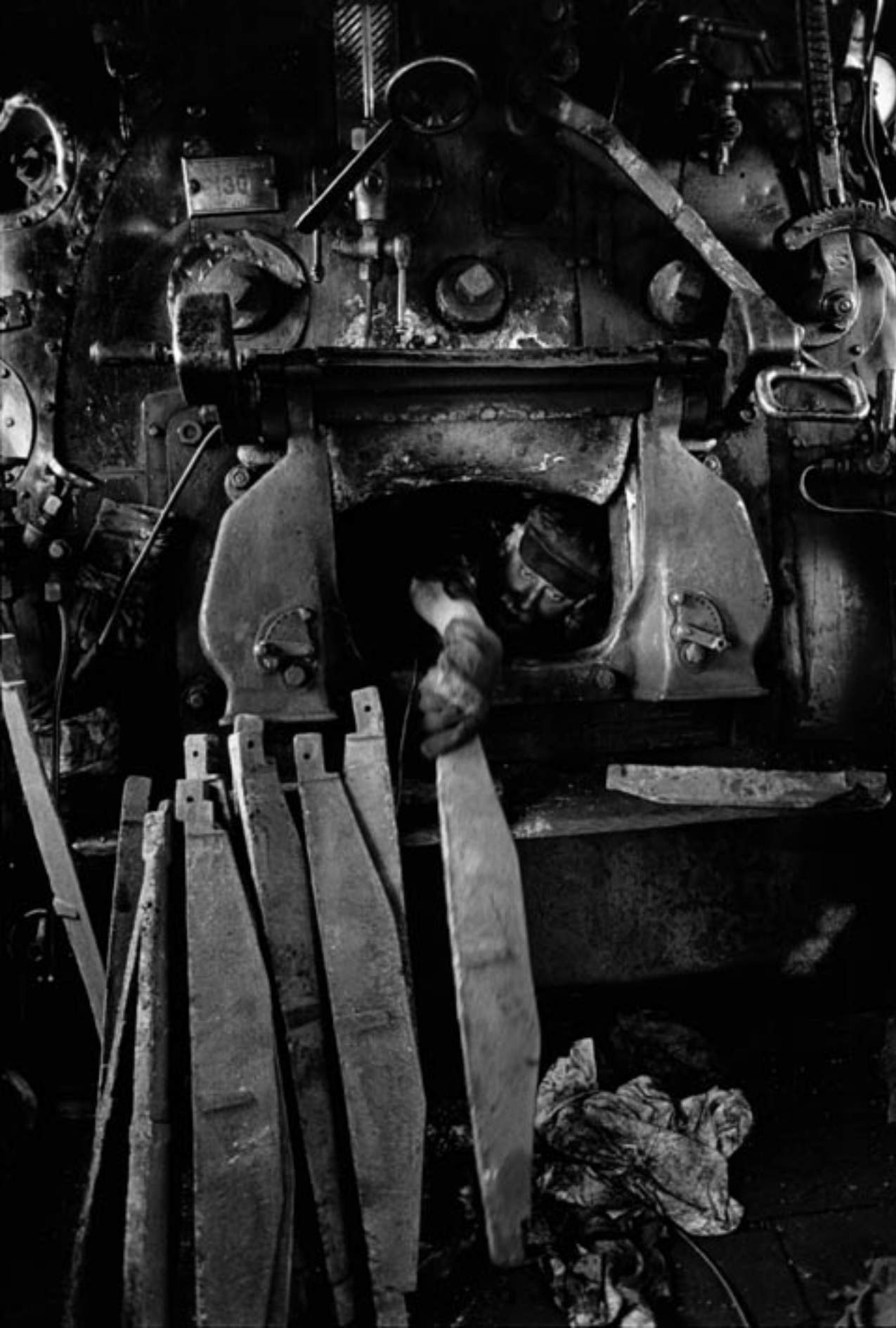


WOLSZTYN



LAST
STEAM
RAILWAY LINE
PHOTOS BY WITOLD KRASSOWSKI





Beautiful Helena is standing under my window hissing. It sounds like a lethargic murmur of a sleeping monster. Every two hours Helena gets another twenty shovels of coal right into her belly. After that, the door of the hearth slams with a loud bang and a stocker like a small pinkie leaves the cabin climbing down a small ladder mounted to Helena's huge green bulk. As the engine starts breathing more briskly I get the impression that those 120 tons of steel, bursting with steam, may come to life any minute and drive away on its own.

