How Atari breached Poland's Electronic Curt

By TADEUSZ MENERT

THE computer revolution that swept through the West at the end of the '70s and the beginning of the '80s arrived in Poland, with a delay of about three or four years, in the shape of the Sinclair Spectrum.

At that time it was the unquestionable ruler of the Polish computer market — and it still occupies quite a respectable position. For over three years any other computers that were brought to Poland by people coming back from their visits to the West were scarce, and their unfortunate owners tried to get rid of them as soon as it was possible, mainly due to the lack of software.

Even such well known brands as Commodore, Amstrad, Apple, not to mention our Atari, couldn't break through the curtain. One must be aware of the fact that a computer can only be useful if there are a certain amount of programs that can be used for both professional and entertainment purposes.

What good is a computer for which one could only get an odd few games and nothing else? Can it really serve one's purposes, or will it fairly soon degenerate into one more forgotten toy?
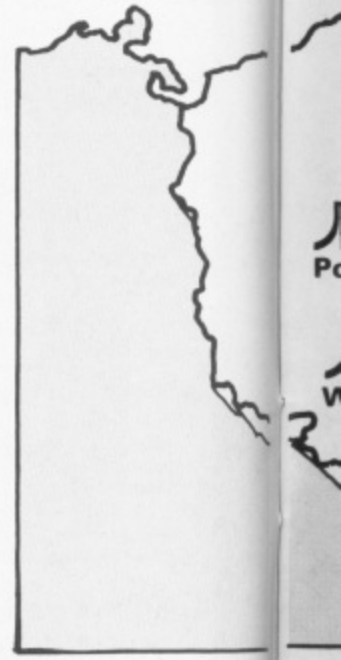
Poland does not supply its computer owners with any kind of software from the West. You can't just go into a shop and choose out of dozens of available programs. Even now the only way to obtain some really good and useful ones is to buy them from the computer clubs here, or to exchange the ones that you have for someone else's.

At the beginning of the '80s the situation was very much worse. Due to the fact that the Spectrum was the most widely used computer here, people planning to buy a micro in the West decided on the Spectrum. They knew that they would have no software problems whatsoever. And they were right.

It took them about three years to realise the serious limitations and inconveniences imposed by the Spectrum, and this was the beginning of the new period of computerisation in Poland.

The change was swift. First Commodore, then Apple, the BBC Micro and other brands began to appear in Poland. There was never an *official* import of personal computers into Poland. People brought them, however, from various countries and within months the Spectrum lost its monopolistic position. There were even a few earlier Atari products such as the 400 and 600XL.

Yet there was no one then who could predict which of all these brands would become a true leader in the field in Poland. Most people wanted something new that would shift the balance radically.

Then came rumours about the new release by Atari of the 800XL. Compared with the Commodore 64 it had better graphics and was to be more reliable. It had more memory than Sinclair's Spectrum and other products. One needn't buy an interface for printers, joysticks and so on.

Compared with the earlier Atari products it was more powerful and versatile, and it had fewer bugs in its version of Basic. Despite that, it was compatible with former Atari products, which meant that anybody deciding on buying it didn't have to wait months for interesting software.

But there was still a danger of buying something that wouldn't become popular here in Poland. Some took the risk, and I was one of them.

I was on holiday in England in 1985, and despite tight finances was positive about buying a computer. The chance occurred in August when I visited a second hand shop at Notting Hill Gate and spotted a nice 800XL with a data recorder and three software items for only £73, which was almost half price then.

Without hesitation I took it back home to Cracow. It took me about a month to locate other Atari users. There were about 50 at the time and for the games I had bought, I received in exchange five others and became the proud owner of eight games altogether.

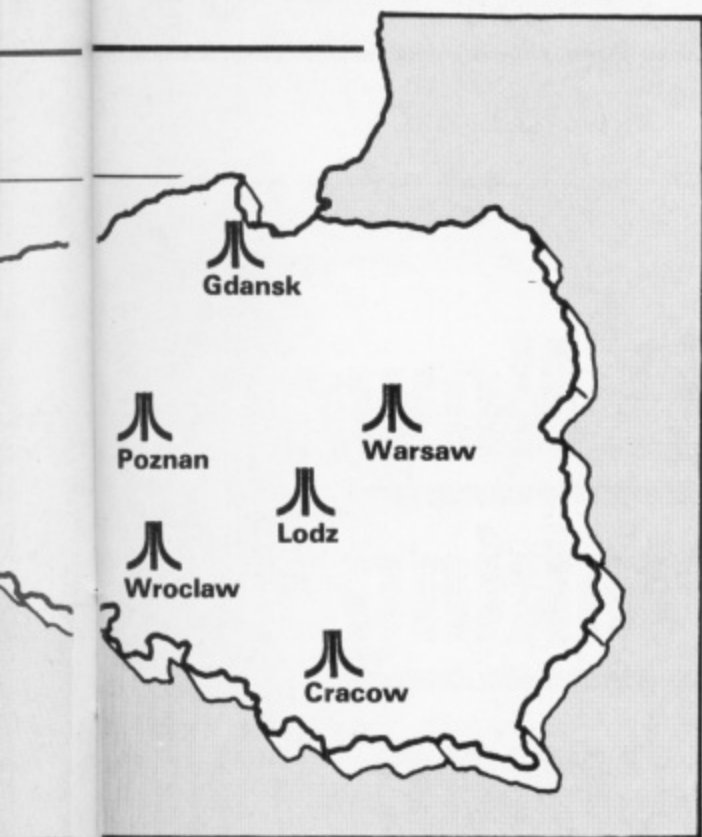I played them, enjoyed them, and learned more and more about my Atari. Everything went its own standard way. And then came a real shock.

