

## “The Charm of the PRL”. Memory Culture, (Post)Socialist Nostalgia and Historical Tourism in Poland

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The article explores the mechanisms of memory culture and the commercialization of the socialist heritage from the period of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) (from 1945 to 1989) as a tourist destination, societal practice and cultural resource in today's Warsaw. At the intersection of heritage studies, historical tourism and material culture, the ethnographic analysis focuses on three empirical case studies as examples of the commercial popularization of the history of the PRL. These are the *communist heritage tours* offered by WPT 1313 and the documentation of the socialist heritage at the *Museum of Life in the PRL* and the *Neon Museum*. These commodified products of Warsaw's tourism and entertainment culture fill a gap in the tourist market, based on the prototypical, nostalgic longing of tourists for a sensual and emotional experience of the “authentic past”. This predominantly participant observation-based ethnographic study on the practices, spaces, images and agents filling this touristic niche, illustrates how they create sensual-emotive, aesthetic and performative fields of reifying, discovering and experiencing the socialist past. Finally, the paper focuses on how these polyvalent mechanisms shape the tourist infrastructure of Warsaw oscillating between critical distancing and entertaining appropriation of the socialist heritage.

*Key words:* (post)socialism, historical tourism, heritage studies, nostalgic turn, Warsaw, People's Republic of Poland

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## INTRODUCTION: AGENTS, SPACES AND IMAGES OF THE SOCIALIST PAST IN WARSAW

In 2019 Poland celebrated the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the so-called Round Table Talks that initiated the historic collapse of socialism<sup>2</sup> in the former Eastern Bloc, but the socialist past is still strongly present in the country's urban landscapes. Particularly the skyline of the Polish capital, Warsaw, has been dominated by the Stalinist Palace of Culture and Science since the 1950s, a monumental building evoking memories of the ups and downs of living in the PRL, which oscillate between nostalgia and critical reflection. Especially among the younger generations, who only know the epoch from stories, pictures or films, a growing curiosity almost fascination for the recent past can be observed, which leads to various initiatives to keep the memories of the PRL-era alive. As a result of this "post-communist nostalgia" (Todorova, Gille, 2010), a number of private museums, tourist companies and gastronomic sites have emerged in Warsaw over the past few years that document, within a sensual and emotive tangible tourism, the testimonies of the political, cultural and social life in the PRL. The presented contribution explores the contemporary tourism in Warsaw and shows how the socialist past and its post-socialist representations are commercialized as a tourist destination, societal practice and cultural resource. As provider of *popular pleasure* (Bareither, Tomkowiak, 2020), the practices, objects and spaces of reification of the socialist heritage create past-related imaginations aimed at entertainment and amusement, and at the same time, fields of discovery and experience that shape the tourist infrastructures and cultural activities in Warsaw's urban space. On the one hand, the focus of the analysis lies on the young Warsaw tourism company *WPT 1313*,<sup>3</sup> which introduces Polish and foreign guests to the grotesquely-gruesome everyday life under socialism as part of several "tours off the beaten path". On the other hand, the study examines two museums: *Muzeum Życia w PRL* (Museum of Life in the PRL),<sup>4</sup> in English known as *Museum of Life under Communism*, in which visitors can marvel at reconstructions of apartments and shops or expositions of everyday objects from the PRL, and *Muzeum Neonów* (Neon Museum),<sup>5</sup> dedicated to the documentation and preservation of the last remnants of the "great neonization campaign" across the former Eastern Bloc – the

1 <http://www.wpt1313.com/pol/Oferta-Indywidualna/WYCIECZKI-PRYWATNE-Fiat-125p/Na-tropie-PRL-u>, accessed on February 10, 2021.

2 *Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa* (People's Republic of Poland, PRL) was a real socialist state in Eastern Europe in the period from 1945 to 1989 ruled by an autocratic one-party regime. In everyday use and popular discourse, the term "communism" became a prevalent rhetorical figure to describe the entire PRL-era. In order to avoid essentialization and stereotyping of the PRL-period, this article operates with terms "socialism/socialist" while referring to the PRL-period. Analytical terms, quotes and proper names, which derive from the popular, museum and touristic discourse and use the terminology "communism/communist", are adopted in their original form. For the definition and terminological controversies surrounding the terms "socialism" and "communism", cf. Mazur, 2013.

3 *WPT 1313*: <http://www.wpt1313.com>, accessed on February 10, 2021.

4 *Muzeum Życia w PRL*: <http://www.mzprl.pl>, accessed on February 15, 2021.

5 *Muzeum Neonów*: <http://www.neonmuzeum.org>, accessed on February 15, 2021.

dazzling Cold War-era neon signs and electro-graphic design. The analysis at the intersection of heritage studies and research in tourism, memory and material culture explores the commercialization of the socialist heritage in Warsaw as a form of *past presencing* (Macdonald, 2013: 16), i.e. as practices of temporal, spatial, emotive, sensual and culturally situated reification of the past. The study focuses on the agents, practices and mechanisms of this polyvalent entanglement of past and tourism and asks how dealing with the “finished” PRL-era can foster the understanding of memory culture and historical tourism in Warsaw. The semantic study with a praxeological approach refers back to local field research conducted in 2019 in Warsaw. The research is based on a methodical triangulation consisting of participant observations, qualitative interviews and perceptual urban walks. The source material includes four semi-structured interviews with the employees of the tourism company *WPT 1313* and the *Museum of Life in the PRL*, pictures of the museum exhibits and the tourist tours as well as visual products of the field such as flyers or souvenirs.

