

# RED HIGHWAYS, PART II

*After having conquered Czechoslovakia,  
the great white 'Vette aims farther East*

By Mark Vaughn

**M**aybe a little more horsepower is all these people need. After a tour of Poland's most impressive car factory, the FSM plant in Bielsko Biala, the idea sprang to mind—it seemed rational at the time.

So I asked Ireneusz Jaszczurowski (that's yaz-chur-off-ski), chief engineer of the plant, if he'd like a ride in the Corvette.

He said yes and we were soon pulling slowly out of the parking lot, which was overflowing with tiny FSM 650s—a lion among aphids—and cruising conspicuously through the streets of Bielsko Biala.

"It's best to go fast only where it is flat and safe," I told him.

This might not have been the right thing to say. He seemed suddenly apprehensive, moving up against the passenger-side door and groping for a grab bar.

He'll relax once he feels how solid and steady this baby is, I thought. Punching the gas, however, didn't help at all.

"This-road-is-actually-more-narrow-than-it-looks," he stammered, his voice rising an octave. "The-guardrails-are-quite-close-and-that-truck ..."

I knew exactly how he was feeling. I felt the same way on the couple of occasions when I got rides in race cars.

I slowed down.

We talked production figures and the like for awhile as we cruised some more surface streets. Then we got onto the E75 highway—very wide, very flat, very safe—and I floored the beast.

"Um ... uh ... well, yes," Jaszczurowski said, having momentarily forgotten what we were talking about. But this time he appeared to be enjoying it a little more, getting more of a feel for what 5.7

liters of displacement can do for your outlook on life.

We got it up to the legal speed limit probably four times quicker than he'd ever been there before. At a crossover on the divided highway we slowed down and, with the traffic clear in both directions, turned around and did a power slide back onto the highway, standing on it through the gears and getting to that same speed limit maybe five times faster this time.

By now Jaszczurowski was saying nothing at all, his eyes simply riveted to the horizon and his hands making impressions in the interior fixtures. He was getting the baptism-by-fire introduction to Western muscle car technology and speed. It must have been quite a leap for him.

Then (could it be?) a smile spread across his face. As we blew by an overpass he seemed to be really enjoying this. Three hundred forty pound-feet of torque will do that to you, especially when the car you usually drive has 30. By the time we pulled back up to the FSM gate, Jaszczurowski was grinning like a school kid on the first day of summer vacation.

"Very nice, very nice," he said.

Mr. Jaszczurowski's wild ride followed a tour of the plant that produces Poland's FSM 650 micro-mini-subatomic-particle car.

While the Trabant is small (see sidebar, page 32), the FSM cars are like kiddie toys. In 1972 the Bielsko Biala plant was opened and, under special license from Fiat, began producing a copy of the Fiat 126 dubbed the 650 (the engines are 650 cc's). Since zlotys weren't exactly negotiable on the open market even back in 1972, FSM paid Fiat for the license fee in engines and gearboxes instead of cash. They were well on their way toward profit but, unfortunately, profit was

forbidden in Poland at the time and the government siphoned off whatever FSM made.

"Now (with the changes in government) it only depends on us," Jaszczurowski said.

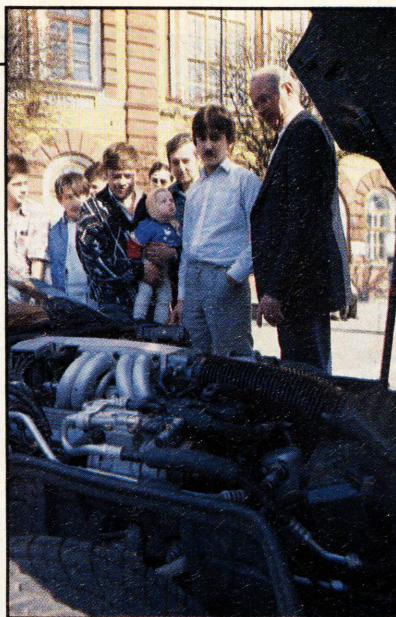
The Bielsko Biala plant sees 200,000 cars roll out the doors every year, a figure that used to be gobbled up by a car-hungry populace almost instantly.

