

## **Remnants of Things Past**

by Robert Furlong

BUDAPEST — Sometimes it's the thought that counts.

At least that's what Budapest's city council believed in 1993 when it urged owners of the Trabant automobile to turn in their cars to be destroyed. It was an attempt to address a pollution problem that threatens everything from the air quality in the modern Pest districts to the toxic waters of the once blue Danube river. Seen from the hills of the tree-filled Buda district, Pest's urban flatlands across the river stand choked beneath a perpetual haze of toxins, its outer districts barely visible.

The doubling of nitrogen oxide emissions in the city since 1990 has been attributed largely to the use of cars, whose numbers jumped 46 percent during this period. The Trabant is the worst offender, releasing ten times more pollution than the average Western car, even more than its automotive siblings: the Russian-built Lada and the East German Wartburg - two other environmentally unfriendly modes of transport to come out of the Cold War.

The city council offered those who trade in their Trabants a 10 percent discount toward the purchase of a new Seat Marbellara car, which retailed for one million Hungarian forints, or about \$10,000.

But András Lukács, head of Budapest's Clean Air Action Group, an environmental-lobbying organization, said the offer would only help the rich who could afford a new car. "Most owners of Trabants are low-income people for whom the ten percent reduction does not help at all," he says. His group pushed for an additional offer: a two-year transit pass comparable in worth to the average Trabant, about \$200. The city council accepted. But would Trabant drivers?

"It's simple and fast," says Gabriella Csörgey of her "Trabi" which she bought new for \$1,200 in 1990. She uses it primarily for errands in the city, opting for her husband's Lada on longer trips. The retiree scoffed at the idea of a transit pass, despite the system's efficiency, and clings to the one thing that gives her some freedom of movement . . . albeit without much style.

If you haven't seen a Trabant, imagine a squared-off Volkswagen Bug and you have a rough idea of the exterior design. And because many are still equipped with an 0.6 liter, two-stroke engine, you're able to analyze its Duroplast frame in detail as it putts by, leaving a toxic blue cloud in its wake. If you've ever driven on the Autobahn, Trabants were those brave obstacles in the right lane, desperately trying to reach the minimum speed limit.

The Trabi, which has enjoyed cameo appearances in U2 videos and a Levi's 501 commercial ("Reason #007: In Prague, you can trade them in for a car"), has become a beloved icon of the post-Cold War era. Its East German designer, Werner Reichelt, made history in 1955 for making it entirely from recycled cotton wastes and phenol resins. In 1993, Reichelt, whose Duroplast concoction became Eastern Europe's answer to the steel shortage, was given the task of recycling the car he created. Working in the original Trabant plant in Zwickau, Reichelt developed an environmentally safe method of turning retired Trabis into bricks.

But it may be awhile before there are enough bricks to aid in the rebuilding of Eastern Europe: Reichelt designed the car to last 28 years. By that projection, the last Trabi should go *kaput* sometime in the year 2019. And it may just happen on the streets of Budapest . . .

Only 1451 drivers traded in their Trabants for a two-year transit pass; 708 took the 10 percent Seat Marbellara discount. The offer was deemed a failure by city officials as well as environmental experts and discontinued. That leaves 70,000 Trabants in Budapest, more than 300,000 in Hungary and over one million in Eastern Europe.

Csörgey's unwillingness to part with her Trabi reflects the growing resistance Hungarians are putting up in the face of difficult social, economic and environmental reforms. It was best stated in the 1994 free elections when the reformed communists (Hungarian Socialists Party) won 54 percent of the parliamentary seats, replacing the Hungarian Democratic Forum whose economical reforms dug too deep for the average pocket.

Despite promises, even reformed communists cannot ease the hardships that come with a free market economy: severe housing shortages, annually projected inflation rates of 28–30 percent, utility increases of 30 percent and up, a habitually devalued currency, multinational companies providing 70 percent of exports.

"We counted on several thousand participating in the program," says Budapest's environmental program coordinator Zoltan Molnar. "People just weren't interested."

Standing at a busy intersection, some people do not hesitate to put a handkerchief to their mouths to protect themselves from the air assaults of passing Trabants. Americans might feel their right to clean air has been violated, but a Hungarian takes it in stride, understanding the driver's need to hang onto a little piece of the past. Whatever foul deeds the Trabant and its driver may commit, they are a reassuring reminder of the days when there was only one road from A to B.

*Robert Furlong is a Globe correspondent.*

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