### EXPLORING THE (POST)SOCIALIST HERITAGE: THEORETICAL AND PRAXEOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Since the 1990s, the polyvalent term “postsocialism” has been a subject of scientific research, media reports and political struggles. The notion is used to describe the transformation of the former socialist states: On the one hand, it summarizes a series of similarities in the transformation paths that homogenize the region of the former Eastern Bloc, on the other hand, it emphasizes the heterogeneity of times, places and phenomena and approaches the post-socialist transformation processes from a critical-reflexive perspective. Thereby, it is assumed that the various experiences of the past era as well as their institutional, everyday and memory-cultural embedding endure to this day (cf. Hann, 2002; Humphrey, 2002). The sociologists Jadwiga Staniszkis (2001) and Ireneusz Krzemiński (2011) emphasize these ambivalences and entanglements of the temporal, factual-spatial, political and cultural dimensions of the transformation in the context of post-PRL Poland.

In the whole of Central and South-Eastern Europe questions of the meaning of transformation are likewise closely linked to memory culture as the example of Poland’s capital, Warsaw, reveals. While corresponding with the concept of *imagined communities* (Anderson, 1983), capitals function as “cities in which the ‘fortunes’ of a nation (...) are condensed and symbolically represented” (Binder, Becker, 2003: 251). The socialist past and the post-socialist present never really remain detached from each other and, in the context of the presented article, they determine the memory practices of the agents and the emergence of historical tourism contexts that influence and condition each other. But cultural memory is “selective and contextual”, as the British anthropologist Frances Pine (2002: 11) emphasizes. In this sense, the memory practice in Warsaw’s historical tourism is relational and flexible: Depending on the context, certain places, events, emotions and practices of living in the People’s Republic of Poland are criticized, while others are subject of glorification, pleasure and longing as tourist emotions.

The interest in the meaning of emotions has long since found its way into tourism and Eastern European studies.<sup>6</sup> Emotions as the driving force behind the memory culture in this region are also a central category of the phenomenon of longing, broadly defined as “post-communist nostalgia” (Todorova, Gille, 2010). The Bulgarian historian Maria Todorova bases her approach to this phenomenon on Svetlana Boym’s (2001: XVII) understanding of nostalgia, who defines it as an *off-modern tradition*, as a new understanding of time and space in the field of tension between staging and authenticity, that can be retrospective as well as prospective. As a touristic resource, the representation of the PRL-era is largely based on nostalgia. Referring to Todorova (2010: 2), the PRL-nostalgia can be defined as a socio-cultural, political and economic narration, “linked to memory, history and affect (...), attached to political allegiances and models of consumerism”. The PRL can mythologize this, even if the positive-identifying “myths of the PRL” do not completely coincide with the dreariness of life in the People’s Republic of Poland (cf. Wandycz, 1996). This mechanism, which also applies to the GDR, the USSR or Yugoslavia,<sup>7</sup> is characteristic for the “Eastern European nostalgia” (Boyer, 2010: 19), creating spheres of everyday life in which (post)socialist utopias are imagined and (re)produced by different agents and in various contexts. This nostalgic “uniqueness” of Eastern Europe manifests itself more particularly in the area of historical tourism. Poland, and especially its capital Warsaw, is a touristic region with various “tourism imaginaries” (Salazar, Graburn, 2014), which oscillate between individual and collective pleasures and hopes on the one hand, and traumas and disappointments on the other. This “imagined geography” (Said, 1979) of Warsaw is determined by the socialist heritage, understood as a tourist destination and cultural resource, and shaped by various “touristic places of longing” (Hoenig, Wadle, 2019b). These are located in the field of tension between concepts of tourism and real experiences and capture “passed on collective utopias and individual desires, feelings and artefacts, landscapes and tourist infrastructures, media and artistic representations of coveted places, political and economic influences” (ibid.: 13). The approach of the “touristic places of longing”, developed by the historian Bianca Hoenig and the social anthropologist Hannah Wadle, is based on Pierre Nora’s (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* (memory sites), which are not only defined as geographical and material places, but also in a metaphorical sense as a theme or a rhetorical figure. Along these lines, in addition to objects or places, also certain symbols, scents, sounds, feelings or memories, for instance according to vehicles from the PRL-era or the fragrance of a socialist perfume, can become “memory sites of emotions” (Groebner, 2018: 23). In this sense, the main goal of the tourist experience is to evoke as “authentic” as possible atmospheres and to allow the tourists to “immerse ‘in history’” (ibid.: 30) on the sensual and emotive level.

These mechanisms of reification of the (post)socialist heritage in today’s Warsaw, illustrated in this paper by taking the example of touristic tours “on the trail of the PRL” and museums as manifestations of *communist heritage tourism*,<sup>8</sup> extend – from

6 On emotions as a scientific category in tourism and Eastern European studies, cf. Picard, Robinson, 2012; Todorova, Dimou, Troebst, 2014; Hoenig, Wadle, 2019a.

7 On the phenomenon of the “GDR nostalgia” and the “Yugo nostalgia”, cf. Berdahl, 1999; Bajer, 2011.

8 On the phenomenon of *communist heritage tourism*, cf. i.a. Light, 2000; Golonka-Czajkowska, 2010; Stach, 2019.

a praxeological and analytical perspective – a bridge to material culture research. Exhibitions and museums are “signatures of modernity” (Korff, 2002: IX), in the presented cases conducive to the (re)construction, representation and documentation of everyday life in the People’s Republic of Poland. Here, material objects play a special role, as they have in addition to the relational also an emotive aspect. With regard to the human-thing relation, the literary also theorist Stephen Greenblatt (2004) speaks of *resonance and wonder*, a twofold potential of material legacies that not only represent the past, but also produce a certain relationship between museum visitors and the past. As an important issue appears here, in addition to the instrumental and functional use of things, also the affect-related and symbolic value of material objects, emphasized by Gottfried Korff (1995: 33) and based on the revealing concept of “thing significance” (Kramer, 1962). Thus the objects of socialist everyday cultures become “time capsules” (Stach, 2019: 283), filled with collective systems of meaning and symbols, which impart them a nostalgic quality and spatial impact. By developing their epistemic and auratic potential, they turn museums into touristic factories of adventure, commodifying memories, experiences and imaginations through suggestive arrangements.

