

CIRCULAR TRAVELS

A SITE-LESS ETHNOGRAPHY OF AN INFORMAL TRADING ROUTE

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Introduction

While the informal transnational trade in Europe in the Iron Curtain period has recently drawn the attention of historians reconstructing it on the basis of official documents (Borodziej and Kochanowski 2010, Bren and Leuburger 2012, Kochanowski 2010, Stola 2012), anthropological observations presenting such phenomena as seen by the actors themselves – especially contemporary ethnographies from the period before the transition – are scarce. The rich western literature on the subject of informality in the Soviet Bloc countries (Kideckel and Sampson 1984, Sampson 1986, 1987)¹ does not represent the insider's view and is politically biased, unlike the ethnographies of informal trade in the later, post-socialist period (e.g. Hann and Hann 1992; Hann and Beller-Hann 1998; Konstantinov et al. 1998, Bridger and Pine 1998, Kaneff 2002, Mandel and Humphrey 2002, Valtchinova 2006) or re-constructive ethnographies based on actors' memories (Wessely 2002, Luthar 2006). Also, the existing ethnographies tend to be confined to chosen sites, usually one or two, rather than describing whole routes.

The present article, written on the basis of interviews with Polish participants in informal transborder trade across Europe, a diary from my own participant observation carried out on the European trading routes in 1980-1990² and memories of internauts does not aim to create an exhaustive ethnography but is rather an effort to present ethnographic materials from the perspective of informality (Hart 1985, 2005, Irek 2009). Reflecting the horizontal nature of informality, the ethnography presented here is site-less rather than multi-sited (Marcus 1995, Falzon 2009), and scale-free (Marston et. al. 2005) rather than multi-scalar (Xiang and Toyota

¹ Sampson alone mentions 150 publications on informality in the 'Soviet bloc' by 1987. Typically for his time, informality is seen as an economic deviation characteristic of the socialist system, both by outsiders like himself and insiders like Brus and Laski 1985, as if there were no informality in the developed economies, as described among others by Pahl 1984, Portes et al. 1989, Ferman et al. 1993 and Williams and Windebank 1998, or in the third world as described by among others Hart 1973 and Elwert et al. 1983.

² Publication of these materials has been postponed for ethical reasons, the names of individuals have been changed and all other identifying information has been removed.

2013). That is, it is not confined to a 'site' or a number of specified 'sites' where the research is carried out, but instead it flows (Irek 1998, Urry 2000, Kirby 2009) freely with the actors, along the routes they have chosen. Different scales are of no relevance here, for the perspective of informality is non-vertical, thus escaping the micro-macro logic. Here places are not only variable contexts of social action but also interfaces between two spaces: geographical space ordered by Cartesian coordinates (Lefebvre 1991), and social space governed by informal networks of a transactional nature, formed by mobile actors engaged in the pursuit of their individual goals.

The logic of informal trade

The informal transborder trade described in this article was powered by geopolitical and economic factors on the one hand and social ones on the other. Since this article aims to avoid the ruling 'economy of shortage' paradigm,³ structural factors are discussed only in so far as they are necessary to understand the logic of the informal exchange of goods across borders. Thus, at the heart of a trading route was the classic market mechanism, the same that powered the Silk Route or Amber Route: a difference in the prices of goods and their accessibility between different geographical locations. In this case it was also a difference between economic systems, as well as between particular states within each system, with state borders creating desirable value thresholds (Bantle and Egbert 1996). The countries of the former Soviet Bloc constituted an artificial market system where the economy was fully subordinated to the political needs of the state, rather than being dependent on the international global market and its rules. The functioning of this system was possible due to both the Iron Curtain, which ensured its relative isolation from capitalist markets, and the relative impermeability of the internal borders between the countries of the bloc, so that any external contacts, whether of an economic or social nature, were fully controlled by the given state, which in turn was subordinated to the needs of the Soviet Union (Stola 2012). And since each country was a separate, relatively closed unit within the system, there were significant differences in the prices of goods, as well as between the goods supplied and demanded in each country (Irek 1998). However, some non-basic needs of the population could not be met through the imports and exports of the inflexible planned economies, which were bound by the limitations of the artificial monetary policies (Leszczyńska 2008) pursued by the respective countries. On

³ As is known, shortages alone do not explain the existence of an informal economy (Carson 1993), let alone informality. In this case, on the 'receiving end' of the trading networks initiated in the poor countries were customers in the rich, capitalist countries. Also, the lack of luxury goods and fashion accessories cannot be described as a 'shortage' (Campbell and Falk 1997).

the other hand, certain basic goods, like children's clothing, which by virtue of being different from what was generally accessible were desired by customers in other countries, were subsidized by the states, so that their export was restricted. This situation created the economic basis for informal trans-border trade, which was initially developed through existing albeit narrow communication channels (Stola 2012), such as people's movements connected with diplomatic exchange, family help, student travel, and business and contract worker travels. But it was only when individual tourist journeys became possible that the channels widened and the 'ordinary people' could participate in and benefit from the informal transborder transactions.

After the death of Stalin (1953) the Soviet regime was relaxed slightly, and the satellite countries started to enter into bilateral agreements on the movement of people across their borders, which also made individual travel possible to other countries within the system. Poland entered into an agreement with neighbouring Czechoslovakia, starting in 1955 with allowing free movement in the border zone and proceeding to abolishing visas in 1960; then followed the German Democratic Republic (1961, 1963 and 1972) and subsequently other countries, including the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia (Kochanowski 2010). In 1964 visas for Hungary were abolished, causing a mass movement of Hungarian, Czech and Polish tourists in both directions. Popular destinations for tourists from other socialist countries, including Poland, were Romania and Bulgaria, with their Black Sea resorts, which became centres for the trade in foreign currencies, cheap gold and furs. Taking advantage of the relaxation of transborder movements of people within the Soviet system, Hungarian tourists raided the neighbouring Czechoslovak towns, virtually cleaning them out of textiles. Czechoslovaks in return raided the south of Poland and resorts in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria, where they were criticised for 'selling smuggled goods, avoiding hotels and paid camping places and generally spending no money, unlike Poles' (Kochanowski 2008: 143), who in turn lavishly spent money in Hungarian shops and restaurants. In Poland Czechoslovaks were known for entering 'criminal networks', smuggling industrial amounts of furry textiles (nicknamed *misie*, 'teddy bears') by train deep into Poland and smuggling out folklore toys, cosmetics and other goods, and even live horses and cattle (Kochanowski 2008, 2010). The proverbially orderly East German tourists were not allowed to travel to the West, but therefore could travel freely within the COMECON system, where they were known for cleaning the neighbouring Czechoslovak and Polish border towns out of food, folklore articles, leather and jeans textiles and electrical goods. Poles in turn raided all of them, including neighbouring Russia, selling and buying anything they could.

Unlike other COMECON inhabitants, Yugoslavs were allowed to travel to the West from the mid-1950s, although initially with restrictions (Repe 2004). Subsequently, from the 1960s, the restrictions were lifted and Yugoslavs were even allowed to work there as well, which had serious consequences for the whole of the European informal economy (Irek 1998, Kochanowski 2008). In effect they became the major distributors of goods between the eastern and western sides of the Iron Curtain (Kochanowski 2010, Svab 2002). Moreover, as they specialized in the gold and currency trades, they were largely responsible for the creation of a secondary market system, a parallel ‘stock exchange’ within the bloc, based on real market prices and on the gold parity (Kochanowski 2008). Other groups who were important players in the currency and gold trades were local ‘Gypsies’ residing in the socialist countries and foreign students, mostly from countries in the Middle East and Africa, who also enjoyed mobility across the Iron Curtain. Poles were allowed to travel as tourists to the West only from the 1970s, provided they met certain criteria (Irek 1998, 2011; Stola 2012).

