

Krakow or Bust

By John Maybury

Flying along high-speed rails, my German train stopped short of the Polish border due to a regional computer outage. For three hours we sat and waited. The only other passenger in first class, a friendly businessman on his way to an office Christmas party, argued vociferously with the train crew about their failure to get us across the border, even if it meant putting the two of us in a taxi. He translated it all for me, so I learned a few choice German profanities that afternoon.

Border guards, customs agents, immigration police, and conductors swept through the train checking tickets and passports; some of them used handheld computers to scan documents. All of them looked large and imposing in their military uniforms.

Finally, the computer went back up and we crossed into Poland. The snow got deeper and deeper. At one station, hooligans pelted the train with snowballs.

The first two Polish words I learned were “wada” (water) and “cavy” (coffee). “This is gonna be easy,” I thought. Boy, was I wrong. My first mistake was asking a taxi driver at the train station how much to go to my hotel. I naively agreed to the price he quoted, unaware that it was double the normal fare. Oh well. From then on my visit to Krakow went smooth as silk. Everyone was incredibly friendly, helpful, and bilingual.

My Polish guidebook breezily wished me a pleasant stay “no matter the bad weather and chilly winds.” Like everyone else, I bundled up, and anytime I saw a patch of sunlight I would angle toward it. But the best way to warm up was to put on walking shoes and hit the cobblestones.

I learned that the Polish word for a tiny shop jammed into a small space is “kram,” which seemed appropriate. I walked through the main gate (Brama Florianska) to the medieval center, past rows of “krams” leading to the market square, one of Europe’s largest, dominated by St. Mary’s Church (built in 1287 on the remains of a former Romanesque church destroyed by the Tartars). A trumpeter plays every day in the tower but stops in mid-song to commemorate the sentry who was killed by an arrow while warning Krakow of barbarians at the gates. This church, like many in Europe, reflects a history of successive waves of invaders, each one preserving or only slightly modifying the structure to reflect its own religious style.

Christmas market stalls lined the square. After browsing their whimsical offerings and refueling on sausage and coffee, I headed to Planty, a park strip that rings the old city. I walked all the way around it until I came to Wawel, the famous castle on the hill where a mythical dragon supposedly lived. I explored Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter, where Stephen Spielberg filmed “Schindler’s List” and which has eight synagogues, plus museums, cemeteries, and bookstores for learning about Krakow’s Jewish heritage.

Krakow’s medieval center is intact and unrestored, spared the destructive forces of invasions that flattened Warsaw and other parts of Poland. Krakow is an architectural and historical gem in the same league as Budapest, Vienna, and Prague.

After a full day of walking, shopping, and postcard-collecting, I beat it back to my modern Hotel System (\$50 a night booked online, heated pool, great food, free Internet access, knowledgeable staff, hip-hop on the sound system, and funny cartoons blown up to poster size on all the walls, translated into English). The featured cartoonist is Andrzej Mleccki (Google to sample his sense of humor).

Glimpse of Polish TV: African band called Baobab playing juju music and speaking Polish. American TV shows with Polish translation in a man's voice talking over the soundtrack, making for a weird echo effect. Many coffee, tea, and beer commercials. Poland's hottest car: Toyota Corolla. European handball (fast action combining hockey, soccer, and basketball, www.eurohandball.com).

I decided against an organized bus tour to Oswiecim (Auschwitz), opting instead for the slow train to the gates of the former Nazi concentration camp. Through the mist I saw the infamous archway with the words "Arbeit Macht Frei" (work makes you free) etched in metal. I walked up and down rows of grim barracks, one for each country that lost its Jewish population in the Holocaust. The Dutch display shows how they had sheltered Jews ever since the Inquisition. Hundreds of photographs and official reports document the atrocities committed against millions of Jews, gypsies, prisoners of war, political dissidents, and other "enemies of the state." Most horrifying of all is the building containing prisoners' personal property confiscated by the Nazis: thousands of eyeglasses, hairbrushes, toothbrushes, shaving brushes, suitcases, shoes, cooking pots, straw sleeping mats, prayer shawls.

It's a sight you never forget.

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