### “BECAUSE DRINKING MUST BE LEARNED”: WPT 1313 AND THE COMMUNIST HERITAGE TOURS

“Are you ready to experience the PRL on your own skin?”<sup>9</sup> asks *WPT 1313*, an alternative tourism company founded in 2014 by Rafał Pawełek, a young entrepreneur who together with a team of local city guides and drivers imparts the history of Warsaw “with a proper dose of adrenaline and fun”.<sup>10</sup> This entertainment-oriented form of nostalgic commodification of the PRL’s history and memories is reflected in the name of the company, its trademarks and the company’s headquarters. The acronym WPT stands for *Warszawskie Przedsiębiorstwo Turystyczne* (Warsaw Tourism Company) and refers to the comedy *Zmiennicy* (The Stand-ins) directed by Stanisław Bareja. Against the backdrop of the catastrophic economic situation in Poland of the 1980s, the comedy tells the stories of two Warsaw taxi drivers sharing a yellow Fiat 125p with the number 1313 and mocks the absurdities of everyday life in the People’s Republic of Poland<sup>11</sup> in a grotesque and ironic way.<sup>12</sup> Authentic vehicles from the PRL-period are the company’s trademark too. As a tribute to Bareja’s “iconic” comedy, the *WPT 1313* fleet consists of a total of over 20 restored large Fiats 125p, small Fiats 126p, the so-called “Toddlers”, as well as the two-toned Jelcz 043 buses, another “icon” of the Polish automobile industry, which earned the nickname “Cucumbers” because of their characteristic streamlined shape. As symbolically and emotionally charged “time capsules” that preserve

9 <http://www.wpt1313.com/pol/Oferta-Indywidualna/KIERUJ-I-ZWIEDZAJ-Fiat-126p/Kieruj-i-zwiedzajSlada-mi-PRL-u>, accessed on February 12, 2021.

10 <http://www.wpt1313.com/pol/O-Nas>, accessed on February 12, 2021.

11 On the irrationality of everyday life in the PRL, cf. Rychlewski, 2006; Lipiński, Matys, 2014.

12 *Zmiennicy*: <http://www.zmiennicy.com>, accessed on February 12, 2021. Stanisław Bareja directed the “iconic” comedy *Miś* (Teddy Bear) from 1980 about the absurdities of the PRL-era. This comedy became an integral part of the cultural memory of Poles.

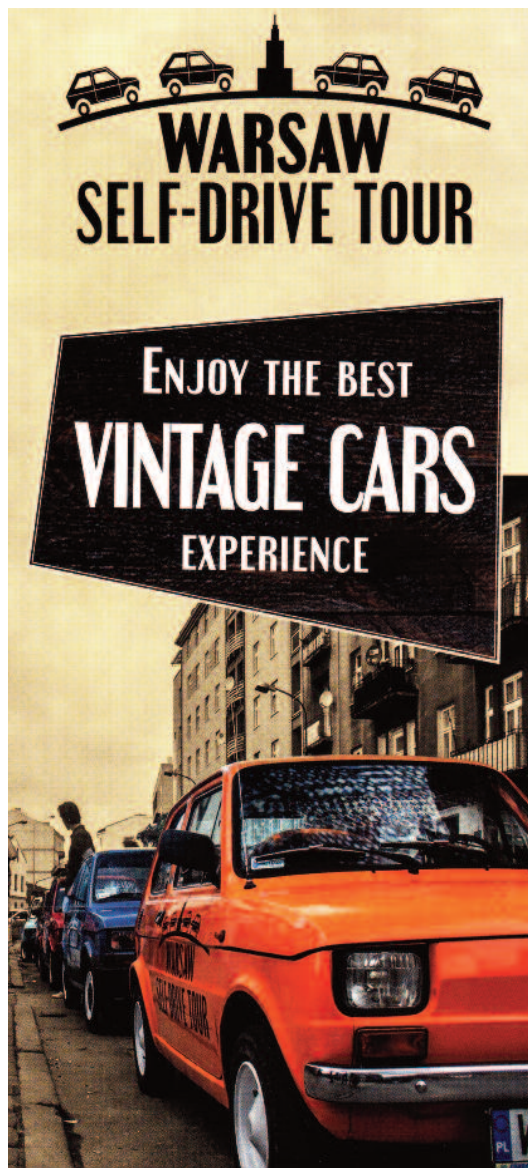


Fig. 1: A flyer for the WPT 1313 Warsaw Self-Drive Tour with a picture of the “iconic” Fiat 126p. Flyer: WPT 1313, 2019. Scan: Agnieszka Balcerzak, 2021.

a piece of everyday culture of the socialist era, the vintage cars vie for the attention of the passers-by in front of the Palace of Culture and Science. The skyscraper, built in 1955 in the style of socialist classicism, is not only Warsaw’s most prominent landmark,<sup>13</sup> which due to its turbulent history repeatedly triggered controversial discussions about its demolition. The building also houses the head office of the EU-funded tourism company WPT 1313, which belongs to the Warsaw Chamber of Tourism and cooperates with the world’s largest travel platform *TripAdvisor*.