Political and economic situation in Poland in the 1980s

From the start of my observations, Poland was in deep crisis, which gave additional stimulus to the tradition of informal trading expeditions of Poles across Eurasia, with the established profession of Eurotraveller. In December 1981, after a wave of strikes, martial law was introduced, to which the American government reacted by imposing economic sanctions. In effect the shortages of basic goods, like food and articles of basic hygiene, including soap and clothes, especially for children, became acute. Food was rationed, but even to get a ration one had to queue for up to four hours, and there was no guarantee that the desired item would not be sold out.

As Grażyna, from a small town in the south of Poland, then the mother of a toddler and a Solidarity activist, recalled:⁴

I was queuing one day for butter for my baby, and after an hour they said it was sold out. But the eggs were there, so I kept queuing for eggs. And as my turn came the saleswoman said that the woman in front of me had bought the last four eggs. I burst into tears. I asked, ‘What am I supposed to do to feed my baby? Should I cut my veins open and feed her my blood?’ Well, the saleswoman found the last four eggs under the counter.

⁴ All interviews have been translated from Polish into English. Own translations.

A long line in front of a shop was a landmark of the eighties. In an obvious denial of Marx's idea that humans by nature do not need to own things (Giddens 1971), the Marxist people in socialist Poland queued not only for basic goods but for anything they could get, own and display to express their uniqueness as individuals and to raise their social profile. Sometimes, while they were waiting for their rations, there was an unexpected delivery. On such occasions it was said that 'they have "thrown" goods "at the shop"' (*rzucili towar na sklep*), leading to the shop suddenly being besieged by a crowd of people (Wedel 1986), for each person in a queue represented a network of family, friends and acquaintances, also eager to shop. As the majority of the delivered goods never left the storage room, 'ordinary people' would queue in all possible shops just in case, buying whatever there was to buy and then swapping these items for what they needed, whether for mere physical survival or for prestige. As Maria from a medium-size town in eastern Poland said:

One might queue for butter, for example, but since 'they have thrown' coffee, that's what one bought in the maximum amount allowed, then one went on to queue for butter in another food shop, for they would not deliver twice in one day to the same shop. In the next shop it may have been green T-shirts, size XXL, that 'they have thrown'. Although everybody in the family was size S to M, and everybody hated green, one bought as many shirts as possible. Then, of course, the goods were traded and swapped around, until one got the lump of butter.⁵

The economic shortages created enormous demand for any goods from the outside, which invited large-scale informal imports, but since one's ability to take currency abroad was limited, the basis for imports was foreign currency earned through illegal exports of Polish goods, which were in short supply anyway. On the other hand, this situation increased the importance of informal social networks, strengthening existing ones and forming new ones. When observed from the traditional, vertical perspective of Thomas and Znaniecki's *Polish Peasant* (1927), Poland might have seemed a country with a large void between the state and the private household. This perspective made a distinction between the public and the private (Wedel 1986) rather than the formal and the informal (Hart 1985, Seligman 1998), making it hard to see that in reality this supposedly empty social space was filled by robust and effective networks providing for the physical, spiritual and political needs of Poland's citizens. And it

⁵ This was different from the 'swapping' in the poor neighbourhood described by Stack (1997). Here the process was not confined to a neighbourhood, and money was also changing hands, for money was in surplus and goods were in short supply. See also Wedel 1986.

was these sorts of networks spreading in the supposed ‘social void’ that eventually led to the fall of the whole socialist system.

Peculiarities of the Polish market

Due to the failure of land collectivization after WWII, Poland enjoyed a relatively large private sector, with 81% of agricultural production coming from private farmers (Kaliński 2007), which created a space for a secondary system of trade, existing in the form of open markets and private shops, including ‘second-hand’ ones. While the majority of goods were distributed through the state system, some of those produced in the private sector found their way into the private shops, as did goods that were privately imported, which was strictly forbidden, for the state had a monopoly on all trade with other countries. But goods that had obviously been illegally imported ceased being illegal once they reached the private shops and open markets in every small town, or the flea markets, which existed only in some of the bigger agglomerations, the famous one being the *Bazar Różycykiego* in Warszawa.⁶ This was possible through a simple legal regulation which allowed shops to acquire from individual sellers goods to a nominal value not greater than PLZ 6000, which was about US\$15 at black-market prices and about one to one and a half times the average person’s salary,⁷ depending on the decade (Jeziński and Leszczyńska 2003, Leszczyńska 2008).

Another peculiarity was the exchange rates. The official currency in Poland was the PLZ or *złoty*, but everything was calculated in dollars. It was the only currency for the black market, which in Poland functioned in the physical space as an official flea market decades before the transition. The dollar had several rates of exchange. There was the black market rate; the official rate, at which the state conducted its transactions abroad and was considerably lower than the first one; and the so-called ‘inner export rate’, which was just a fraction even of the official rate (Jeziński and Leszczyńska 2003, Leszczyńska 2008). For this price one could buy desirable and otherwise inaccessible goods from the state, like newly built apartments, cars, tinned ham called *Krakus*, spirits, chocolate, cigarettes and toilet paper. Polish toilet paper was harsh and unpleasant, but extremely hard to get, so for ten rolls (plus the usual price) one could, for example, ‘organise’ a holiday by the sea, subsidised by the

⁶ Similar markets existed in other socialist countries (Sik and Wallace 1999), excluding the German Democratic Republic (Hüwelmeier 2008). A very important post-transformation open market in Łódź, Poland, has been described by Marcińczak and van de Velde (2005, 2008).

⁷ As distinct from the mathematically average salary quoted in the statistics.

state. A soft roll from abroad symbolised the luxury of the West and was a desirable present. Such 'luxurious' items could be obtained in duty-free shops of the 'Polish enterprise of inner exports', called *Pewex*. There was a similar system in East Germany, called *Intershop*. For Poles, the beauty of *Pewex* consisted in the fact that one could obtain original Western goods there at a fraction of their real price in the West. Thus, approximate⁸ median prices in the period included the following: a 20-pack *sztanga* of 'original Marlboro' cigarettes cost about 80 cents, and a bottle of French perfume from reputable company cost only about 2 dollars. Polish vodka, 40% proof, which Poles called 'voltage', cost less than a dollar a bottle. These goods could be used to bribe customs officers and were sold abroad for up to ten times the price, the money being invested in other goods in demand in a different country or back home (Irek 1998). With each subsequent border movement the profit was multiplied, so the so-called 'chain' transactions were popular.

***Kolo*: the circular trading route**

The modern routes of informal trade across Europe overlapped largely with historical communication routes such as the Via Regia and Amber Way, known since the Middle Ages or even Roman times. And these were not just a sequence of geographical places connected by roads, but projects which were continuously developing in the natural, geographical space measured in Cartesian terms, in the collective memory of societies and in the practices of their users. If one were to name any distinguishable 'pattern' and element of relative stability in the social space created by the informal networks, that would be a route: an interface between the natural and the social. And although the rules governing each route were passed on by oral tradition, rather than being written down and sanctioned by the state, they introduced a relative order, understood not as a set sequence of repeatable events, but as the predictability of the consequences of given actions in given circumstances.

Mocking the ancient tradition, the trading routes were given different names, depending on the desired goods, such as the Crystal route or the Mutton route. A circular trading route starting from Poland and going through Russia and Romania or straight through Czechoslovakia and Hungary to some capitalist country in the south of Europe, usually Turkey or Greece, or (less often) to Italy, then back to Poland via Austria and Czechoslovakia or via West Berlin and East Germany was called *Kolo* or 'circle'. Its first stage overlapped with the old Southern or Carpathian Route – important for the anti-fascist resistance in WWII

⁸ The prices in the *Pewex* shops were increasing, and the black-market dollar rates varied considerably throughout the decade, therefore the quoted values are approximates given for orientation.

– or with the eastern part of the Via Regia between Kraków and Kiev, while the last stretch from Berlin overlapped with the Mid-Western Route' along the proglacial valley to Warsaw. On its way south it also overlapped with the Amber Route, which in Hungary forked, one leg going through Vienna to the Adriatic, the other turning towards the Black Sea. The return route from Istanbul went along the northern branch of the Balkan Route (now infamous for drugs- and people-trafficking), across Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Austria, Germany or Hungary to Czechoslovakia and Poland or through Romania and the Ukraine to Poland.