Not anymore.

"Now we have some problems because the price has gone up," Jaszczurowski said.

Mark Vaughn photos





The Corvette rests in the courtyard of King Bela IV's castle atop Budapest's Castle Hill (far left) with the Parliament Building, on the other side of the Danube, in the background. Heroes' Square (center) had a new hero for one day, while Polish horsepower enthusiasts (left) peruse the V8 in Zywiec



Another difficulty arises from relaxed import regulations that make used cars from Western Europe easy to buy.

Yet despite its problems, Jaszczurowski says FSM will survive and prosper.

"Fiat wants to cooperate even now that there are different conditions in Poland," he said. "Because of our contact with Western countries we are able to learn more than other Eastern Bloc countries. But we wouldn't want to compare ourselves to the U.S. or Japan. We have some very bad habits which we must change."

Now that he had seen what 5.7-liters of displacement can do for a car, change (for the better) has to be inevitable. The ride may have planted the seed that someday may produce the first Eastern Bloc sports car.

Indeed, there seemed to be an even greater longing for fun, useless things like sports cars in Poland than in either of the Eastern European countries we'd been to yet. The previous week we'd toured East Germany and Czechoslovakia (AW, April 30), places untouched by significant amounts of either horsepower or torque for over 50 years. Now we aimed the nose of the great white shark farther east toward the ancient citadels of Poland.

This was the first country we would go through on our expedition that didn't share a border with a Western state. It probably couldn't pick up as many Western TV and radio stations so it was just a little bit less

contaminated by the capitalist version of civilization. And it showed.

Horse-drawn farmer's wagons shared the main roads (there were no autobahns) with pedestrians, cars and trucks. The few cars that were here were Russian-made Ladas, East German Trabants and one of two Polish-manufactured cars—the FSO Polonez and the FSM 650.

Our first Polish city was Kracow, a 1000-year-old city on the Vistula River founded by a guy named Prince Krac (really), upgraded shortly afterward by Boleslav the Brave, and operated as the capital of Poland for more than 600 years thereafter.

It is an anomaly among Eastern European cities. Spared the bombings of WWII, the old quarter stood as it had for centuries. But like Karl Marx Stadt in East Germany and Brno in Czechoslovakia, there was no life in it. All the lights were turned off shortly after sunset and everybody stayed inside, presumably asleep after a hard day in the factory. It was like walking through a Disneyland closed for repairs.

At our hotel we got an idea of just how bad Poland's economic problems are. The hotel porter asked (on the sly) if we'd like to change some money. Tourists were supposed to get a better rate by changing money "privately" instead of down in the hotel lobby.

We handed him 50 West German marks. He gave us back a stack of paper with lots of zeros and pictures of people we'd never heard of. After a few calculations we figured out it was 40 times higher than the official exchange rate. There wasn't much faith in the zloty among the indigenous population of Poland.

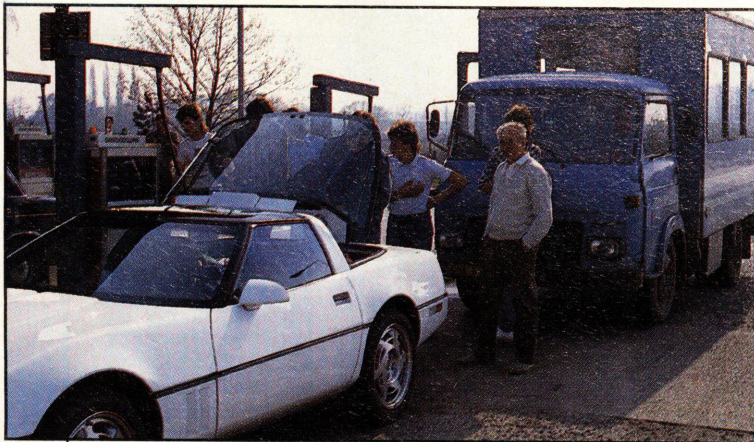
The day after our arrival was the first unscheduled day we'd had in a week and we spent it touring southeastern Poland. One place we visited was the Nazi death camps of Auschwitz/Birkenau.

