can see the three chimneys that once polluted the air of Krakow for four decades and caused substantial damage to the artistic heritage of the Old City. They are now merely a symbol of days gone by. In order to photograph them, Joanna and I had to go all the way to the top of the hill. Two zealous ushers in front of the main gates at the plan had politely explained that it was strictly forbidden to enter the facility or to take pictures. Perhaps this is the only legacy left by the old regime…