Kolo was a school of truly capitalist thinking. Here both those who had had 'para-capitalist experience' of the private sector and the rest learned self-reliance and the basics of the capitalist economy. The first step in their education was acquiring a passport, and the second was obtaining money and required goods while waiting for the passport, all three items being major challenges demanding initiative, persistence, vision, the creative use of social capital and a realistic calculation of profit and loss – the characteristics of the modern capitalist entrepreneur. After making a passport application and ensuring that it would be responded to positively as soon as possible (usually with a suitable bribe corresponding to the would-be trader's status, his degree of connectedness with the right official and the overall length of his stay), a Eurotraveller had to organise money for the trip, either through a loan in the workplace or by mobilising a network leading to a bank employee of any rank. Having obtained the money, one had to exchange some of it for dollars on the black market in order to be able to 'organise' (rather than 'buy') the required goods, which could be sold at a profit elsewhere. Knowledge of which goods should be taken on the journey was essential for its success and was democratically distributed in the trading networks, which included also the local shop assistants. Thus, it was enough to know somebody who knew somebody who was an established trader or even just a friendly shop assistant to obtain up-to-date information. The rest came with the experience of learning from one's own and other's mistakes. Anna, presently a prosperous businesswoman, described the process as follows:

For the money I borrowed in the bank I got dollars from a dealer, who lived opposite the police station, above a brothel which officially functioned as a beauty salon. Then I took a box of eggs from my uncle's farm and went to my friend from work. Her aunt was the manager of our Pewex shop. The aunt herself got a black hen from me – it was worth a lot because I said it was guaranteed straight from the farm. People in town always love it when something is from the farm! (...) Then we went to the shop. It was late, and there were no people. I was able to choose whatever I needed, without being disturbed. Besides, the woman

was an expert. She knew it all. I did not have to ask, and she gave me all I wanted and much more. If I remember well, I got several bottles of vodka, some packets of Marlboro cigarettes, three or four crystal vases, several tins of ham, elegant packets of coffee, chocolate, a bottle of bath liquid, fashionable soap and matching deodorants. I was very happy, for I knew that with such goods no shop assistant in town could possibly resist me!

This, however, was just the beginning of the transaction chain. As Poland was in a midst of an economic crisis, to get at the desired goods a person had to network to obtain access to the right people and bribe them. Thus Anna used her husband's connections plus 'a packet of coffee, a chocolate and a deodorant' to acquire from the sports shop the goods she did not even know she herself desired:

My friend from school knew her husband – they worked together in a factory – so I asked him to introduce me. First I went to the factory, and there we talked. (...). We were talking for two hours until his work finished, and then we went to a restaurant, where she came and joined us. Then I told her what I needed, and she invited me to come to the shop the next day. And imagine, I enter this empty sports shop with empty shelves and I go out with a small tent for two people, two air mattresses, a picnic set comprising four folded chairs and a table with an umbrella, a tourist cooker together with a gas bottle, and a water-resistant sleeping bag. She too was an expert in what one should buy for the journey! All the shopkeepers knew what went well in Bulgaria and what you had to sell in Hungary. Of course I promised her first choice of the Turkish clothes. We Polish women are crazy for clothes!

Anna recalled that, apart from the big items, she also 'organized' small accessories, like whistles for scouts, ping-pong balls, can-openers and fishing nets, for which she paid about two dollars altogether, which, after the successful journey on Koło, became one hundred dollars.

Monika, an extremely successful Eurotraveller, told how she started her business in a medium-size town in the south-west of Poland:

You have to know people and you have to talk to them. Go to a party, drink a lot and say that you are going to Greece. And then it just rolls. When word got around that I was travelling, shop assistants started to treat me like a serious partner in trade. Of course I had to bring them some small gifts and I had to invite them over, but then I could get things. And I have

more friends, not only in Poland. Basically I got friends all over the world. Everybody knows somebody, you know. For my first trip I bought towels and bed linen, about hundred lipsticks, so many boxes of Nivea cream that I did not even bother to count them and plenty of silver jewellery. And of course I got the red fox fur for Hungary, but I got it through a relative of mine.

The towels and lipsticks were sold in Bulgaria (for Bulgarian levs, which, together with money for clothes and tourist equipment, she traded for West German marks with the German tourists, who lived in the same hotel and whom she approached during breakfast. The silver jewellery she managed to sell en bloc to a Czech couple she met in a car park near Prague; they exchanged addresses for future reference. It took her two days to sell the Nivea cream, but she managed to do so thanks to a new Hungarian acquaintance whom she met in a restaurant and who also bought the red fox-fur from her. If the route went through Turkey rather than Greece, the most lucrative goods apart from spirits, crystal ware and cigarettes were silver fox furs and ready-made stoles. Fox furs were a fashionable accessory and a status symbol in Poland and were hard to get: one had to know somebody who knew a hunter (red fox) or a fox farmer (silver fox), otherwise one had to pay an exorbitant price on the black market, which could cause financial disaster if discovered by the customs. It was not easy to get hold of most desired goods, not even condoms, which were a desirable commodity in Turkey, as well as in Romania.

Magda, another successful Eurotraveller I met on a train on her return from West Berlin, described her problems in obtaining condoms in Poland:

In our town you could get them only in a pharmacy. It was impossible to buy them in a kiosk. You had to approach the counter and ask loudly so that the pharmacist behind the glass wall could hear you ... and everybody in the queue was looking at you ... simply horror. As if that were not embarrassing enough, at that time the pharmacy was run by an old bachelor. It was the bottom of the crisis then, and they were selling only two condoms per person. I had to go to this pharmacy every single day. After a fortnight I still had only 28 condoms, and the pharmacist started to act strange. He seemed to be waiting for me, and every time I came in his look became more and more penetrating. Finally, I became desperate and decided to approach him with my problem. I gave him a packet of Pewex coffee that cost at least twice as much as all the condoms I needed, and told him bluntly what and why I wanted. He sold me

hundred condoms and also told me to buy several packs of prescription pills called Biseptol.⁹ This Biseptol, he said, would guarantee me brilliant social success in Romania. He said that Romanians usually buy it by the tablet and swallow it immediately even without water, showing the greatest pleasure. He was not sure why they behaved in this way, for he thought that the pleasure they demonstrated could only come from vodka or hard drugs.

Another experience with this drug was described in an Internet forum of the magazine *Gazeta Wyborcza*, called *The Bazaar Dictionary of Poles: how we informally conquered the West, North and South*.¹⁰ In 2009 an internaut looking retrospectively at his travels wrote:

In Romania contraception is a crime. The (local) gossip says that Biseptol, when used vaginally, acts as a contraceptive. Polish women sell the tablets directly from their bags on the beaches, on lawns, and at bus stops.¹¹

A very important part of the Eurotraveller's knowledge was the economic geography of the route. Not only did one have to know which goods to sell and buy in which places, but also which places had to be visited first before going somewhere else. Thus, for example, unless one was a contract worker, before visiting East Germany (the DDR), with its supply of goods desired by Poles and its demand for 'Western' gadgets, a visit to a Western country like Turkey or at least a trip to Vienna was a must.

But there was a problem where to get the eastern marks (...) the only solution was trade. For there existed goods that the central goods distributor in the DDR had not accounted for. Kojak lollipops sold for one mark [ten times the price] – the inhabitants of the DDR desired them like salvation. Moreover, Chinese watches (with their famous seven melodies) [and] cheap plastic phones with buttons in the receiver. But to sell these marvels one had first to buy them. Where? Of course in Vienna near the famous Mexico Platz, from a mini-bazaar by Alexander Platz [in Vienna], as well as by the exits from the underground.¹²

⁹ A powerful sulphonamide used for treating bacterial infections (a tablet twice daily for ten consecutive days).

¹⁰ Internet forum (*Bazarowy Słownik Polaków: tak zdobywaliśmy na dziko Zachód, Północ, Południe*, initiated by *Gazeta Wyborcza*), <http://wyborczapl/2029020,100426,6792798.html>

¹¹ Ibid. Accessed 07/08/2009.