Co-driver Bruce Davis and I had been to Dachau in West Germany before but there, few of the buildings were left. At Auschwitz and Birkenau the camps remained

Two months ago it was "only" 17 million zlotys for an FSM, or roughly two years' wages for a typical factory worker making 700,000 zlotys a month.

"There used to be waiting lists for the cars," Jaszczurowski continued. "But the bank used to take down payments on them without consulting FSM. People made down payments on a new car when the price was only 60,000 zlotys and now it costs 21 million. This is a problem."





**Finding unleaded premium was always a gas, both in Czechoslovakia (left) and Poland (below). Polish pump attendant (below) requested, and got, Goodyear souvenir for the driveway**

largely as they had been during the war. In some of the rooms are what is called "evidence" of the atrocities that took place there—huge piles of eyeglasses, enormous rooms full of shoes and luggage—the scattered belongings of 4 million people. The few hours we spent at these two places spoke more about the current situation in Europe than all the research we had gathered before and since.

It was a relief to get out in the sunshine and back on the road again.

Isolated as they are, Poles are far more trusting of humanity. Hitchhiking in Poland is looked upon the same as Westerners view taking a taxi or riding a bus. There is no fear of winding up in several different Hefty bags scattered across the countryside. When Davis departed the expedition to tend to business in the West, I started picking up hitchhikers to supplement the Frank Zappa tape that had by then permanently lodged in the cassette player and was repeating itself every 42 minutes.

The Poles are warm, hospitable people, but outside of big cities they speak only Polish. Conversations with hitchhikers went something like this:

Me: "Do ... you ... speak ... English?"

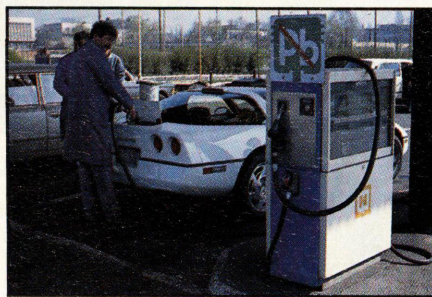
Them: "(Indecipherable paragraph with no vowels.)"

It was the same for German, French and Italian. The language barrier was frustrating for me but not, apparently, for them, as they kept talking, telling me what must have been great stories about something.

To get from Bielsko Biala to Budapest you have to cut through Czechoslovakia, but because it's not exactly a main European traffic artery, the next 10 hours meant winding through some of the smallest towns and most poorly marked roads yet encountered, which is saying a lot.

If you could judge reactions of townsfolk to the Corvette by how high they jumped when they saw it, the residents of Eastern Czechoslovakia would probably take the title at about three and a half feet.

I picked up several more hitchhikers here, most of whom spoke either German or English. There was a young computer genius on his way home to Nitra; a beautiful university student going to visit her boyfriend in Partizanske; a middle-aged man on his way home from work; and a farmer of



about 35 who took sudden offense when asked if he was Czechoslovakian ("I am SLOVAK!" he fairly screamed).

At the Hungarian border that night, I spent a couple of extra hours helping two visa- and cash-less American sorority girls pay for their Hungarian visas so that they could get back into Hungary from their day-long jaunt in Czechoslovakia ("Ohmigod! Nobody told us we needed a visa to, like, get out, too ..."). Between translation sessions I struck up a conversation with the Hungarian customs agent.

She seemed to like the Corvette and kept saying, "It is a beautiful car!" in German. It turned out she had gotten off work about the time I pulled up (nearly two hours before) but was so impressed with the L98 that she hung around hoping for a ride. She bounded out of the customs building on my heels and headed for the passenger seat. She got her ride home.

A little later that night, the Corvette pulled into Budapest, one of the most striking cities in Europe. Cruising over St. Margaret's Bridge at one in the morning was among the most memorable moments of the two-week trip. All seven bridges across the Danube are restored to their original condition and lit up like Christmas trees at night. And unlike so many other Eastern European cities, the streets of Budapest were alive with people even at this late hour. It was an 18th century Las Vegas.

