

Urszula always went to Arkadia in stilettos. Even when it was freezing. That's what she told me, carefully watching to check whether I believe her. Arkadia was the chicest restaurant in Nowa Huta, it was heaven on earth, and Urszula couldn't imagine going to heaven other than in stilettos. And a hat. She sent her photo in that hat to the *Worker Poets* anthology and caused a scandal, because the editor had a different idea of a gantry crane poet from Nowa Huta, simply a different one, definitely not in a black hat with a softly drooping brim, worn at an angle.

In Nowa Huta Urszula lived in cafés. That's what she said. That is, yes, she did have a room at the workers' hostel, but cafés suited her more than hostels. She told me that she'd dance, light as a butterfly, with the handsomest men, and when the clock struck the time for the night shift, she'd spring up to leave.

'You're delightful,' she'd cry, 'but I'm off to the conglomerate!'

'And what's your position there, at that conglomerate?' the men would shout after her.

'The top one, sir, the top position!' she'd shout back.

She'd jump onto a tram and rush to the steelworks, climb the gantry crane in high heels to write opera librettos, ballads and poems, and load ore and magnesite too. As she climbed the ladder, all the moulders would only have eyes for her long legs. That's what she said and it was a superb story.

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Gigant was the first. Gigant was grand.

You went there up the steps, to the first floor, passing two newsagents and an ice-cream place, and marble pillars covered with light blue tiles towered above you. There were palm trees and lounge chairs in the foyers, and further on the main room opened up: shiny floors, mirrors on the walls, stuccoes on the ceiling and square tables at which even 600 people at a time could dine or drink.

Gigant was the first elegant restaurant in Nowa Huta. It was situated at the Department Store at the A-1 estate, and from the start it was obvious that its "aesthetically pleasing and costly furnishings" will have to be protected from "the excesses of unpredictable hooligans". It opened its doors on July 4th, 1952 (in Nowa Huta everything was opened on the July or the October anniversary), so that – following the example of the Soviet Union – the liberation of women from their "kitchen slavery" could begin. At least that was the plan: women will leave pots and pans behind and take up bricks,

drive steam engines, eat in canteens and restaurants, wash clothes in laundries and hand their children over to nurseries and kindergartens. At last, they'll have the time to build socialism.

But Helena Pietrzykowska didn't, for some reason, think about building socialism. She wanted to get out.

Recruiters brought her to Nowa Huta on Friday 13th. It was September 1953, mud and dust, and meadows and fields were still stretching away towards the horizon. She got her first job at the construction site of the conglomerate, her first place to live – at the workers' hostel. She escaped it very soon, lodged with an old lady. She was raring to work. She carried bricks and laid them, but also for a short while, just two weeks. An engineer immediately started hanging around her, a married one, had a crush. When he got too persistent, Helena quit and went straight to Gigant.

Excerpts translated by Marta Dziurosz

Extended sample translation available at [booksfrompoland.pl](http://booksfrompoland.pl)



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#### Selected works

*Strup. Hiszpania rozdrapuje rany*, 2020

*Pył z landrynek. Hiszpańskie fiesty*, 2013

*Baśnie z bloku cudów. Reportaże nowohuckie*, 2009

#### Foreign language translations

Rights for *Strup* have been sold to Spain and Ukraine.

#### Selected awards

Ryszard Kapuscinski Award for the best Polish reportage book (winner in 2020 – for *Strup*; nomination in 2021 – for *Kobiety Nowej Huty*)