¹² Jarosław Śliżewski, 'Farel na Bazarowym szlaku', accessed 07/08/2009 from <http://wyborcza.pl/2029020,100426,6787802.html>

Equally important was the direction of the flow of goods, which was known both to the traders and to customs officers. Shipping goods in the wrong direction could create a financial disaster and raise suspicions with customs. Usually the list of permitted goods in each country was memorized, so that it could be flawlessly recited to the customs officer upon entering the country. Of course, due to tiredness or the influence of alcohol, it often happened that a Eurotraveller would recite the wrong text – then the outcome of journey was dependent on the customs officer’s fancy. Traveling on the ‘Worker’, a train towards Berlin, I was more than once a witness of how, at the border controls, a customs officer had to shake a sleeping passenger to wake him up. Upon opening his eyes the latter would recite:

Ten packs of coffee, ten packs of jelly beans, ten bars of chocolate, two pairs of shoes, two bars of salami...

Stop! the customs officer would laugh. *That’s the wrong direction!*

Indeed, what the ‘worker’ was reciting were the allowable amounts of goods on the journey from Berlin to Warsaw.

On another internet forum about Polish trade trips under socialism, called ‘Trading trips of our fellow countrymen during socialism’, an internaut recalled the following scene at an airport:

One colleague, who, like the rest of us, had no clue about smuggling, put his suitcase on the table. The customs officer looked inside it. On the top there was a nicely folded towel. The officer lifted one corner of the towel, and there (we) saw the following set: a mirror, a comb and a brush. Then he lifted the other corner – there was another set: a mirror, a comb, and a brush. (He lifted the third and the fourth corner and he saw the same things.) Then he turned to his colleague searching people at another stand and, laughing loudly, called out: ‘Slavek, come here and look! The fellow is flying to Budapest with goods for Istanbul!’ He searched our colleague no more.¹³

Apart from accessing and developing knowledge of what and where to buy and which places to visit in which sequence so that the maximum profit was achieved, the Eurotraveller had to know the habits of the customs officers on each border, as well as the best hiding

¹³ Post by Matylda1001, accessed 20/12/2012 from http://forum.gazeta.pl/forum/w,16256,120823537,,Wycieczki_handlowe_rodakow_w_czasach_PRL_.html?v=2

techniques, depending on which vehicle one chose for the journey. Travelling by bus, one had limited opportunities, so goods were carried on the body ('*na ciało*') hidden in bodily orifices, as well as in lingerie, in the trousers ('*na nogę*'), under the skirt, coat or jacket, under the seats, or simply in the luggage holds. The less obvious places, such as spare tyres or places under the car body, were usually reserved for the drivers themselves. Smuggling by train was much easier: apart from the 'on the body technique', one could deny ownership of the luggage (a whole train was less likely to be detained than a single bus), or hide goods in the toilet or in seats, walls and ceilings after removing the panels and then putting them back. The operation demanded technical skills and was hence gendered – if women were in the group, their task was to keep a look out and distract potential intruders.

*The equipment of a trader going by train includes a set of screwdrivers, pliers, a small drill, a hammer and a bit of soot... For example, foxes (fox skins)... are packed into ventilation pipes... Once on the train you turn off the heating, dismantle the seat and push twenty fox skins into the pipes underneath. Then you put the screw back and soil it with soot so that there is no trace of fresh work. There are only trusted people, the traders, on the train anyway, so nobody complains it is cold. We keep warm with vodka.*¹⁴

The smuggling could be quite comfortable if the train had a restaurant car. One could enter into an agreement with the train staff and have the load shipped for one, as described by the same traveller from a medium-sized town in central Poland:

*To our astonishment, in Bratislava the state-owned shops are full of bananas, (...) oranges and watermelons. (...) On one journey I take by train almost one and half tonnes of fruit. The manager of Wars (a restaurant) takes 200 dollars and two packs of bananas. The cargo comes on a hand-pushed carriage right to the steps of the train, with no camouflage whatsoever.*¹⁵

Antek, from a small town in western Poland, whom I met in Berlin, where he was buying goods for his electronic shop back home, recalled his first trip to Turkey, on which he joined his cousin Edward as his helper.

¹⁴ Post by Robert, in *Bazarowy Słownik*, op. cit., p. 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

He showed me a purpose-made hiding place in the front seat. He put the silver and red fox skins into it, along with the amber jewellery. You would never know that we have such clever craftsmen in our country! They made hiding places in all possible places in his car. I would never ever have guessed that some places were hollow... We put there the cigarettes, vodka and crystal vases. We put the Nivea cream boxes into the sleeping bags – the boxes were big and round, and we just wrapped the sleeping bags around them. We hid dozens of lipsticks in the tent poles – simply the ideal place for that shape. We put all the clothes (destined) for sale in Romania on top of our luggage, and between them, right on the top, we left plenty of smaller, less valuable things. Edward said they should attract the custom officer's attention so that he will not look more deeply.

The Ten Commandments of a smuggler included the following rules, explained to me by Andrzej, a Eurotraveller from Łódź:

If you show fear, you are f...ed. You must look the bastard (customs officer) straight in the eyes and, whatever you say, say it with one hundred percent conviction, even if it is absolute f...ing rubbish. If they ever ask you on the border what are you carrying, your one and only answer is 'nothing', even if you are smuggling a f...ing elephant. 'Nothing' ends the whole conversation – and that's what you want. You must be the master, and the son of a bitch (customs officer) will recognise it. Give him a nice big sausage, and he will wave his tail like a dog and lick your hands; show the slightest fear or hesitation, and he'll f...ing eat you.

By a 'nice big sausage' he meant a sufficient bribe: the general understanding was that it was better to give a generous bribe than to have the customs officer search one's luggage, for with each prohibited item discovered, the bribe would have to be higher. But then it was unwise to spoil the current rates. Thus, apart from this basic knowledge of the psychology of the customs officers, one had to have a sound knowledge of their local demand for gifts and the current rates of bribery.

Paweł, a high-status professional from a small town who travelled mostly for adventure, described a situation when, instead of the Johnny Walker whisky popular at that time with the Romanian customs on the border with Bulgaria, against the better judgement of his companions he bought a bottle of 'cognac' in a customs-free zone which was a bit cheaper. The problem was that Romania was known for very good local brandies which in Poland were called 'cognac', so it was not a rarity in Romania, which Paweł, not being an honest smuggler

but mere adventurer, did not know. The description of the unfortunate border crossing became his standard drunken party story, told for the next ten years along with stories of his later African Safari adventures.

Thus, having left Bulgaria, Paweł approached the Romanian guard with a wide smile and a bottle of 'cognac':

He reacted like a devil to holy water.

'No cognac', he said. I could see that he shivered with disgust upon hearing the word 'cognac'.

'Johnny Walker!' he said.

'Whisky bad, cognac good, kharosho, dobri', I explained – 'taking cognac!'

'Unloaden the car' – he said in broken English, as if barking. Thus, we had to unload the car in the darkness. Then he got greatly agitated upon seeing our sheepskin coats. He ran back to his little hut, where he spoke with another man and returned after a while with a big sheet of paper.

'You Polish to sell coatsen (using the English word with a German plural ending) for dollars in Romania, but you not sell! To give coatsen here or deposit', he said.

'OK' – I said – 'how much skolko ('how much' in Russian) deposit pozsalusta ('please' in Russian)'

'\$50 one coatsen'.

'We no money, we no selling those kozuchen ('coats' in Polish with the German plural ending 'en') at all. They are for I, you check that. Kharoshij dlja I ('good for I'). Very OK for I' – I was explaining, but it did not matter anyhow, for the guard was not listening. He was just angry.

'No money, no travel' – he said.

'You Lei (Romanian currency)?' – I tried to negotiate.

'What? Smugglen Lei Romania!' he yelled.

'No' – I almost cried at that moment. It was like Kafka's castle. I tried to explain in my broken English mixed with Russian that I had just the permitted amount which I could exchange back in Poland. I showed him three dollars' worth of Lei, and he asked if I also had Levs, but I hadn't. Then he grabbed the Lei and said 'confiscato'.