The next morning I called Gabor Horvath, an international editor for Hungary's largest daily newspaper, *Nepszabadsag*. Gabor was an acquaintance of General Motors' director of international PR, Ron Theis, who suggested I meet both Gabor and his colleague, Peter Bencze Szabo, the deputy editor in chief of Hungary's first and only car magazine, *Auto Extra*, which

started publication about a year ago.

Szabo has test-driven a number of Western-made cars (at the time he had a Chrysler Voyager from Austria) but he had yet to drive anything with as much performance potential as the Corvette.

That afternoon as we were having a look at the V8 outside Szabo's office, he seemed quite impressed, talking excitedly with a lot of g's and y's.

"He would like to drive your car," Horvath said.

This was worrisome. An earlier ride in the Voyager revealed a take-no-prisoners road manner—scary enough in somebody else's car, truly frightening in the vehicle I needed to get back to the Western world.

But it would probably be good for East/West relations and, if he stuffed the Corvette under a row of Dacias, it wouldn't really be my fault because he was a friend of Ron Theis, right? So I handed him the keys and buckled up.

"I only like to go fast," Szabo said as he stomped the gas, blistered the paint off rows of parked cars and hurtled my Corvette over the quaint but dangerously narrow cobblestones of Budapest. There was no need to explain to *this* guy about the one-to-four shift lockout mechanism. The scariest thing about the ride was that the whole time he was flinging us headlong down this pathway of death, he kept investigating parts of the dashboard he found intriguing.

"What is this one?" he'd ask. "Beautiful, beeeautiful."

He didn't end up bending it, thank God, but I understood now how Jaszczurowski felt during that Corvette thrill ride back in Bielsko Biala.

The next day Horvath and I drove to the Hungaroring to have a look around and maybe do a few laps. This track hosted its first Formula One event in 1986, shortly after it was built.

"The idea was quite old, though," said Bela Vinkovits, the track's liaison with the police and traffic-control offices in Budapest and the guy who arranged for our visit. "Six to seven years before the track opened they were quite serious about a Formula One race in Hungary. We've always been interested in motorsport. I remember Nably Park in the city (Budapest) when I was a child, there were 80,000 to 100,000 people. The rally races drew huge crowds. People were camping the whole night just to see a car for 20 seconds."

And the Grand Prix drew even more, with about 100,000 spectators during a typical Formula One weekend.

"There were 190,000 fans for the first race because building the track had become a national cause. It was overwhelming. Many supporters left their work just to help build the track. On the weekend of the first Grand Prix you couldn't see any grass."

But while watching motorsports is very popular in Hungary, participation is quite



another matter. Simply purchasing an everyday car requires years of careful financial planning, let alone a race car.

On the way out of Hungary and back to the civilization of the Western world however, there was evidence of motorsport activity, although on a small scale.

The Volan Sport Club in Gyor, in western Hungary, has a small karting track right off the main highway to Vienna. It just so happened that the 10-year-old Hungarian karting champ was there breaking in a new engine the day I drove through. His name was Peter Kalman and he took his driving seriously. He wore a driving suit, shoes and a full-face helmet and drove a handmade kart composed of "gun-barrel steel" and

stopped by cross-drilled disc brakes. It was constructed by his father and chief mechanic, Laszlo Kalman.

"Karting is not very popular in Hungary," Laszlo Kalman explained. "There are only two tracks and perhaps 120 drivers altogether."

The Kalman kart, however, was a serious piece of engineering. When asked if he had higher aspirations for his son in motorsport, the elder Kalman replied, "Oh no. This is just fun for him right now. We don't have any plans beyond this."

But then I asked young Peter if he wanted to be the Formula One champion someday, his answer needed no translation—"Yes!"

Less than an hour away was the Hungar-

ian/Austrian border. It had been an eye-opening experience: unleaded gas but only tourists to buy it; two thoroughly modern racetracks but no locals who could afford to race on them; and despite the hard work of so many people, any possible fruit from their labors had been drained away by a faceless oligarchy like smoke up the chimney of a hopelessly inefficient Eastern Bloc factory.

But the Corvette had left an impression all across the Eastern Bloc. And maybe, just maybe, it had inspired a few backyard mechanics or design engineers to try and tweak another three or four horsepower out of their two-cylinder Trabants.