The portfolio of WPT 1313 implies customer-tailored offers for individuals, couples, groups and companies, which include team building and integration events, bachelorette parties, school and company trips as well as guided group games and city tours, among others guided tours “in the foot- steps” of the composer Fryderyk Chopin, through Jewish or pre-war Warsaw. The rental of the “iconic” vintage cars for individual self-drive tours is also a part of the entertainment offer for Polish and foreign tourists. “You’re interested in communist Warsaw, comrade? Are you tired of traditional forms of touring? Feel the spirit of Warsaw while driving an iconic Polish car of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. An experience you’ll never forget!”, touts WPT 1313 in an atmospheric retro-style flyer (WPT 1313, 2019) embellished with a picture of the “Toddler”, the small Fiat 126p (Fig. 1). These “legends”

of the Polish automotive history and their fields of connotation function under the consumption, use and appropriation aspects of the PRL as “emotional surfaces of friction” (Hoenig, Wadle, 2019b: 23) between past and present. Understood as sensual

13 *Pałac Kultury i Nauki*: <http://www.pkin.pl>, accessed on February 15, 2021.

“time travels”, the tours make the recent history of Warsaw physically tangible and, ideally, evoke among the tourists an emotive and nostalgic attitude towards the PRL-era.

The guided *communist heritage tours* are at the heart of the *WPT 1313* entertainment offer. Their success is shaped by several passionate city guides, among others Rafał Dąbrowiecki, awarded the honorary title “Warsaw’s Inhabitant of the Year” in 2018, and Tomasz Bareja, an expert on Warsaw’s history and the cousin of the famous director Stanisław Bareja. The company’s portfolio includes various two to four-hour PRL-tours for the price of 25 euros, including the classic tour “On the trail of the PRL” or diverse thematic routes, e.g. “As with Bareja. On the trail of the iconic Polish comedies and the absurdities of the PRL” or “Legendary pubs of the PRL. Because drinking must be learned”. The last one, very often booked by larger tourist groups or companies, is a part of the all-season venture *Ogórkiem po Warszawie* (With the “Cucumber” through Warsaw), a historical tourism project with over 8500 followers on the social media platform *Facebook*.<sup>14</sup> The starting point for most of the tours is the representative Defilee Square, built in the 1950s in front of the Palace of Culture and Science and ostentatiously staged by the PRL-regime during propaganda parades. The visitors commence their “time journey” here into an epoch, in various ways imagined as both temporal *lieu de mémoire* and a place of longing. In “iconic” vintage cars they immerse in the atmosphere of socialist Warsaw, as “spatial agent of moods” (Böhme, 1995: 29) conveyed on the cognitive and visual level. The focus lies here on the history of events and politics from the end of World War II (WWII) to 1989: The tours are composed along historically and politically relevant places and buildings and linked with mentality and everyday history aspects of living in the PRL-era. The highlights include the Palace of Culture and Science, but also other material legacies of the real socialist architecture. First and foremost, it is the Constitution Square, located in the heart of Warsaw, along with the ministerial district, the Communist Party headquarters and housing estates. In order to impart the most authentic image of the PRL and the living conditions in this epoch to the tourists, the narrative arrangement of the tours includes in the sense of the concept of *staged authenticity* (MacCannell, 1973) not only the splendid and luxury buildings of the era, but also its “backstages”, such as the Różycki Bazaar. In the PRL-era it was Warsaw’s most famous black market, today it is a common marketplace in the grungy district of Praga showing Warsaw’s “original” face, away from the hustle and bustle in the city centre.

The integration of culinary experiences and gastronomic tastes into the tour’s nostalgic narrative about the history of consumption in the PRL<sup>15</sup> is another way to commodify the feeling of authenticity of the epoch. The tour “Legendary pubs of the PRL. Because drinking must be learned” includes for instance a visit to *Muzeum Polskiej Wódki* (Museum of Polish Vodka),<sup>16</sup> located in the 19<sup>th</sup> century building of the former vodka factory *Koneser* (Connoisseur) in the district of Praga. It encompasses interactive exhibitions and presentations about the history of vodka production in Poland, such

14 *Ogórkiem po Warszawie*: <http://www.facebook.com/OgorkiemPoWarszawie>, accessed on February 15, 2021.

15 On the gastronomy and consumption history in the PRL, cf. Brzostek, 2010.

16 *Muzeum Polskiej Wódki*: <http://www.muzeumpolskiejwodki.pl>, accessed on February 15, 2021.



Fig. 2: A chic black and white postcard of the coffee house *Jaś i Małgosia* commodified as a tourist souvenir. Postcard: *Jaś i Małgosia* 2019. Scan: Agnieszka Balcerzak, 2021.

as *Luksusowa* [Luxury Vodka], one of the best known vodka brands of the PRL-time. A sensually tangible pub tour rounds off the museum visit. It includes a stay at restored gastronomic venues, e.g. *Restauracja Kameralna* (Cosy Restaurant),<sup>17</sup> a famous establishment founded in 1947 in the city centre of Warsaw that offers traditional Polish cuisine in a unique post-war atmosphere, or the exactly twenty years younger coffee house *Jaś i Małgosia* (Hansel and Gretel)<sup>18</sup> with the motto “Welcome to our fairy tale”, still enjoying a “cult” status and drawing touristic attention with chic merchandise articles like bags or postcards replete with catchy food and beverage pictograms (Fig. 2). In these venues, exciting anecdotes about Warsaw’s gastronomic culture accompany the consumption of Polish vodka and snacks such as pickles, lard and herring. Through their aura, aesthetics and haptics, through the social practices associated with them and their performative use, these places representative of the history of Warsaw’s amusement and gastronomy culture, function as cognitive and sensual “experience factories” and nostalgic “time locks” of the everyday realities of the PRL-era.