Finally I realised that the guard was simply drunk and just wanted more liquor, but for some weird reason it could not be cognac. How can one refuse five-star cognac? Those Romanians are so different from us Poles!

'OK'-, I said, 'we oborot ('go back' in Russian) to Bulgaria, buy two Johnny Walkers for you.' This must have pleased him, for he retreated. So did we. We spend about two hours on the bridge watching the Danube and waiting for his shift to change, very much tempted to jump off the bridge. Then we approached again. This time I just offered ten dollars, and it went all right.

This was a commonly used tactic valid also on other European borders, with everything depending on the customs officer's discretion. In the era before computers there was a big chance that the same people and cargo that had been rejected by one team would be accepted by another team on a different shift. Very often also somewhere else was tried for crossing, as in the story quoted later by the internaut Bartek, mentioned in the 'Bazaar Dictionary' quoted earlier:

We are returning from Turkey via Czechoslovakia. They expel us from every single Czech border crossing, for we have two thousand bottles of pure spirit in our luggage holds. Finally, after the fourth crossing, we realize they must phone each other and warn that such and such a party of Poles is approaching. Thus, we put one of the passengers behind the steering wheel, some lady lends her wig to the female guide, and we come back to the very first crossing from which we were returned (expelled). And we get through!¹⁶

Case Study: Sonja, the ultimate Eurotraveller

A successful journey on Koło was described by Sonja, a former teacher. A single mother after a painful divorce, she decided to start travelling in the mid-1980s for both economic and psychological reasons. Like Antek, on her first journey she accompanied an experienced Eurotraveller called Dorota from her home town. The two women joined an organised car trip to Istanbul. The 22-day trip cost less than a hundred dollars a person, without gasoline, but including hotel costs in Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria (but not in Turkey), as well as a guide. The members of the trip came from different parts of Poland and had to travel on their own to the meeting point, where they formed a cavalcade.

Our journey started very early in the morning. We appeared on the Polish–Czechoslovak border with the car so loaded that its chassis was almost touching the ground. We got a hand

¹⁶ Post by Bartek in *Bazarowy Słownik*, op. cit., p. 2.

out from the travel agency containing the current customs regulations in all the countries we were going to cross. And, of course, everything we had in the car was on the list of goods that were not allowed to leave Poland and forbidden to bring into Czechoslovakia, unless for one's 'own needs'. The customs officer approached us, and Dorota said that we had nothing! 'We have absolutely nothing', she said, 'but camping equipment and some clothes and food! We are going to need all this during our three-week camping trip!'

The officer believed us! Of course not for free. It cost us five dollars each and a big bag of chewing gum from Pewex. Then, the Czech guards ran towards our car. That was really scary. You should have seen their faces when they surrounded us. I was so scared I could not move at all, but she showed them our documents, which of course stated clearly that we were going to transit their country on our way to Turkey. They only asked if we had any Czech currency and then retreated, like vampires upon seeing a cross, but if we had been going to Czechoslovakia only, they would have tried to bring us to ruin.

The women got lost on the Czech roads and, while asking for directions, disposed of the 'silver' jewellery, bought in Poland for the equivalent of one dollar, for which they earned the equivalent of twenty dollars in Czech crowns, double Sonja's salary as a teacher. Since they were on an organised trip, they could not waste any more time trying to find Dorota's acquaintances in Bratislava, who would have helped them to turn those into dollars. Czech guards were very sensitive to Czech crowns being taken out of the country, so they had to get rid of them, otherwise the whole cargo would be placed at risk. They had a meal in a good restaurant (half a dollar for both) and spent the rest on sweets, fruit, alcohol, soap for Romania, baby clothes and some fake jewellery from Jablonex, to be sold in Turkey. After which they still had about ten dollars' worth of Czech Crowns, which Dorota put into her bras. The Czech guards made them wait for hours on the border, but luckily allowed them to go without any control, taking a packet of cigarettes and a pack of bubble gum from Pewex as a gift. The Hungarians let them through immediately, were very nice and did not ask any questions or demand a bribe. This, however, was not the rule, especially for big cargos on the way back.

An internaut contributing to the forum *Bazaar Dictionary* quoted earlier recalled:

Hungarians, for example, can keep a bus from Turkey for ten hours on the border. They order every single bit of luggage to be unpacked (...) and record it on a form. Then a customs officer comes with a torch and checks: there have to be five thousand and forty-six trousers

*(...) there are three pieces too much. So, fill in all the forms again! Form filling takes half an hour, waiting for the customs officer to return three times as much. It is raining, the jeans on the ground are getting wet and the colour is starting to run. The Hungarian is not in a hurry.*¹⁷

Sonja and Dorota were lucky with their ‘small’ cargo, but the other members of the cavalcade also passed the second border, although they had much more cargo placed in containers attached to roofs, or towed. Some were even towing caravans, and the trip guide had a caravan as big as a cottage, despite the fact that they were all booked into hotels. They travelled to Budapest, where they dispersed to sell their goods and to buy other goods to be sold elsewhere. They knew that trading in the streets was illegal, and there were numerous stories of Polish people getting arrested and fined. Therefore using any contacts with the Hungarians was an important element of the journey, increasing both its safety and its profitability. Unfortunately the numbers were uneven, and there were not enough Hungarians for all the Polish tourists, so misfortunes were not a rarity. On the other hand the Hungarian policemen were described as quite friendly compared to the Czech or East German police, and the fines were not heavy enough to put the traders off.¹⁸

Eric, a tourist guide from central Poland, recalled:

We went there by bus. It was a trip by the most influential people: teachers, doctors and lawyers from X. They were travelling to see the cultural treasures of Budapest. Instead, as soon as we stopped they dispersed, and I had to look for them, as they were selling Nivea in the shops and at building gates. Two were arrested for illegal trading. Instead of being at a concert, I spent the evening at the police station. What a shame!

An experienced Eurotraveller would go into great lengths to ensure a personal contact with a Hungarian shop assistant or waiter, therefore visits to restaurants and parties in hotels were not purely recreational: they increased the chances of meeting a business partner. Dorota knew some shops in the centre where the women sold numerous boxes of Nivea cream, several red fox furs, some lipsticks, towels and about twenty crystal vases. The vases could be

¹⁷ Post by Tomek in *Bazarowy Słownik*, op. cit., p. 1.

¹⁸ What it looked like from the viewpoint of the Hungarian and Polish authorities is described in the excellent book by Kochanowski 2010.

sold in Turkey for three times as much, but it was too risky to carry them over the rough roads in Romania, where they could break or be confiscated by the Romanian customs guards.

The list of what they bought in Budapest did not differ from the standard known to all Eurotravellers. It included the cheapest chewing gum, sweets, food for the onward journey, luxury underwear and fashionable clothes to be sold in Romania and Bulgaria, and several bottles of thick, pearly shampoo with a large neck in which to hide gold coins, which could be cheaply obtained in Bulgaria from Russian tourists. For five tins of Nivea cream, for which they had paid about five cents back in Poland, they also got several bottles of the local Tokai wine, very popular in Poland to this day, as well as cognac (all brandies were called 'cognac' in socialist Poland, just as all sparkling wine was called 'champagne') for their own pleasure, as well as a supply of kiwi juice. She explained:

Kiwi juice is good for you. It is known to have some magical properties that save people from a hangover or even death by vodka. It is an absolute must for every serious smuggler.

Kiwi was then completely unknown in Poland, but it became an instant success with the Eurotravellers. Once introduced, it was used to save numerous lives on the trains and buses of the trading routes. Another Hungarian product said to be good for you was the red wine called Egri Bikaver, which was translated as 'bull's blood'. It was believed to raise the level of red blood cells. The women bought four bottles of it, just to keep their blood in balance as they travelled, and since they were not selfish they bought ten bottles more on the way back from Turkey, to share with the needy at home.