Just wait 'til next fall when those hot new 1991 models come out ... ■

## Behind the wheel of Trabant the Terrible

*'59 design sold only because there were no alternatives*

I've driven many different cars but this was my first time behind the wheel of the worst car made since the dawn of time.

Say what you will about automobiles from America, Japan, or even Western Europe. Carmakers from those places have certain minimum requirements for their products. Like trying to get someone to buy them. Up until the fall of the Wall there were no such constraints on the Eastern Bloc manufacturer.

It was the law of supply and demand on acid. Buyers used to wait 15 years to take delivery of a "Trabbi," the current example of which made its debut in 1959. It really hasn't changed since.

"Oh, it's horrible," Gabor Horvath, a Hungarian journalist who lives in Budapest, said of the Trabant. "It's not popular. It's bad. It smells. It's weak."

Gabor's friend, Peter Szabo, owned the test car. He showed off a few of the technological features necessary to make the Trabant start, like the manual choke.

"There is no logical method to it," Peter said about adjusting the choke. He was right—in, out, it didn't seem to matter. But the car started anyway.

The next problem was getting it into first. The shifter was a four-on-the-tree with a reverse H-pattern. Apparently I was using the right placement but the wrong technique. Peter did it with two fingers.

"Gently, like a woman," he said.

And we were off.

Surprisingly enough, 26 horsepower is not as lame as you might think. It's faster off the dime than a farm tractor or a riding lawn mower, for instance, and we were able to keep up with the traffic in downtown Budapest with ease. The engine is a simple



Gabor Horvath (at left in photo at left) and Peter Szabo proudly display the definitive statement of Warsaw Pact auto technology. The interior (below) is from the 'nothin' fancy, thanks' school of design

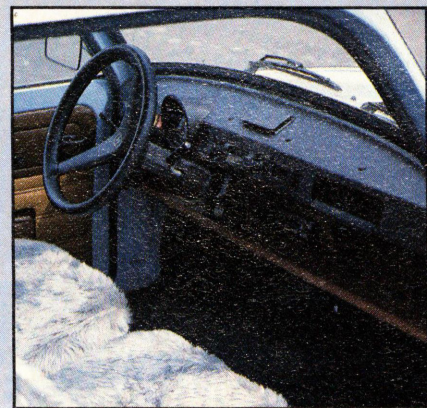
air-cooled two-cylinder two-stroke that "can be repaired on your kitchen table," according to Gabor. It sits up front and drives the front wheels (something of an innovation, actually, for 1959). This makes the back end very light, as Gabor and Peter demonstrated later by lifting it off the ground together. The car is only 138 inches long and weighs a scant 1353 pounds. The body panels are made of fiberglass, too (another innovation, come to think of it), just like the Corvette.

There are few cars in the world still made with leaf-spring suspension at all four corners and the Trabant, being one of the few, rattled miserably on the cobblestones outside the 13th century palace of King Bela IV. A sharp right-hander produced a unique four-wheel flop, as if the shocks were located somewhere in the glove compartment, as we descended Budapest's famous Castle Hill.

One thing you learn right off is that first gear on a Trabant is not synchronized. Trying to downshift all the way into first is like trying to put a typical Western car into reverse while moving forward—it makes a lot of noise and simply won't go.

The teeth in the transmission kept wanting to bite each other, it seemed, but by keeping the lever in a closely prescribed H-pattern the trans cooperated.

We stopped for pictures in front of the Parliament building. Whenever we did this



in the 'Vette, crowds would gather. This time, the police came and told us to move. (Gabor negotiated a reprieve.)

The trunk is huge—14.5 cubic feet—big enough to smuggle five or six people across a border in a pinch. The seating isn't roomy by any means but three adults can sit in the back easier than in a Geo Storm.

The dash is nothing fancy—a couple of idiot lights and a speedometer—but there is a full-width shelf beneath.

With all the changes sweeping over Eastern Europe, the Trabant will be replaced eventually, probably sooner than later. Will that leave a lot of sentimental Trabbi owners longing for the good old days?

"No way," said Gabor. "Anything's better than this." ■