### “THOSE IN POWER TAKE CARE OF THE PEOPLE”: THE MUSEUM OF LIFE UNDER COMMUNISM

The *Museum of Life under Communism* also fulfils the touristic function as a “manufacturer of experience” (Hein, 2000: 65), combining authentic images of the PRL-era with sensual-aesthetic experiences and scientific knowledge. It belongs to a number of small

<sup>17</sup> *Restauracja Kameralna*: <http://www.kameralnarestauracja.pl>, accessed on February 17, 2021.

<sup>18</sup> *Jaś i Małgosia*: <http://www.klubjasimalgosia.pl>, accessed on February 17, 2021.

private museums that focus on different aspects of everyday life in the PRL.<sup>19</sup> The foundation stone for the museum was laid in 2009 by Rafał and Marta Patla, Warsaw devotees, passionate city guides and founders of *Adventure Warsaw*,<sup>20</sup> another tourism company specialized in *communist heritage tours* with the “iconic” Nysa 522 retro vans. Initially, the museum was only a garage exhibition of everyday objects from the PRL-era curated by the Patlas. In 2014, they converted it officially into the museum *Czar PRL* (Charm of the PRL) and made it accessible to the public. The peripheral location at an old factory in the aforementioned Warsaw district of Praga, a small number of visitors, but also the critique the name would suggest the PRL was an exclusively “cool” and “charming” period, led the founders to relocate the collection into more spacious and representative facilities on the Constitution Square and rename it *Museum of Life under Communism* in 2019. Accordingly, in the new official museum flyer (MŻwPRL, 2019: 2) we can read: “For the young generation, a visit to the museum means an exciting history lesson, bittersweet stories, (...) intriguing objects and images of their parents’ and grandparents’ life. For the older ones, it is a nostalgic return to the time of their youth.” The “time journey” into the PRL-era starts for around 200 visitors per day<sup>21</sup> after entering the museum: The visitors are welcomed by an elderly lady, whose styling is reminiscent of the work clothing worn by the employees of the catering establishments in the PRL such as milk bars, gastronomic venues, which during the socialist era provided government-subsidized traditional Polish cuisine at a low cost. The 5 euro ticket in the form of a replica of a socialist ration stamp acts additionally as a haptic and aesthetic “time lock” into the world of the PRL-era. The imaginatively designed admission card is, on the one hand, a “charming” practice to reify the symbols of communist heritage and commodify them commercially; on the other hand, it serves as a reminder of the shortage economy and dreariness of living in a socialist state.

These aspects of the socialist everyday life are also shown to visitors in the thematic zone of the museum. The concept, which is neither designed chronologically, nor claims to be complete, comprises eight sections: the post-war period, history, culture, motorization, tourism, fashion, gastronomy and everyday life. At the beginning of the 260 square meter museum area there are display boards and exhibits that document the reconstruction of Warsaw after the Second World War, a Communist Party office and evidence of the socialist terror system as well as a small exhibition on the history of the historic opposition movement *Solidarność* (Solidarity). Afterwards, every tourist can visit the well-structured thematic zones including the bilingual exposition walls with authentic everyday objects of the PRL-era. These include household appliances such as the *Predom* vacuum cleaner, the “iconic” *Bambino* gramophone or “luxury goods” – difficult to obtain in the PRL and only available thanks to “connections” – e.g. women’s perfume made by the state manufacturer *Pollena-Lechia* or chocolate products of the famous Polish confectionery company *Wedel*. One of the exhibition

19 These include i.a. *Muzeum Przestróg, Uwag i Apeli* (Museum of Warnings, Notes and Appeals) located in Złoty Stok or *Muzeum Dobranoczek* (Museum of Bedtime Stories) in Rzeszów, <http://www.kopalniazlota.pl>; <http://www.muzeumdobranoczek.pl>, accessed on February 18, 2021.

20 *Adventure Warsaw*: <http://www.adventurewarsaw.pl>, accessed on February 18, 2021.

21 The number refers to the assessment of the museum employee Barbara Wideliska-Sulikowska, interviewed by the author on September 24, 2019 in Warsaw.



Fig. 3: An exhibition wall at the Museum of Life under Communism in Warsaw with examples of the socialist commercial art. Photo: Agnieszka Balcerzak, 2019.

walls provides information and examples of the commercial art in socialist Poland (Fig. 3). It also shows a quote published in 1962 in *Dziennik Ludowy* (People's Daily), a propagandistic socialist daily journal: "Looking at nice and aesthetic things lets you see the beauty, distinguish trash from art."<sup>22</sup> The citation confirms that in the everyday realities of the PRL, utility and advertising graphics – largely shaped by progressive industrial design – were like any other field subjected to the central control of the socialist regime and were supposed to praise the system. But as a result of the shortage economy, they did not have to play any marketing role, i.e. to encourage sales, since they were without any competition.

An important part of the exhibition is also a very authentic reconstruction of a typical PRL-apartment with a bathroom, a kitchen and a living room (Fig. 4). In these rooms, the material artefacts of the socialist scarcity are sensually tangible. Whether the *Frania* rotor washing machine, the *Rubin* TV or the *Półkotapczan*, a functional lounge that was hidden in a bookshelf during the day – these objects are the "classics" of the socialist domestic and design history, which, along with many other objects, are experiencing a revival in today's modern popular culture.<sup>23</sup> In the sense of post-socialist

<sup>22</sup> "We encounter this art every day", *Dziennik Ludowy* 102, April 29–30, 1962, cf. Fig. 3.