The trip was booked for two days into a bungalow on the shores of Lake Balaton, where a constant watch was kept over the cars and luggage. This was one obvious advantage over travelling as an individual: in an organized group it was not only easier to obtain a passport, but also safer. Upon arrival at Balaton the group members held a brief meeting during which they democratically agreed who was going to watch the cars and when. It meant that he (it was deemed to be an exclusively male task) had to be relatively sober, while the others went out to a local restaurant, where they dined and wined and had a Magyar Cigany (Gypsy or Roma) orchestra playing only for them. The next day they spent on the beach relaxing before the onward journey and discussing business strategy before entering Romania, which was the

centre for the black market in foreign exchange in the south-east, despite the fact that its regime, as Sonja put it, ‘forbade virtually everything’.¹⁹

The rumours said that desperate Romanians were stopping single cars on the roads, robbing everything possible, killing people and throwing them into the river or burning bodies and cars. So the Eurotravellers usually tried to drive as close as possible to each other, even if it meant less business. But the most difficult part of the journey was the border, where they had to undergo intimidating experiences, although Sonja’s story was not as dramatic as Maria’s, another Eurotraveller:

First we queued for about an hour to approach the Hungarian guards. Then we moved into no man’s land between Hungary and Romania and were kept waiting there in the burning sun for at least four hours. The queue did not move, although we were quite close to the gates. My husband got impatient and told me to get out to attract the guards. It was hot, and I was wearing a (semi-transparent) cotton dress which he (her husband) had brought me that year from India. All I had underneath were rather brief knickers I’d got in Budapest. So I got out and started to pace up and down, stopping from time to time to stretch. Before long a customs officer got out of the gate and waived at us to approach. The cars moved forward. But then he pointed his finger at me.

‘You, personal control’ – he said.

The guy led me into a dark room. Then he left me with some woman. She could not speak any foreign language. She spoke Romanian, and she was rough. She wore no gloves but checked me meticulously, touched me everywhere, including putting her finger into my vagina.

Intimidation was the rule and was entirely separate from the bribe to be paid for crossing the border with one’s cargo intact, which at that time was ten dollars a car, a bottle of whisky, cigarettes, a box of Czech chocolates and chewing gum, which came on top of a twenty-dollar voucher for petrol, which everybody had to buy, even if the car was diesel – apparently the country’s policy aimed at undermining the black market. The effect was the further stimulation of black-market activities: the vouchers were usually sold informally for five

¹⁹ For description of the situation in Romania in the 1980s, see, for example, Kideckel and Sampson 1984, Sampson 1986.

dollars, and diesel was obtained from lorry drivers for desired goods like sweets, the cheapest Polish cigarettes, chewing gum or condoms.

The car trips usually proceeded towards Bucharest, for it was generally known in Poland that it was the best place to exchange all possible currencies for dollars, at very generous exchange rates. Trading with the locals was reported to be a much better experience than in other countries. There it was the buyers who looked for the sellers. As Danuta observed:

Doing business with the Romanians is a real pleasure. As soon as the car stops, whether in the worst wilderness, they appear as if from under the earth and are ready to swap or buy anything and to accept any currency, and they sell marvellous things. You can get hand-made folklore objects for peanuts. We sold all our cheap candies, chocolate and God knows what, even sugar lumps, which we bought in Czechoslovakia for our own use. You can see that they are starved and scared. If they pay in foreign money, they usually have it hidden somewhere under stones. They buy anything! I have got rid of all the old rubbish clothes which I took from home to protect the crystal vases.

Sonja had a similar experience. She swapped her ex-husband's old clothes (which he left behind as useless when he moved out) for a hand-stitched tablecloth and a set of twelve matching napkins, as well as the German shoes she was wearing for a hand-stitched white and red top for herself and matching dresses for her daughters. She also had an adventure with Biseptol:

I asked a sales assistant if he wanted to buy Biseptol. And he was like thunderstruck, and exclaimed loudly, 'Biseptol!' Suddenly two other men rushed in from the back room. I froze. My knees became weak. I thought, 'Oh my God, they're going to confiscate my money and my cargo, put me in prison and keep raping me ever after.' But instead they offered me like \$10 for the whole load of a hundred pills. Back in Poland it cost about 25 cents.

There was nothing to eat on the way, as the group had been warned while still in Poland, and they continued their journey right into Transylvania, where they stopped in a little park to eat food brought from Hungary and to meet the Germans. Indeed, as soon as they arrived they were immediately surrounded by a group of young, blue-eyed, blonde people with very light complexion, looking very different from the villagers they had met so far. They proved to be Transylvanian Germans. They bought all the remaining condoms except ten, which the

women saved for themselves 'in case of emergency'. As expected, they bought en masse all silver jewellery, fake or not, including the earrings Sonja wore, Polish lipsticks, some fashionable textiles, soap and deos, luxury underwear bought especially for them in Hungary, as well as all the remaining Czech and Hungarian sweets. The Germans paid for everything in West German marks, and unlike all the other buyers, did not even try to bargain. The party invited the Germans to join the picnic, and everybody exchanged addresses with them. Communication was easy, for they spoke fluent German. They said they got all the West German marks from their relatives in Germany, to which they hoped to migrate at the first available opportunity.

The cavalcade proceeded southwards, until it reached Bucharest. The hotels in the Bucharest vicinity were trading and money-exchange centres, as was common knowledge amongst Eurotravellers. The hotel staff, from receptionists to chambermaids and waitresses, were interested in doing business, which was handy for those who had not managed to sell their goods elsewhere, but troublesome for those who wanted to sleep (the staff kept knocking on the bedroom door until midnight) or to have a meal (the waiters were mainly there for the trading). Sonja and Dorota exchanged all their remaining currency into dollars, earning more than a hundred dollars net each, on top of what they already had, not counting the goods and souvenirs. Sonja also had to use her personal safe, the money being rolled up, put into a condom and stuck deep into her vagina. To get safely into Bulgaria they paid \$10 to each team of guards, plus a bottle of whisky, two packets of Czech chewing gum, a big packet of sweets for the Romanians and an extra ten-pack of cheap Polish cigarettes for the Bulgarians. Those with a bigger cargo were not so lucky: they had to unload everything on one of the banks of the Danube, which took them several hours and much more money to bribe.

Bulgaria appeared to them as beautiful as Romania, and it had more recreational opportunities, since the economic situation seemed better there. There was food in the restaurants and shops, and the hotels on the seashore had higher standards and were safer. But then, trading was not as easy as in Romania. The Eurotravellers had to make some effort and develop contacts with the locals, rather than being approached by everybody. But Sonja was lucky:

We were so tired that we slept until midday, then we went for lunch. It was a great hotel, so we dressed in our best clothes. After lunch the manager of the restaurant invited us to his office and asked if we had more clothes like this or any other attractive items. His name was Dima – we still exchange letters. We agreed that he would come straight to our room and pick

what he wanted. He came and he wanted just about everything – he took twenty towels and six sets of duvet covers, as well as cosmetics and textiles from Hungary. But for some reason he was especially interested in my made to measure clothes. ‘But I need them myself’, I said, to which he replied that he would wait until I went and then buy them for dollars on the day of my departure. ‘But I cannot travel without clothes’, I said. He looked at me as if I were abnormal and said ‘Everybody does it. People leave knickers and socks here. They buy everything later in Turkey’.

He warned us not to buy dollars from the local traders on the beach but from the dedicated specialists, who happened to live in the hotel. I think they were paying him a cut. He also advised us where to sell our sports equipment and where to go for fruit. Bulgaria supplied other socialist countries with fruit, but there were no peaches or grapes on the coast, so to get them, one had to travel to plantations deeper in the country. He was incredibly nice and paid particular attention to me for the rest of our stay. I felt as if I had sold my soul to the Devil.

