

Uzina Tractorul Brasov

By Ian M. Johnston

Brasov

I concede that possibly not many readers of my tractor epistles will be familiar with the intricacies of the Romanian language. But 'Uzina Tractorul Brasov' renders itself as an easy translation into Universal Tractor Brasov. But even this mouthful is thankfully normally reduced to simply UTB.

For those who may be unaware, Brasov is an ancient medieval city located in the Northern Transylvanian mountainous region of Romania. And yes, one associates Transylvania with that evil and heinous character Dracula, who incidentally, was not merely a fictitious individual. His real title was Count Vlad Tepes Dracula The Impaler, and ruled from 1448 to 1476.

His eerie and menacing Bran Castle is but an hour's drive south of Brasov and I suggest should only be visited by those of a strong constitution and never at night!

Brasov is located in a valley, but a few kilometres to the north west is one of the rare areas of Transylvania that can boast a reasonably level plateau. In 1925 an aero club established an airfield on the site. In due course a factory was constructed to manufacture biplane aircraft.

Fast forward to World War 2, when Romania was occupied by the Nazi regime. The Luftwaffe commandeered the aircraft factory for the purpose of assembling the infamous Junkers JU 87 Stuka ground attack dive bombers. Thousands of fleeing civilians across Europe were subjected to the horror of Stukas as they hurtled from the skies with machine guns blazing and

fragmentation bombs being scattered indiscriminately. In order to create further panic, Stukas were fitted with ear shattering sirens which added to the horror and fear of their onslaughts.

The original Junkers plant in Germany was exposed to continual bombing attacks by the RAF, and it was considered the location of the factory at Brasov would be an ideal alternative, as it would be beyond the range of the RAF Wellington and Blenheim bombers. An additional advantage of the site was the fact that ash forests were in abundance on the slopes of the surrounding hills. The Stuka frames were partially constructed from ash timber.

Following the collapse of Hitler's Nazi rule of terror, in 1944 Romania, along with most of Eastern Europe, fell under the brutish control of Stalin's grim Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The immediate emphasis was the necessity to grow more food, at a time when millions of war ravaged citizens were starving.

Accordingly, scores of East German tractor technicians were forcibly removed to Brasov and ordered to convert the aircraft factory into a high production farm tractor facility.

In 1946 the first UTB tractors left the production line.

A place of fear

When I visited Brasov in 1988, Dracula's Castle was not the only source of trepidation. Romania remained under the desultory control of President Nicolae Ceausescu, undoubtedly the most monstrous and feared communist leader during the merciless Iron Curtin era. (A few months following my perhaps injudicious visit



Bran Castle – the sinister residence of Count Vlad Tepes Dracula. (IMJ archives)



Junkers JU 87 Stuka dive bombers. (IMJ archives)



A 1989 Farmliner 640 DTC Special on display at Wingham Show. (PHOTO: IMJ)



A Universal 850 in the Long livery, observed whilst driving in Alberta in 1995. (PHOTO: IMJ)

to that troubled land, a well aimed bullet through his cranium blessedly terminated Ceausescu's life).

The presence of apprehension in the streets of Brasov was almost tangible. The much feared Securitaté (state secret police) were everywhere – including a machine gun toting unsmiling character permanently stationed in the lobby of the Hotel Carpathi, into which I had booked. Food was in such short supply that children were growing up having never tasted fresh fruit or farm produce. Milk was unknown.

Even my initial arrival at the UTB factory created an unanticipated situation. A factory official was appalled when he saw me extracting a camera from the boot of my rental car and rushed to have me replace it urgently back in the boot. He then furtively glanced towards the Securitaté chap who had been designated to accompany me on my factory visit, and was relieved to note that the forbidden camera had not been observed.

The purpose of my visit to the UTB factory was to appraise the suitability of a new model for the Australian market. In Australia, UTB tractors were rebadged as Farmliners. They were imported by Inlon Pty Ltd who were also the importers of the Italian Landini tractors. I had a business association with Joe Jardin, the firm's managing director, who had recently experienced cardiac problems and was unable to undertake his planned visit to Brasov to carry out the new tractor inspection. So I volunteered to take his place. But I insisted at my expense, as I wished to be accompanied by my wife and also use the excuse to visit other Iron Curtain countries. (Which nearly ended in a disaster when I was placed under arrest in Bulgaria by an over zealous security official who accused me of being a NATO spy – but that is another story).

The factory was vast, employing around 28,000 workers. But it was a dark sprawling affair, which made me think of the sort of factories one reads about that existed during the Industrial Revolution. Everywhere I was taken by my escorts, I observed hard working men and women offering me a friendly smile, but which was quickly extinguished when they detected the grim faced Securitaté individual following behind.

The range of UTB tractor models was impressive. Totally

differing examples were being produced for varying world markets. For example, those destined for Egypt and The Middle East had no correlation with those manufactured for East European farmers, or others for Turkey or the African Continent.

The range included both wheeled and track mounted units, plus an extensive array of earthmoving machinery. Around 70,000 tractors were produced each year for distribution to 115 countries worldwide.

But there was a problem!

The actual design of the UTB tractors was world class. Indeed a Fiat licence had been provided for the construction of certain models. But the standard of individual component production and assembly lingered well below western world standards.

There was an obvious reason for this unfortunate situation. Under the communist dictates, the factory was required to produce a designated number of tractor units by the end of each month. Failure to comply with this imperative resulted in extreme penalties for the senior management officials which in turn filtered down to the wages of the work force. It is therefore perhaps understandable that the philosophy within the factory was to hurriedly complete the build of tractors at any cost!

I personally witnessed endless numbers of tractors, lined up side by side along a railway platform measuring several hundred metres in length, awaiting the arrival of a locomotive hauling flat top trucks, upon which the waiting tractors would be driven cross ways onto the trucks. Also in attendance were a number of tractors fitted with cushioned pusher blades, which were used to push the tractors which failed to start, onto the wagons. A sorry state indeed!

I must hasten to state that the UTB Farmliner tractors destined for Australia did not fall into the above deplorable category.

Those tractor models, previously selected by Joe Jardin, were identical to a range imported into the USA by Long Inc., a company based in North Carolina. In America they were sold under the Long label.

Knowing the UTB production problems, Long had established a hi-tech workshop within the UTB factory boundaries. I enjoyed lengthy and informative discussions with the Long team, which had permanent bookings in the aforementioned Carpathi Hotel. They explained that each individual tractor purchased for the USA