

From Cracow and the Royal Wieleczka Salt Mine to Auschwitz and beyond, UNESCO has recognized Poland as a land of impressive cultural and historic diversity • By Susan Hallett

# A Taste of Poland

On the face of it, Poland appears an unlikely tourist destination. But then, Poland's contribution to culture and civilization as we know it has been and continues to be outstanding.

My husband and I arrived in Warsaw, the capital city, last Sept. 9, to take a bus tour. It was just two days before the attack on New York, which we learned about on the streets of Cracow.

Seventy years ago, Tadeusz Boy-Zelenski pictured Cracow as a town of "painters, town of stained-glass windows, town of poetry, town of graves, town of art, town of life." More recently, in 1978, UNESCO designated the historic centre of the city as a World Heritage Site, describing it as follows: "Located at the foot of the Wawel, 250 kilometres south-east of Warsaw, Cracow, the former capital of Poland, has a rich historic centre made up of the medieval site of Kazimeirz in the southern part of the town with remnants of the 14th-century fortifications, the 13th-century site of Cracow with the largest market square in Europe, the City Hall, the Jagellonian University, the Royal Castle and the Cathedral of San Waclaw where the kings of Poland are buried."

Our Canadian tour guide, Andrew Pirowski, who was born in Cracow, helped us explore his beautiful city. The million or so inhabitants of Cracow live on both shores of the meandering Vistula River. Life centres on the Main Square or Rynek, laid out with stunning gusto in mid-13th century. From morning to evening people shop and café-sit in the 16th-century Cloth Hall in the middle of the square.

Always visible: the colourful towers of St. Mary's Basilica. The main altar is a 15th-century masterpiece by sculptor Wit Stwosz, who was from Nurnberg. Made of gilded and polychromed linden wood, it is said to be the largest gothic wooden altar in Europe.

Not far from Cracow is the UNESCO-sited 700-year old Royal Wieleczka Salt Mine, one of Poland's most popular attractions. We walked the two-km. underground route (from a total of 300 km.) and encountered magnificent underground lakes, unique excavated chambers and real chapels ornamented with beautiful salt sculptures and bas-reliefs. We were told by an excellent local guide that the miners had carved everything in their spare time. The spellbinding Chapel of St. Kinga, 101 metres below ground level, is large enough to host weddings, sports events and New Year's Eve balls.

Our 12-member group visited a highland village, a spa, went river rafting and saw several other UNESCO sites, including Torun, which "owes its

origin to the Teutonic Order which built a castle there in the mid-13th century as a base for the conquest and evangelization of Prussia." We actually stayed overnight at the imposing Castle of the Teutonic Order in Malbork, which UNESCO calls "the supreme example of the medieval brick castle."

In the middle of the 20th century, Nazi Germany and communist Russia looked askance at the surprising progress of a free Poland and maneuvered to complete a new dismemberment. The partition came to realization when Hitler and Stalin signed a non-aggression pact. On Sept. 1, 1939 Hitler attacked Poland. Stalin, invading from the east, then carved himself a share.

Bearing this in mind, we approached Auschwitz, also on the UNESCO World Heritage List, but not on our itinerary. Andrew, however, managed to organize a short stop. Auschwitz-Birkenau, the most extensive Nazi death camp of the Third Reich, was where four-million people were systematically starved, tortured and assassinated.

The moment we walked through the gate with its infamous "welcoming sign" — *Arbeit Macht Frei* (work makes one free) — we knew that UNESCO was right to preserve the fortified walls, barbed wire, platforms, barracks, gallows, gas chambers and cremation ovens to bear witness to man's cruelty to man.

The night before we returned to Canada our group attended a concert of contemporary music at the Fryderyka Chopina Academy of Music in Warsaw. It was a fitting end to the two-week tour because music plays an important role in Poland. Apart from old Polish church songs and klezmer music, there are polkas and mazurkas as well as operas by such composers as Stanislaw Moniuszko (1819-1872), father of a national Polish style of music; and songs by Ignacy Jan Paderewski.

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