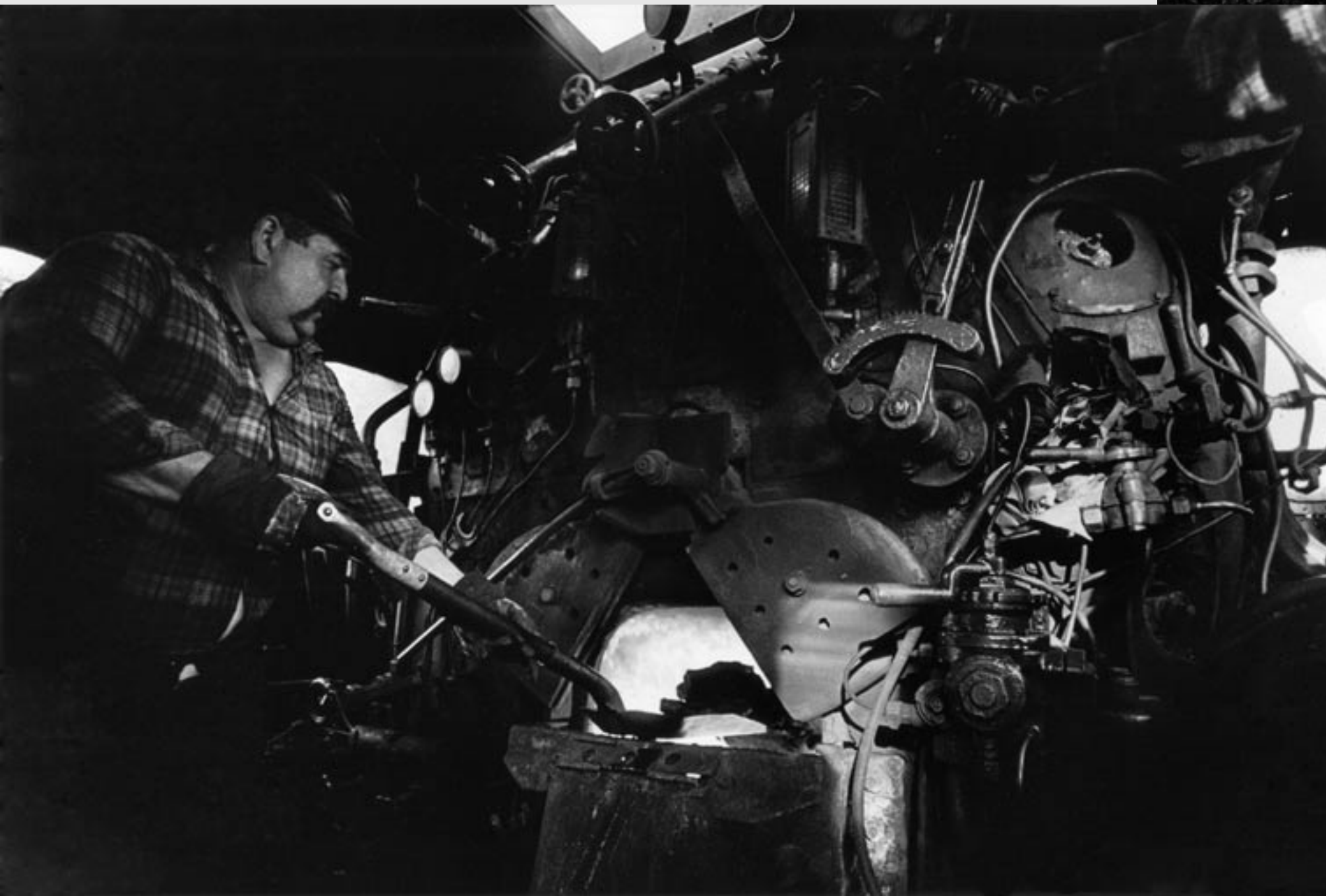
"She was once quite a lady and sport," says Kazimierz Koscianski, an engine-driver. He takes off the railway cap to rub his balding head, smearing it with coal dust. "Today we go on a special route to Kolobrzeg, so I have been warming it up since yesterday. I will pray all the way, that „that bitch' produce enough steam, for it is pretty uphill." Helena gets scolding quite often, sometimes even grossly, but that is only a kind of coquetry, so that the little „puffer train' does not think they like her much, and that the strangers know the work is hard. In fact, Helena is pride and joy of the engine-house in Wolsztyn. It is the last machine of a small series built in 1937 at the Chrzanów Rolling Stock Factory. The same year it won a gold medal at the World Technology Fair in Paris. "Some damn champion?" says Koscianski shrugging his shoulders. "It gobbles as much coal as the passenger OL-49 model, producing half the steam!"