<sup>23</sup> On the phenomenon of fascination with the bygone everyday socialist culture, cf. Grębecka, 2010; Born in the PRL: <http://www.facebook.com/BornInThePRL>, accessed on February 18, 2021.



Fig. 4: A reconstructed living room from the PRL-era with typical furniture, decorations and technological devices of the epoch. Photo: Agnieszka Balcerzak, 2019.

“semiotics of tourism” (Culler, 1981), the objects function for many generations of Poles as authentic cultural codes of the epoch. With regard to Tom Selwyn’s (1996: 2–28) pioneering distinction between “cold” authenticity, which is based on verifiable knowledge, and “hot” authenticity that is subject to the sphere of emotions and imagination, it is the tension between these two forms of authenticity that shapes and enlivens the touristic experience. This experience can be deepened in a small cinema hall with the flair of the 1970s with projections of socialist propaganda films, motion pictures and cartoons of the era. Moreover, a reconstructed grocery shop including a glass counter with original food scales, siphon bottles and empty meat hooks accompanied by the famous propaganda slogan *Władza dba o ludzi* (“Those in power take care of the people”), insistently enables the representation of empty shelves as symbols of socialist supply gaps.

The small 1950s-style café, which the museum curators also rent out for birthday parties or readings, is a thrilling way for the tourists to finish their visit at the museum. Here, while trying out board games from the PRL-era, the visitors can taste typical snacks and drinks, for example the bottled carbonated soft drink *Oranżada*, which can additionally be purchased in the small souvenir shop. This mechanism represents a commodified form of imparting knowledge, adventure and experience, in which the café atmosphere can induce a positive, identificatory and ultimately nostalgic effect on the perception of the PRL-epoch.

## “WARSAW CITY LIGHTS INFORM, TEACH, AMUSE!”: THE NEON MUSEUM AT THE SOHO FACTORY

An exceptionally fascinating way of being immersed in the atmosphere of the bygone PRL-period, especially in the realm of architecture, graphic design and advertising, offered to the tourists “infected” with the nostalgia for socialism, is the second analysed cultural institution, the *Neon Museum*.<sup>24</sup> The “charming” small museum began as the documentary project *Polish Neon* on Poland’s Cold War neon signage, initiated in 2005 by the Polish photographer Ilona Karwińska and the British graphic designer David Hill. As the most unique and largest of its kind in Europe, the collection offers an alluring look at the intersection of art and social organization in the People’s Republic of Poland and serves as an accessibly illuminating entry point into the country’s post-WWII history. Since 2012, after Karwińska and Hill opened their private collection for the public, the museum has grown into one of Warsaw’s most interesting cultural institutions, devoted to the restoration and preservation of the historic neon signs of the pre-WWII and socialist era. The fine arts graduate and museum’s employee Martyna Baranowicz emphasizes this: “If this museum had not been established, these neon signs would not have survived (...). Indeed, the neons are now commercial and you can make money with that, but so far no public museum took care of them. If not for Ilona and David, these neon signs would have fallen into oblivion.”<sup>25</sup>

Since the Polish capital’s first years of independence, regained in 1918, and the rise of capitalism via the period of the WWII and the dreary socialist years through to the present day, neons have been and still are one of Warsaw’s unmistakable trademarks.<sup>26</sup> The first neon sign in Warsaw, called by the press of those days the “Philips neon”, was lit in 1926.<sup>27</sup> The historian and Warsaw expert Jarosław Zieliński (2010: 14–15) indicates that the neon sign made of bottles with the inscription “Porter” and the name of the brewery “Haberbusch & Schiele”, which promoting English porter beer, shone from the rooftop of a villa on the intersection between the chic boulevards Marszałkowska Street and Aleje Jerozolimskie, till this day one of the most representative streets of the Polish capital city. This was the starting point of the interwar “neon boom”: The neon signs were fixed on the façades of hotels and restaurants, high-rise blocks and even historic buildings or were used to advertise the services, as for instance chemists, libraries or

24 *Muzeum Neonów*: <http://www.neonmuzeum.org>, accessed on February 20, 2021.

25 This statement is cited from the conversation with Martyna Baranowicz, interviewed by the author on September 26, 2019 in Warsaw.

26 On the history of Warsaw’s neon signs, cf. Karwińska, 2008; Zieliński, Tarwacka, 2010.

27 The history of neon lights dates back to 1675 when the French astronomer and geodesist Jean Picard invented the Toricelli barometer. Upon his observation of the faint glowing of the barometer, he discovered the so-called “mercurial phosphorescence”. Followed by further discoveries, especially of the neon gas in 1898 by the Scottish scientist Sir William Ramsay, as well as several tests and inventions, like the voltaic pile, the Geissler tube and the Rhumkorff coil, the emission of a blue or purple light from a glass tube became possible during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The simultaneous discovery of further noble gases like argon, helium and xenon, as well as the spread of electrical energy, made the construction of neon lamps possible around the turn of the century. Finally, the industrial use of neon in signage was pioneered by the French engineer Georges Claude in Paris in the early 1900s. On the evolution of the neon light, cf. Zieliński, 2010: 8–12.

jewelleries. Already by the end of the 1920s, several dozen neon signs brought graphic diversity to the rapidly growing Polish capital.