For the first time in history, Poland bought a batch of Western personal computers — about 500 Ataris plus a certain amount of data recorders, disc drives and long awaited software.

Why Atari, and not Commodore or Amstrad? Well Jack Tramiel is, after all, of Polish origin, born in Warsaw (as far as I know). His Polish name was Jacek Trzmiel.

One would think that the software and hardware problem in Poland was over now, and to some extent it was.

Things need, however, a little explanation. All this equipment was bought in by Pevex, a firm that sells such goods in Poland for Western currencies. And that makes a great

Gdansk

Poznan   Warsaw

Lodz

Wroclaw

Cracow

tain

difference. The computer plus 1010 data recorder was sold for about $200, and one dollar (on the black market of course, as there is no way of buying it legally) costs over 600zl. This amounts to over 120000zl.

The most popular car in Poland, the Fiat 126p, costs here about 360000zl. If you still can't figure out how much it was, let me give you one more number. My monthly pay, as a teacher of English at the Jagiellonian University, is 12500zl. No comments. A Polish phenomena.

If, however, you think these Ataris were long in the shops you are wrong. Within days they were gone. Pevex immediately ordered further shipments of 800XLs, disc drives, joysticks, data recorders and rom cartridges. This time they got more than 5,000 computers.

Despite their high price, micros are desperately needed in Poland. They are so much in fashion here that youngsters sell what they can, beg from their parents, save money and buy them either in Pevex or for our own currency at the so-called markets which are held in all the major towns in Poland.

The Polish government ended all restrictions when it came to individual export or import of personal computers, so there is no customs duty to pay.

This led to extensive import of Ataris, which in turn lowered their price at these markets from over 150000zl to about 120-130000 for a computer with a data recorder. This

second lot of Pevex-imported computers was also sold within days.

In the meantime there was such a huge demand for Atari software that even Pevex couldn't cope. But the experiences of the former Spectrum users proved effective.

It took our Polish Atarians only a few weeks to organise a club. Although it does not act as an official Atari club, and does not provide membership cards, it serves an important role here being an informal association of all Polish Atari users.

Regular meetings are held four times a week in one of Cracow's cafeterias. One gains one's membership automatically when one buys an Atari computer, and there are no membership charges.

So Atari has become a leading computer brand in Poland. Of course there are regional differences, and in Lublin, for example, there are only about 50 Atari users, whereas there are over 2000 in Cracow, probably due to the location of the Atari club.

It is so strange that suddenly people who wouldn't even look at each other a few months ago now meet and talk as if they had been friends for years. Before the computer boom, I couldn't imagine myself talking about Basic, or about some mathematical formulas, with a complete stranger and what's more, one whose professional interests are utterly different from mine.

The gap between the scientific and humanistic minds is disappearing. I wouldn't like to suggest that we owe *all* this to Atari, although it's quite true in my case.

Most of my work can be done now much quicker and much more efficiently with the computer. Take translations. Before I bought my Atari I had to type and retype the translated text at least three times. Now Atariwriter does most of the work for me. The same applies to creating tests for my students and writing letters. I also never imagined that the adventure games I try to use during my English lessons would be so useful.

When a few years ago I read about the revolution in the field of computers and when I kept on seeing all these colourful advertisements of a great number of different brands of computers, I was afraid that we would be left far behind the

mainstream of modern technology and would occupy some inferior position because the gap between our societies helps the growth of the gap between our technologies.

Now I see we have somehow managed to get past this dangerous stage. We are still behind, that is beyond question, but we are moving, and this brings hope.

No one likes to be last. The urge to make up for lost time is so great that there is now not a single magazine, or even newspaper, that wouldn't publish something about computers.

There are even computer-dedicated TV programmes like Halo, Komputer and Spektrum, radio broadcasts of computer news, and programs transmitted on-air.

There are whole newspapers dealing only with hardware and software problems like Bajtek, Komputer or Mikroklan. There are no magazines yet dedicated to a single computer, but who knows what will happen within a year?

Taking everything into consideration, the prospects for the Atari in Poland seem to look great, better than for any other computer here.

A lot depends on Atari themselves. Will they remain really reliable, and keep on supplying good programs? Much depends on Atari users, both here and abroad. The former must prove that their computers can do more than other machines. The latter, being far more experienced and having greater access to up-to-date information, could provide the Polish Atarians with their ideas and solutions to various problems.

I at least, am extremely grateful for all the letters and help I have received from Atari users from all over the world – mainly in England and the USA – with whom I got in touch.

When I needed them they were there, and that is what counts. We all do it for fun, for pleasure.

We deal with the so called artificial intelligence. We operate the machine. How it is then that we still are human and friendly? Even more friendly and human than before we bought these unhuman machines.

Best wishes to all of you!   ■

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