If the travel route went through Turkey rather than Greece, a short holiday on the Black Sea was a must, but as usual the purpose was not purely recreational. The Polish Eurotravellers had to meet Russian travellers there in order to buy gold coins to be smuggled into Turkey and to sell the remaining clothes, including those they were wearing, as well as all tourist equipment. Apparently, the best way of meeting Russians in informal surroundings was to attend their morning exercise sessions on the beach, but one had to be very careful because they used to stay in a group, which made approaching them individually difficult. Later, after Brezhnev’s death, one could approach them directly since at that time they were selling their cheap goods in the open markets. As Richard, whom I met on the ‘Smuggler’ train, described the situation:

One can do really good business with them because they have no idea about the European (trading) measure system. All they know is a handful or a bucket (...) What do they sell by buckets? For example, towels and handkerchiefs. The smaller items are sold by handfuls and only in dollars. They know only the rouble-dollar rate, and if it changes in the meantime (since they had left Russia) they have no idea (cf. Irek 1998).

Bulgarian currency also had to be exchanged into West German marks or dollars. Marks were preferred, for in Bulgaria dollars were often fake. The best transactions were with the West German tourists, who spent what for people in eastern Europe were unimaginable amounts of money and could be approached resting on the beach or in the bars and restaurants. Dealing in dollars was risky, therefore it was usually done through the recommendations of friends and acquaintances. Thanks to her personal contact with the restaurant manager, Sonja found it easy to sell the tourist equipment.

Next morning we couldn't go to the beach because of the sunburn, so we went to the petrol station as Dima told us. The guy seemed unfriendly, but we said we had come from Dima, and he instantly became very nice. He said Dima was his cousin. (...) He bought everything. The price on some things was a bit low, but we did not want to look for other clients. We sold our tent, mattresses, sleeping bags, gas bottle, camping set with umbrella and deck chairs, small camping accessories, ping-pong balls, whistles, basically everything. After two single transactions we got about 150 dollars' worth of Bulgarian Levs each, not counting the money Dima was to pay for our clothes. Then we had to change our Levs into dollars. Others preferred to change them into German marks, because those were seldom fake, but Dorota said she could smell a false dollar a mile off, so we had nothing to fear. By then we had already earned three years' salary each, plus we were having the holiday of a lifetime.

The women exchanged money with some Arab students. For Sonja this was her first contact with Arab men, and it was a culture shock.

As soon as the lift opened, we felt the scent of strong perfume mixed with something like burning candles. (...). They were just brewing coffee and asked us to join them. In Poland it would have been an insult to refuse such an offer, so we said OK. (...) We thought we could leave in a matter of minutes, but it appeared that drinking coffee was a long ritual. First they were brewing it for ages in small kettles on sticks, and then they drank it very slowly. They said they had been watching us as we suntanned topless, and they were offering us a hundred dollars for one night. I wanted to run away, but Dorota told me to say that we were married and that we had to reject their kind offer. Then we started to talk about our money business. (...) We put the Levs on the table – they counted them, and then they fetched a device on which they counted twice, quarrelling amongst themselves in their harsh language. They gave us ten- and twenty-dollar bills, because bigger nominations were always fake. Dorota

checked every single one against the light. She refused two ten-dollar bills. They exchanged them without question.

The women bought two five-rouble coins made of 98% gold and sunk them in the pearly shampoo, and on the eve of departure they sold all their remaining clothes, cosmetics, shoes and suitcases. Sonja recalled:

On the day of our departure, apart from a toothbrush and two pairs of knickers, a tourist iron and a hair-dryer my suitcase was empty – the other suitcase was completely gone, so was a nice big bag. I had absolutely nothing: no pullover, no trousers, no pyjamas or dressing gown. Four bras and seven matching knickers were gone, so was my bikini in panther design. All my T-shirts, skirts, jumpers, blouses, made-to-measure dresses, tailored jacket, five pairs of shoes were gone. So were my tights, in which we put the red fox furs before stuffing them into parka sleeves, my cosmetic bag with hair brush, mirror, used lipstick foundation and mascara, warm parka taken just in case, socks and whatever else I had. (...) For the \$60 I got for my used clothes and luggage, I bought textiles in Turkey which, in the absolutely worst-case scenario, I could sell for \$300.

The humiliation experience was repeated on both sides of the Bulgarian–Turkish border, although the women paid bribes at the going rate both to Bulgarian and Turkish teams of customs officers. Unfortunately a female customs officer from Bulgaria took a liking to one Hungarian shampoo (with the precious gold coin inside) and demanded it as a gift. Then Sonja was approached for quick sex behind the building by the Turkish customs officer, but, instructed previously by Dorota, she said she had her days and offered him a pack of cheap Polish cigarettes instead. The deal was accepted, and they travelled on towards Istanbul. Their knowledge of Turkish sexual habits was useful both there and on the way back, valuable advice given them by Polish seasonal sex workers Dorota had met in Istanbul on her previous journey. Apparently, they were complaining that when they were menstruating they were losing money, as the clients avoided them like the plague.

Her first contact with a non-socialist country was shocking for Sonja. Instead of the expected paradise on earth, she encountered a contrast more typical of the third world, namely extreme poverty set against luxury.

Our hotel was everything we did not expect. It was in a small decayed house with dark corridors, a rotten carpet and a narrow staircase leading to tiny en suite rooms. It was so shabby that a public toilet in Bulgaria seemed luxurious by comparison. We also had to share a shower with some huge cockroaches. We were warned not to eat anything in Istanbul restaurants because of the ridiculously high prices and the danger of amoebas, so we made a small picnic in a scruffy car park surrounded by high walls. We ate the fresh food we had brought from Bulgaria and canned ham from Poland. Then, just in case, we disinfected our intestines with slivovitz from Bulgaria, so our spirits improved considerably, but next morning we got depressed upon seeing our breakfast – some white rolls, a choice of one tiny jar of marmalade and a tiny lump of butter and the smallest cup of coffee the civilised world has ever seen.

In Poland at that time coffee was drunk in big glasses, a quarter of a litre, with boiling water poured on to a spoonful of ground coffee. Ironically, this way of serving coffee was called ‘Turkish coffee’ and was believed to have been brought from Vienna by Jan Sobieski after he had saved Europe from a Turkish invasion. Espresso was not yet known. Another shock was to see the driving habits in Istanbul:

To save money we went to the centre by car, although Dorota knew that both parking and driving downtown was hopeless. Indeed, everybody was rushing about madly, with no respect for lights or signs, the only rule being don’t hit the car in front of you. The streets were crowded and narrow and the signs confusing, so we circled the town for ages before we finally found what we wanted. We parked far behind a shop with the familiar name of a Polish local town. We saw that along the street there were plenty of other shops with Polish names. So we went to the shop that was named after our area. They greeted Dorota as if she were royalty. The Turks spoke some language very similar to Polish, but she told them to speak German, so I had to interpret again. Two very handsome dark guys led us into little room at the back. As we sat on a funny low couch, they asked us what would we like to drink and served us cold water and very strong tea in tiny glasses on a silver tray. Then we started negotiations. First we had to sell our goods, so that we knew how much of their products we could buy. This meant that they could not cheat us too much, otherwise they wouldn’t be able to sell their goods. Dorota was the one to negotiate for us both. She started with her four silver fox furs, for which she obtained \$30 each, then the man shook my fox fur and proved that it was losing its hair and was therefore of worse quality, so I got only \$20 for it. Then we

traded our electrical wares, including the car radio. For the slightly used hair dryer and iron, which back in Poland had cost something like twenty-five cents, I got \$5, I got \$20 for silver and amber jewellery which had cost perhaps \$4 at home, the cigarettes went for \$10 for a set of twenty packets, and the Polish vodka was sold for \$5 a bottle. The things for children brought from Czechoslovakia sold for \$30 and the Jablonex jewellery for \$10. I also obtained my \$40 share of the saved golden coin. This meant that, for the \$160 I had borrowed which I had originally invested in the journey, I had by now around \$700. The others did much better: they had more cigarettes and better fox furs. I had nothing more, but those who owned a car could still sell such items as car seat covers, spare wheels, car tools, torches and so on. People were stripping their cars of everything: they were even selling the back seats.