One day, together with Koscianski and his partner, I went for a ride to Pozna_, on a fifty- three-year-old OL-49 engine. At dawn, when I arrived at the Wolsztyn Engine-House it just begun to emerge from the darkness. The air was already heavy of smoke and steam. First locomotives, with heavy chugging, were leaving the garage for the morning 'rub'. The drivers have one and a half hour to get the engine ready for duty, the yard buzzes with life. They have to check and lubricate all the joints, blocks, bolts, check the oil in brake pump, load the coal, and pour the water to a steam-boiler. The OL-49 engine consumes up to 18, 000 liters of water, three tons of coal, and eight liters of oil, to drive from Wolsztyn to Poznan and back – some 180 kilometers route.

"Hey, you, photographer, move elsewhere!" Koscianski shouts above the whistle of steam to one of the enthusiasts trying to snap a picture. "A coal cart might fall on your head!" The place attracts locomotives lovers from all over the world. They come here every day, all year round, to capture the life of the last engine-house of the type in Europe. Some of them just want to have a look at the engines and take some pictures, others' dream of trying their hand at driving, or at least to blow a steam whistle.

At 4.27a.m. I am leaving Wolsztyn on the OL-49 with two drivers and Paul Davis, an English tourist/engine-driver, who paid a lot of money to spend his vacations getting up half past four in the morning, and for the few hours a day play with throttle, pressure valves and a whistle as an engine-driver. Paul is sitting now on a stool next to the side window. Wind is playing with his gray hair and he wears such a broad smile that if the ears didn't stop it would surely

go around his head! His face radiates with happiness. Each time he sounds the whistle it lightens up even more. "I have to whistle. The signs require me to do so," says Paul. He is fifty three years old, same age as the engine. With the grin of a child in a chocolate factory, Paul looks out the window and pulls the whistle again. His eyes are burning like the flames of the hearth. "No surgeon would separate him from that whistle knob!" laughs Koscianski, who has been driving locomotives on this route for more than thirty years. "Some people use entire boiler of steam just for whistling!" He smiles at Paul and pats him on his back. After four days of learning how to drive a steam locomotive Paul has the privilege of sitting at the wheel. Under the watchful eye of the old driver, he may turn the handles, step on the gas, regulate the pressure of the steam in the boiler, drive off and stop the train at the station. "Slow down a little bit, otherwise the old hag will burst to pieces!" Koscianski shouts above the whistle of wind, steam, and the rhythmical knocking of the wheels against the track. At the same time he gives a sign to Paul to slow down. "The only thing you really want to do, when speeding through the forest echoing with the chug-chug of the locomotive, is to step on the gas!" says Paul. But Koscianski keeps his hand on the brake valve all the time. "Five people I have killed on this route," he bursts suddenly. His face stiffens immediately, making him look tired and much older. "Quite recently a man did not stop at a stop sign. It was broad daylight! Why the hell did he drive onto the tracks? I can still see his eyes looking at me: I know that I will kill him, he knows that I will kill him, and there is nothing I can do about it. Such a pity. It's such a damn stress." Koscianski quiets down and turns towards the window. Only Paul, who doesn't understand a word of Polish, is smiling at the whistle. Czeslaw Janus, Koscianski's second-in-command, who has worked on the railways for more than twenty



years, throws six shovels of coal on the fire every few minutes. Now, it is my turn to try my hand at stoking. The coal has to reach the exact place of the hearth, in order to heat the boiler evenly. The engine shudders from time to time, the blocks of coal roll on the floor. In the end I miss the place. "Even stoking needs some knowledge," Janus sums up my efforts, and gives me an understanding smile. On our way back, he takes a turn with Koscianski to drive the train. "Various strange fellows come along," says Janus with a smile. "We've had a guy who caught smoke into a jar, another one bought a dirty coal shovel, asked us to autograph it, and hung it on a wall in his house in Stuttgart. The weirdest of all are Brits. On the route between Wolsztyn and Poznan some people asked me to prepare eggs on bacon, fried on a shovel! They had everything they needed, including butter. Cannot help freaks!"