In the post-WWII period the neon signs little by little punctuated the skyline of Warsaw in order to breathe new life into the war-ravaged city. While in the 1940s the neons were deemed superfluous and even seen as antagonistic to the socialist system, after the death of the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin in 1953, private shops and service facilities began to reappear on the streets and signified the gradual revival of illuminated street advertisement. Poland's new socialist government was less repressive and with hefty state funding, Western neon advertising was co-opted to beautify the dark socialist buildings.<sup>28</sup> In 1956, the socialist authorities also set up the state-owned company *Reklama* (Advertising), which manufactured neons for Warsaw and adjacent administrative districts and whose luminous neon tubes reached the high quality standards of the pre-WWII installations. At this point, the authorities declared the end of the 1950s the time of the "great neonization campaign", which implied the "illuminating" of cities: Accomplished architects, visual artists and manufacturers were tasked with designing individual neons and advertising for entire buildings or stretches of streets, of which Marszałkowska Street, "neonized" in 1960 by the recognised architects Eleonora Sekrecka and Zygmunt Stępiński, is a good example. This embrace of neon did not, however, mean a "capitulation" to the capitalist system and fell into the politically correct category of "socialist advertising": Since the country did not have a free market, the neon signs were used for prestige or to provide information as the 1967 propaganda announcement, "The Warsaw city lights (...) inform, teach, amuse!",<sup>29</sup> proves. In the 1960s and 1970s – "the golden age" of Warsaw neons – hundreds of neon signs lit up Warsaw's main streets, were promoted by the socialist state and offered artistic freedom while lending great liveliness and diversity to the up-and-coming socialist capital city, as David Crowley (2008: 12), a cultural historian of Eastern Europe under the socialist rule, points out: "The neon landscape suggested life after dark. Shaking off Stalin, the Poles enjoyed a liberal period when modern art could be displayed and jazz and satirical cabaret performed without attracting the attention of the censor." In the 1980s, when the country slid into bankruptcy and the neon and street lights were periodically switched off to save power, the socialist "neon boom" fell into a decline: The damaged signs were thrown away, others simply consumed too much electricity thus becoming unaffordable, and after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, the medium was also eventually replaced by modern advertising from the West.

Today, these "fleeting ornaments of Warsaw at night" (Zieliński, Tarwacka, 2010) are a graceful and witty testimony to the Polish art, graphic design, advertising and everyday life in the PRL-era, restored and documented at the *Neon Museum*. The institution is situated within the *Soho Factory*, a post-industrial site now transforming into a trendy

28 Neon signs were popular also in other Soviet Bloc countries, but they peaked in the PRL. To illustrate this: The Warsaw *Ambassador* restaurant, located near the US embassy, illuminated the neon inscription "ambassador" in the style of a western saloon lettering. In this form it would have been banned in other Soviet Bloc states.

29 This slogan is cited from an exhibition boards at the *Neon Museum*, photographed by the author on September 26, 2019 in Warsaw.



Fig. 5: The dazzling Mermaid as a neon incarnation of the Warsaw coat of arms designed in the 1970s for the Warsaw City Library. Photo: Agnieszka Balcerzak, 2019.

the museum has a collection of around 200 neons in storage, about 50 colourful prime examples from Warsaw and all over Poland glow in several hallways on the old factory's dark walls, accompanied by boards with detailed information in both Polish and English.<sup>30</sup> More salvaged signs are dotted around the complex and illuminated after dark. The collection of Warsaw's distinctive neon culture includes visually enticing signs from train stations and restaurants, libraries and the most varied shops, replete with artful scripts, animal and floral motifs or aestheticized everyday objects, e.g. shoes or jewellery. One of the favourite pieces delighting the eye of the beholders is *Syrenka* (Mermaid), a neon incarnation of the Warsaw coat of arms, designed in 1970 for *Warszawska Biblioteka Publiczna* (Warsaw City Library). The bulky red and white neon, restored and displayed at the *Neon Museum*, depicts the Warsaw Mermaid with a sword and shield – a famous symbol of the Polish capital – resting on an open book (Fig. 5).

The curators of the museum offer its visitors a wide range of subsidiary forms of adventure, experience and *popular pleasure*. In addition to the fulgent spectacle of restored fluorescent neon signs, the visitors can analyse the copies of drawings and

art district with a mix of galleries, designer shops and restaurants in the aforementioned Warsaw's grungy district of Praga, where the *Museum of Life under Communism* was initially located. The *Soho Factory* dates from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and has an exciting history that influences the atmosphere of the museum: In the past, it served as an ammunition factory, then as a motorcycle and scooter factory and, during the last years, it was an abandoned place. Due to its location and its atmosphere, the authentic neon exhibits and their auratic impact, the museum acts as an eventful place encapsulating the spirit, the images and emotions of the bygone PRL-period. At the beginning of the museum visit for an admission price of 3 euro, the visitors are greeted by several illustrated exhibition boards that tell the history of Warsaw's neon signage. Attracting some 500 visitors a day, the

