

LIKE THE PHOENIX

Filmmaker and photographer Ronny Sen revisits his stay in Gdansk, Poland, the city of rebellion, resilience, and jazz.

“In the winter of 2015, the Embassy of Poland invited me to visit their country for an artist residency. When they asked me where I wanted to stay, I said Gdansk, for two reasons: first, the Second World War started from the city of Gdansk with the German army attacking a Polish military depot, and it was subsequently annexed by Nazi Germany in 1939. The second, and more significant reason for me, was the Counter-Revolution in the '80s and the Solidarity Movement that began from the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk and signalled the beginning of the fall of the Soviet Union.

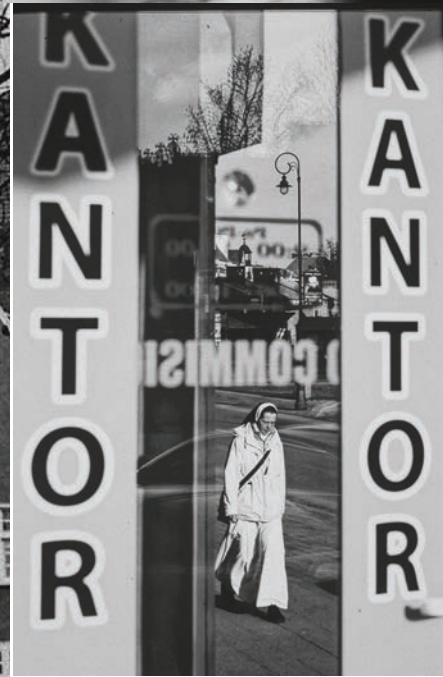
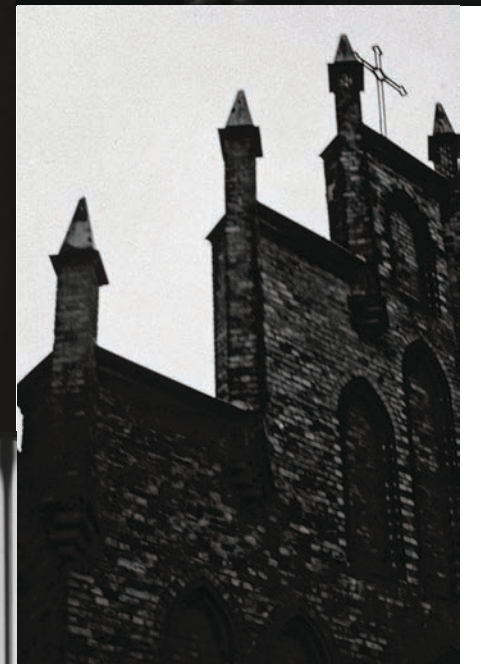
There was an enigma, some kind of mystery I had felt about Gdansk. As children, we grew up reading Soviet literature [in Kolkata] and there was a romance to Soviet Bloc countries. My family and friends had also lived under a three-decade-long Communist Regime in Bengal, and when

I was in college, around 2010, we witnessed it fading away, and quickly. Poland, and particularly Gdansk, was special because I wanted to see whether there were any shared similarities and burdens of a



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Impressions of Gdańsk, Poland. 2015, photographed by Ronny Sen, (TARQ)





Communist past. I wanted to produce a body of work that looked at common histories and the allure of the Soviet literature we held in our hearts.

Most of Gdansk was destroyed in World War II by air strikes and artillery fire, and was rebuilt brick-by-brick. I had seen photographs of the ravaged city and wanted to understand how they had restored it to its original form. The buildings in Gdansk look old, but they are relatively-new. I stayed in a beautiful, 150-year-old tenement house on Biskupia Street in the Old Town. In 15 minutes, I could walk to the National Museum of Gdansk and the Motlawa River was a minute away.

The city, in general, is fairly easy-paced...not too fast, not too slow, just right. The streets buzz with small bars and cafés and the nights are long. For instance, you may hear a large

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group of 20-somethings singing and dancing on the road at 3 A.M.. Eastern Europe has one of the wildest night clubs in the world, and the party scenes can be quite intimidating if one is not used to them. I visited Wolnosc, B90, and the Tkacka Music Club, all of which were a riot. But there are also many breweries and wine bars to visit, as well as live jazz performances at bars and open concerts to keep you entertained. Bruderschaft Pub, Iluzja, and Flisak 76 are some of the popular bars, and Festiwal Jazz Jantar is one of the biggest jazz events in Gdansk. Brovarnia Gdansk is a beautiful brewery you must visit: built in 1690, it is situated on the bank of Motlawa River on Szafarnia Street.

In Poland, jazz is intertwined with its politics and through this, it has its own identity. In Stalinist Poland, jazz was banned and went underground. From the '80s onwards, a more avant-garde style became popular in Poland called Yass. During this time, jazz groups would perform on stage in strange costumes (where the secret police would also be

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RONNY SEN/TARQ



around). In one of these concerts, the artists flung flyers from the stage with the word *dupa* (Polish equivalent of ‘ass’) at the police, written in the style of the Solidarity Movement logo. Today, the Polish jazz magazine *Jazz Forum*, published in Polish,

English, and German, is distributed in 103 countries, so you can imagine how integral the scene is.

The other great things are the large-scale murals and graffiti in the city. And, of course, the European Solidarity Centre, a museum dedicated to the brave fight for freedom from the Soviet Union by Solidarnosc, the illegal trade union led by Lech Walesa. I even met one of the greatest Polish artists who lives in Gdansk, Lech Majewski; later, he designed the poster of my feature film *Cat Sticks* in 2019. Polish posters have a distinct style and identity of their own, where the poster itself is an art object and not used merely as a representational tool. It can stand on its own feet.

To enjoy a sunny day in the summer, I recommend snacking near the Motlawa River, where there are several, small, outdoor restaurants. A must-try dish is Pierogi: it looks like pithe, which we have in Bengal, but is a savoury dumpling stuffed with potatoes, cheese, sauerkraut, and mushrooms. Like the chicken rolls of Kolkata, the secret to a great Pierogi lies in the dough.

More than trying to study Gdansk and its people, I was looking for impressions of Poland. Ultimately, I was happy with its mystery.” ■



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