Wojtek Lis, who manages a website on steam locomotives, remembers that once he wrote an e-mail to his friends in Holland, mentioning that it was snowing in Wolsztyn. "I sent the e-mail about 8 p.m., and about 1 p.m. the next day, the Dutch were already on the route near Wolsztyn, taking pictures."

Those for whom there is no space in the cabin, take a trip in the carriage behind the locomotive. They lean out of the window to catch a glimpse of the engine that pulls the train. "As soon as we start turning all the Japs and Brits throw themselves at the windows, shooting pictures with their tiny cameras," says Jan Krawczyk, train manager. "next minute they sit down gibbering something, excited like children."

For the engine-house in Wolsztyn tourists are calamity on the one hand and blessing on the other. Polish State Railways (PKP) had planned to close down that "relict of the past" for a long time, and they would have surely succeeded if not for Howard Jones, an Englishman, and steam engine freak. Jones, who has never in his life driven





a car, transferred his affection for mechanical engines on to the steam-engines. When he had found out that there was an engine-house, from which the locomotives still ply regular routes, he decided to settle in Wolsztyn. In 1996 Howard signed a contract with PKP, which gives the tourists access to the locomotives. Part of its income Howard's firm, The Wolsztyn Experience, assigns to repairs of the equipment and wages. Every year over 200 enthusiasts of steam-engines, mostly from England, put on railway man's caps, and blow the steam whistle on the route between Poznan and Wolsztyn. Thousands more come here to have a look at the giants, and photograph the last steam engines plying regular routes. One of the tourists after his week-long travel wrote this in Jones' guest book. "If there is anything better in the world, God must have kept it for himself."

What it's all about? After all, every western European country has Railroad Museums, many offering routes where tourists can get a taste of stoking and driving. "The problem is," explains Jones "that the route in a museum is very short, everything is spotless and brilliant, and has nothing to do with real life. Here you can get dirty with coal, breath in the dust, and have a beer with real engine drivers afterwards." The tales told at the table of a bar opposite from the engine-house flow like water after summer showers. "When the Martial Law was introduced in Poland in 1981 there worked about 328 people, including 200 drivers and we've had 33 locomotives," recalls Wieslaw Jokiel, a staff manager, and a former driver. "There has remained only 12 engine-drivers and eight engines."

Stephen Black, a forty or so year old enthusiasts of steam-engines, who came from near London is sitting with us at the table. He never not get married because most of his adult life he has spend on trains. "My mother told me that when she had been pregnant she had traveled a lot by train, and that I must have got used to that rhythmical knock- knock-knock, and probably that is why I can not live without it now. But that's not all. My aunt run a bar where many railway workers used to come and tell their most weird and wonderful stories. Besides, I had a beautiful view of the main national route between the north and South of England from my bedroom window. When it started getting warm in the summer, I used to watch the locomotives whistling and blowing the steam, often passing each other in opposite directions. I knew that people traveling on those trains were going for holidays. Together with

other boys I used to stand at the level crossing waving at the engineers. I think I'm trying to get the time of my boyhood back. That is why I spend all my free time traveling by steam trains in Europe."

It is now Stephen's turn in paying for a round of drinks. He cannot speak a word of Polish but he follows every single gesture of the railway workers who get more and more excited. "An engine-driver was really somebody! He worked in white gloves, not touching the coal," says Janus, performing a pantomime for Stephen's benefit, imitating an engine-driver putting white gloves on, and checking whether the armchair needs dusting. "Today, you have to be a driver, a stoker and a mechanic ready to do repairs any time. There is not enough people to work. We are lucky to have Howard here. If he had not come, the shop would have been closed down long time ago. Surely it will not last for ever because there are no young people to take over. It would be so good though, to know that our grandsons could also travel by steam-engine years from now."

While the drivers are sharing their worries, Piekna Helena stands still, hissing, murmuring merrily, and waiting patiently for the tomorrow's route to Kolobrzeg. The pride and joy of Howard Jones, Helena was originally designed for fast traveling. It is said that once, on a route between Hamburg and Berlin, it sped along at over 93 miles per hour! "It is not just a legend," says Howard. "I must but once speed Helena up to 90 miles per hour, which after all is the British standard speed," he explains. "I had almost succeeded. I was driving down a hill, passed a semaphore showing green at over 60 miles per, but I had to stop at red light of the next semaphore. There was no reason for the semaphore to show red! The magic and long-desired „90 miles per hour' was almost within my reach, and yet I had to apply the brakes. One day I will get that 90' miles/h out of her, even if it is going to kill me."

ANDRZEJ KOZIARA