Both women were approached for sex in return for a fur coat, but strangely, the excuse that they were menstruating did not work, so they had to say 'no' directly. During the conversation it appeared that the 'Turks' happened to be a family of labour migrants from Yugoslavia. They had worked for some time deeper in West Germany, after which they moved to West Berlin, where their family had another shop and yet others in Belgrade and Vienna. They were well informed regarding which type of garments should be taken if one went through Berlin and which were for Poland: those members of the trip who did the full 'Koło' bought high-quality sheepskin coats and leather jackets to be sold in the west, while Sonja, who was going straight back to Poland, bought two fur coats plus a fur jacket, and two small-size coats for her children, plus industrial amount of textiles, chiefly for women. The only problem was that such quantities of textiles were strictly forbidden in each country, even if one were only in transit, and in Poland they were heavily taxed. Thus, following the best practice of the route, the women asked their hosts to pack the tax-free quantities of textiles into parcels and to send them to several friends back home. The rest had to be smuggled across all the borders.

Sonja was initially scared that the goods would never be sent, but eventually she received all the parcels, and it was at the Polish end that she had some problems retrieving them. Since informal relations were based on trust and good reputation, the risk that the Turkish shopkeepers would not send the goods was small. Although the contract was oral, any breach would have cost the trader a loss of business. The information that a certain shopkeeper was cheating would spread fast in the networks, and although the shopkeeper would perhaps have earned \$300 by keeping the goods for himself, he would lose his Polish clients, which he could not afford in the conditions of fierce competition against other shops. (After *perestroika* the same situation was apparently repeated for the Russian traders, whose buying power drove

the Poles out of the market.) In theory it was possible to return goods to the shop if they were found to be faulty, but in practice it was more profitable to mend them oneself or to sell them more cheaply in Poland than to bring them back to the shop. Therefore the buyers tried to check the goods in the shop, so each visit could last up to three or four hours. In trying to keep clients for themselves, rather than allowing them to shop with the competition, the shopkeepers went to great lengths to satisfy them.

They did not have the choice of the most popular dresses, so we paid for what we had already bought and left the shop. We agreed to come back the next day, to collect the things and see if they had obtained what we wanted. That day we were just unable to do any more errands, so we drove across the bridge over the Bosphorus to Asia, just to put our feet on the other continent. Next day we drove to the shop, where we got our things. The missing clothes were already there, and everything was nicely packed in big plastic bags doubled up. These bags were very popular in Poland, and for each pair of them I could have bought a new suitcase. We also bought raisins, halva, chewing gum, chocolate and plenty of coffee. Halva was obtainable only in Turkey, but we could buy those other things in Hungary and Czechoslovakia, but again it was forbidden to take such products abroad if bought there. Although it would be much cheaper to do so, it was not worth the risk – our sheepskin coats would have been at risk there. Then we went back to the hotel to meet the other members of our cavalcade. But they were not there. The car park was almost empty. We went to reception to ask about our guide. They said he had not checked out, but he went to town, leaving no message. We waited for about an hour, but there appeared only two other cars. Finally we saw our guide. He came on foot. He said he was going to West Berlin, so were the others. The mystery of why they had all come with caravans, although they slept in hotels, was finally solved! Even if all the goods they carried were confiscated, which had to be calculated, although it had never happened before, a fully furnished caravan with a washing machine, cooker and fridge was in itself a treasure for sale!

Thus, the members of the organised cavalcade had to go back home individually and without the guide. Sonja and Dorota travelled to the border with the other cars, but then the party separated during the customs controls.

The Turks took their usual rate and let us go, but Bulgarian guards were not so pleasant this time. We waited several hours, they separated us from our companions, and as if that were

not enough, they told us to unload the whole cargo and carefully searched it, until we feared for the safety of our dollars. It took us a packet of five Turkish knickers, a T-shirt and a stick of our precious original Donald chewing gum to get through the border, but we forgot to agree with the others where to meet, so we were on our own. The good news was that we had to go to a hotel in a town only about 160 km from the border. The bad news was that all maps and documents for the journey had stayed with the guide.

The women travelled alone across Bulgaria and Romania, where they lavishly bribed the customs and entered Hungary without problems, which was partially due to their assumption that at 3 am the guards would be less active. Then they went to the familiar resort on Lake Balaton, where they were booked in by the travel office. They met up with the other cars, which also meant that they could leave their cargoes and go out to enlarge their pool of familiar Hungarians. They also visited the waiters they had met on their way to Turkey and sold several highly fashionable Turkish garments, for which they bought fashionable Hungarian pullovers, orange-coloured ‘jeans’ and pairs of trainers, as well as some sweets, shampoos, soaps, paprika and fruit to use at home, and of course brandy and wine, taking advantage of the fact that the shops were full and that one could buy everything there without any restrictions.

The resorts at Lake Balaton were important meeting places for those who looked for contacts and bargains, as well for those parties who had been separated because of the border controls or having got lost on the road. This was particularly significant in the late eighties and early nineties, when Polish informal trade on Koło was at its peak, before dying out in the mid-nineties.

This is how Tadek, another Eurotraveller whom I met on a bus, described a reunion with a party who had got lost on the Turkish border:

We were greatly surprised when, on the last day on Balaton, we saw the familiar car in the company of some other Poles. We thought it was our delirium because we were so drunk. But it was them. It appeared that they had got lost and then saw a road sign to Skopje, so instead of coming back along the planned route, they went to Yugoslavia, which they thought was an even better deal. They could sell their textiles twice as profitable as in Poland without carrying them across all these borders. But they had bad luck again and were caught, and the fine they had to pay erased their profits – some of their profits, of course. Luckily, they met other unlucky Poles on the route, who had failed to get rid of their cargo of towels and duvet

sets in Hungary. These other guys were almost caught by the police in Budapest and had to run away. In a panic they took the towels to Yugoslavia, where they were heading to sell their crystal objects. There on the camping site they met our friends, who bought the cargo for a good price and carried it back to Hungary. Our friends had contacts in Hungary, so they still managed to sell everything for double the price, after which they headed towards Balaton.

Sonja and Dorota did not need to re-join cavalcade, since the distance to Poland was not that great and the roads in Czechoslovakia were safe. Besides they wanted to visit Dorota's acquaintance in Bratislava, since they had some Hungarian forints left. The forbidden currency landed in Sonja's bras safely and was subsequently exchanged for Czech crowns with the familiar people from Bratislava. The prices in Czechoslovakia were lower than in Hungary, so apart from fully tanking, which was very important because fuel was rationed in Poland, the women bought fresh and dried fruit, sweets, rum and cognac in amounts that would not offend the Czech customs officers. However, it was not a happy crossing on the Polish border. For some reason the customs officers were in a worse mood than ever:

We waited about four hours before they emerged from their little hut, and when they approached we saw our death in their eyes. Everything we had gone through so far seemed like child's play. We had to get out of the car and unload, after which they touched absolutely everything. The worst thing was their silence. Without saying anything, they took away all our things, including what we had bought for ourselves. We were not allowed to get back into the car, so we sat in the darkness and cold on the edge of the pavement. Our tormentors came back after half an hour and said we had to pay \$100 in taxes each, for the cargo was valued according to its black market price. We did not have that amount of money on us. They knew it. It meant that we would have to leave most of our cargo on the border. We were screwed.

After long negotiations and tears, they were allowed to go back to Poland, which cost Sonja the most valuable item in her cargo: a good quality man's fur coat as a bribe. Yet, despite all the costs and the loss of two major items (a golden coin and a sheepskin coat) the journey was an economic success. Of the approximately \$160 invested, Sonja brought home about \$30 in cash, souvenirs for her children, sweets, coffee, liquor, fashionable clothes and food for herself her children, as well as for her friends and family plus goods for trade bought for about \$150 which were to be sold for three times that amount, giving a net profit of around

\$300. The profit from the parcels sent for her from Turkey was about \$900 net, after sending costs and giving nice souvenirs to those who allowed their addresses to be used.

The final gain was not only more than ten years' worth of salary, but also experience, knowledge of other cultures, an expanded social life through numerous new friends and acquaintances, and new confidence which changed Sonja from an abandoned wife into a successful businesswoman. The context of her actions was no longer a small town, a single place in socialist Poland, nor a succession of specific places in specific countries, but the unlimited space of informal networks with goods, services, knowledge and emotions flowing along their links.

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