30 All figures were provided by Martyna Baranowicz, interviewed by the author on September 26, 2019 in Warsaw.

projects of neons from the archives of the PRL advertising company *Reklama*, or watch in a special cinema zone the documentary film *Neon* by Eric Bednarski (2014) about the history of Warsaw neons from the pre-WWII period until the present. The small museum cinema, surrounded by an impressive riot of neon colours, forms and functions and acts for the visitors as a “time lock” into the “charming” and dazzling neon period in the history of the socialist Warsaw. Moreover, the museum programme also includes educational lessons, video shootings<sup>31</sup> or guided tours for individuals and groups, offered either as only museum-run or as a part of the *communist heritage tours*. Those consist of an exhibition visit combined with a guided tour “on the trail of Warsaw’s neons”, for instance to the still existing red lettering *Pałac Kultury i Nauki* (Palace of Culture and Science). An absolute must of each tour is a guided walk through the major socialist thoroughfare – the Constitution Square with its monumental sculptural ornaments and classical colonnades – that allow the tourists to see and feel how the buildings and streets shook off their dreary atmosphere with illuminated colourful neons. Some originals still shine there today, for instance the “iconic” neon *Siatkarka* (Volleyball Player), which depicts a leaping female volleyball player overlooking the main Stalin-era square. One of Warsaw’s oldest functioning and most spectacular neons, designed by the renowned 1950s and 1960s artist Jan Mucharski and restored in 2006 with funds raised by the Polish artist Paulina Ołowska, is an animated sign that once used to advertise a sport shop: The volleyball player launches her ball in an arch that rises into air and sequentially falls, down the side of the building in sixteen separate steps.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, in the scope of the initiative *Akcja Renowacja!* (Action Renovation!), the *Neon Museum* completely reconstructs broken signs and documents this on special boards displayed next to the restored neon lights, often referring to the old design sketches kept at the *Warsaw Museum of Modern Art*. In an ironic twist in the neon signage history in Poland, the industry is in fact growing again. The demand for old Polish designs is rising: Especially among young local firms looking to tap into the retro market; for designers, typographers and street art devotees searching for inspiration; or for tourists seeking for unique souvenirs with stylish lettering and motifs of the past or unusual photo opportunities – transforming the museum into a “touristic place of longing” and a “social media temple”. The well-stocked souvenir shop tries to meet these needs and offers a wide range of material remnants of the neon era reified in the form of aesthetically pleasing gifts like postcards, mugs, tote bags, etc. (Fig. 6). These objects, encapsulating the aura of the socialist period, are fascinating “snapshots” of Polish history endowed with the ability to evoke a nostalgic attitude towards the PRL-era or at least towards its art, design and advertisement culture.

31 The *Neon Museum* serves, for instance, as an atmospheric backdrop for Rafał Brzozowski’s video *The Ride*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xsWwLWaZBq8>, accessed on February 22, 2021. With this song, the artist represented Poland at the Eurovision Song Contest 2021 in Rotterdam.

32 On the *Volleyball Player* neon, cf. Zieliński, Tarwacka, 2010: 144.



Fig. 6: The souvenir shop at the Neon Museum within a post-industrial site in the Warsaw district of Praga. Photo: Agnieszka Balcerzak, 2019.

## CONCLUSION: COMMODIFICATION, EMOTIVENESS AND POPULAR PLEASURE IN HISTORICAL TOURISM

The emergence of polyvalent (post)socialist memory practices and “touristic places of longing” in the realm of historical tourism, museums and gastronomy venues in today’s Warsaw is the result of an ongoing “nostalgic turn”, which can be observed in other countries in Central and South-Eastern Europe as well. In the *popular pleasure* culture of Warsaw’s touristic present, the socialist heritage becomes objectified as a tourist destination, cultural resource and societal practice. The presented ethnographic perspective on the *communist heritage tours* of WPT 1313 as well as the touristic offer at the *Museum of Life under Communism* and the *Neon Museum*, illustrates the central sensual-emotive, aesthetic-performative and visual-narrative mechanisms of commodifying the socialist past.

The presentation of the People’s Republic of Poland era as a cultural resource and touristic destination is based on the prototypical nostalgic longing of tourists for emotionally and sensually tangible places, practices and objects, which still have the “authentic” socialist aura. As part of the urban tourism marketing strategies focused on the socialist heritage, e.g. in the form of a vodka pub tour, during a visit at the 1950s-style café in the *Museum of Life under Communism*, or while walking through the hallways with the dazzling neon signs at the *Neon Museum*, stories and anecdotes (for instance about the living space scarcity and the architectural dreariness of the

PRL-era), symbols (such as empty grocery shelves) and material relics (from cosmetics and confectionery via electrical appliances and neon advertising through to vintage cars such as Fiat 126p) create an amalgam. As “symbolic glue” for the narrative arrangements evoking nostalgic comments, for instance “Look, I always drank this orangeade in my childhood” or “I remember always seeing this neon sign when we took the bus to my grandfather’s flat”, they create figurative continuities. Simultaneously, they use imaginations, memories and emotions in order to create effects of recognition that enable younger and older tourists to experience the PRL-time with all senses. In this manner, places and venues function as touristic “factories of experience”, in which material remnants of the PRL-era serve as “time locks” for the exploration of everyday realities in socialist Poland.

Although the agents of this “nostalgic turn” in the very processes of commodification of the socialist heritage of the PRL emphasize the difference between entertaining appropriation, enlightening reflection and critical distancing, they are repeatedly reproached for playing down the PRL-regime, indeed as repressive, absurd and bizarre, but in some sense worth longing for. This accusation, understood as “reducing the PRL to grotesque gags and gadgets”, as a sort of “barejization”<sup>33</sup> or “charming trivialization” of the PRL-era, may be quite appropriate. However, an extensive criticism of the commercial popularization of historical tourism offers does not always have to be justified, because this practice does not automatically equate with history-falsifying or PRL-glorifying narratives. At the same time, a semantic-ethnographic analysis cannot make any statements about the effects of a visit at a museum or the participation in a guided tour on the tourists’ perceptions of history. What is more relevant here is the intertwining of tourism and past on a physical, imaginary and emotional level and the effects of this multi-sensory interaction on the touristic commodification of the socialist heritage in Warsaw’s urban landscape.

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<sup>33</sup> The term refers to the “iconic” comedies of Stanisław Bareja. It has been coined by the authors Piotr Lipiński and Michał Matys during a radio interview about their publication *Absurdities of the PRL*, conducted by Paweł Gozliński on September 7, 2014, <http://audycje.tokfm.pl/podcast/18297,Piotr-Lipinski-i-Michal-Matys-o-AAbsurdach-PRL>, accessed on February 22, 2021.

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