

Teenage Trutles and The Rest of the Gang

"A wonderful paradise world! Hawaiian Barbie knows only summer! Flowers in the bikini, shiny hair, and Barbie's always playing with friends! Barbie smells like dreams of paradise! Today, she's got fragrance from the tropics for you! Hawaiian Barbie smells as beautiful as you! Hawaiian Barbie has a real perfume for you! Real Hawaiian Barbie only from Mattel!"
[excerpt from a 1995 Polish TV commercial].

Poles were introduced to the idea of licensed toys based on foreign (mostly American) brands and characters even before the political transformation. However, the debuts of the plastic pioneers, whose appearance foreshadowed the later toy boom, were anything but easy. Barbie—the global icon of the new approach to dolls for girls and toys in general, arrived in Poland as early as the 1970s. She was there among the coveted luxury goods (including those for children) from the West, available only in the outlets of the Internal Export Company. In the so-called Pewex stores, an original doll cost around \$6, the equivalent of an average monthly salary. Likewise, before 1990, the cult Lego blocks were mostly an unfulfilled desire among Polish children, exclusively obtainable at hard-currency shops. Although domestically made substitutes did appear, wider availability came at the expense of quality, which was very poor indeed.

The landscape of the toy market in Poland changed dramatically in the early 1990s, as it became possible to import and sell Western goods. Toy importers quickly realized that it was a business, correctly assuming that children and younger teenagers would prove an excellent and exceptionally dedicated group of consumers, readily attracted by the colourful packaging of Western dolls or action figures.

In the 1990s, Polish children got their first opportunity to interact with a toy differently than before, as products with the logos of the major Western brands hit the stores. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Transformers, G.I. Joe, He-Man, Batman, Spider-Man and Action Man for boys. For girls, there was Barbie of course, but also My Little Pony, Polly Pocket or the plush talking Furbie. The dazzling colours of the mermaid Barbie shone through the plastic box. On the back of the packaging, she claimed to be a magical Barbie, because her hair changed colour underwater. A Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle action figure in a space suit

assured us that we were buying not so much a piece of plastic, but a hero who was going “where no turtle has gone before”.

The toys themselves were only one part of the equation. The key element of promoting them in Poland involved the attractive extra material: animated series, comic books, games or food products. Thus, the cult animated series about the adventures of the Ninja Turtles appeared in Polish television as early as 1991. In 1993, TM-Semic began publishing comic books about their adventures. More or less at the same time, the stories of the Transformers—shape-shifting space robots—and the American G.I. Joe super-soldiers could be seen on video tapes and pages of comics. Since 1993, young Barbie fans had the possibility of reading about the adventures of their idol in the *Barbie* magazine. The Little Ponies—following in the footsteps of their “boy” cousins from Hasbro’s Transformers and G.I. Joe lines, made their way to VHS tapes.

One might think that with the influx of toys whose form and substance grew increasingly unrealistic, Polish children and teenagers fell into the clutches of Western consumerism and escapist play, their minds polluted to benefit the toy corporations. Such an interpretation is apt to some extent, but it does not account for everything. The reinvention of the toy as an element of spectacle was not so much an act of enslavement as a proposal of a novel mode to engage with the texts of (pop)culture. This was not about recreating content known from television or comics, but about play that often involved uniquely personal meanings. Also, in the Polish context, one cannot fail to appreciate the almost absurd exaggeration of the toys of the time, whose colourful boxes contrasted sharply with other products. That contrast—especially to a child—was all the greater because toys were often found on the shelves surrounded by household products or clothing rather than in dedicated stores. He-Man stood out among a selection of men’s shirts, while Barbie’s colourful radiance eclipsed the washing liquids. Those miniature agents of the Western world would later become cherished and cared-for artefacts, with the contemporary collectors proudly displaying their childhood acquisitions as timeless treasures.

Thirty years ago, you could buy the same toys that were available abroad. They included Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Transformers, Barbie, and My Little Pony. All children wanted to have them.. You could watch cartoons and read comics about the adventures of these characters. This allowed children and teenagers to play with them in new ways, different from before. Today, as adults, they are happy to have these toys.