Krakow
By Dea Birkett

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What do the Pope, the Nobel Prize winning poet Czeslaw Milosz and the Museum of Insurance have in common? They're all Krakowian. Krakow may be Poland's second city in terms of size, but in things spiritual, artistic, and cultural it's indisputably number one. No other city has so many historic monuments, or such a vast collection of works of art, 2.3 million at the last count. The tallest structures on Krakow's skyline are not skyscrapers, but the lofty spires of numerous old churches. Its institutes of higher education, all 13 of them, are the oldest and most prestigious in Poland. Listed by UNESCO as a World Cultural Heritage site, it was nominated European City of Culture in 1992, and again in 2000. It is by far the most attractive city in the country.

This is all very intimidating for the traveller who just wants a little bit of a relaxing break. There's nothing so scary as feeling obliged to beef up on the reign of King Kazimierz Wielki and the Tatar raids, or tramp around admiring Gothic altarpieces, when you'd far rather just hang out. But travelling is always full of little surprises, and Krakow turned out to be one of them.

Sustenance of the calorific kind was necessary in order to assail the streets of this superlative city. Café culture is celebrated on a grand scale in Krakow, and a cup of strong black coffee with heavy cheesecake is never more than a few metres away. Café Jama Michalika, a former hangout of the Polish art nouveau movement, served as an excellent retreat from the monumental grandeur outside. Only a few minutes walk from the Main Square (the largest in Europe, the most historically significant in Europe, the most beautiful in Europe, everyone agrees), the café's interior is so gloomy, with stain glass windows depicting dancing skeletons and crocheted doilies on each heavy wooden table, it's like a cross between a church and your granny's front parlour. Customers are encouraged to chatter in a subdued manner, as if muttering prayers.

Outside, the world was, indeed, awesome. The Main Square (Rynek Glowny) is the reason for Krakow's superlative status. The twin spires of St Mary of the Assumption soar above it, as if painted on to the clouded sky. The late-Gothic interior is universally acknowledged as a masterpiece, a riot of blue, pink and gold, like a huge Christmas bauble; its high altar is considered one of the greatest pieces of Gothic art ever produced. From the tallest of the towers, a trumpeter plays the hejnal mariacki every hour on the hour, uninterrupted for the last 700 years.

In the Square's centre stands the solid bastion of the Renaissance Cloth Hall, with a stone arcade running through it selling souvenirs. Krakow may be awash with historical significance, but it's not at all stuffy. Inside the Cloth Hall, the trendsetting Sukiennice Café thrives, a blast of bright colours straight out of Conran. In any other country, a venerable building like this would be protected to death. But in Krakow, the centuries are jumbled, sitting next to each other quite comfortably, as if the cutting-edge café and the venerable Cloth Hall had really grown up together.

I met Scott in Sukiennice, an Australian who now lives in Krakow. We downed a couple of Zywiec (Polish beer), while he imparted his wisdom on his adopted hometown. 'A genteel old lady who has just discovered the 20th century when we were entering the 21st,' he called her. Much to Scott's lament, but my delight, Krakow is one of the few places in Europe still a sushi-free zone.

I confess the Sukiennice was the first, and not the only, bar we visited; there are 300 in the immediate vicinity of the Main Square alone. Many of these are underground, hidden in cavernous medieval cellars. The key word to look for is pod - meaning underground: there are pods where you drink, eat, or listen to music. The music
ones are the easiest to find; listen for melodies emerging, with the smoke, from below. Then descend down the closest stone steps - there may be no sign at all - and you'll find a very packed, very smoky room, at the end of which will be three or four men are playing jazz as if it had never gone out of fashion. Jazz is still very much in, in Krakow.

The pod Harris Piano Bar (which had no piano) holds jamming sessions for young musicians. Luckily, it was directly below Main Square. I hadn't yet left the area around the Sukiennice. Scott warned me against the Krakow syndrome of 'squarecentric-ness' - the inability to pass beyond the powerful orbit of the Main Square. Because it's so beautiful, because it's so satisfying to both body and soul, most visitors rarely leave it. I spent days just wandering around and around, until I was satiated with splendour.

Once, I walked a full ten minutes to the Wawel, the imposing royal fortress peering down over the River Vistula, home to the national cathedral and castle, seat of kings for over 500 years. The hill has been built upon since the 10th century, and almost every style of architecture is represented upon it, from Romanesque to Gothic to Renaissance to Baroque. This bizarre skansen represents the heart of Polish national identity in all its grandeur. I admired, then retraced back for a drink in one of the 300 central bars. I had caught the squarecentric bug. I knew, then, that I had to break out of it.

Early the next morning I determined to voyage to a world beyond. I arranged to meet Maria and Alex, two students I had met in Pod Jaszczurami, a well-known student bar on, fortuitously, the Main Square. One in every seven Krakowians is a student aged under 25. This city of great antiquity has one of the most youthful populations on the planet.

We followed a street that spun out from the force field of the Main Square. Suddenly, everything seemed to shrink. Minute Polski Fiat 650 cars in 70s psychedelic orange whipped down narrow streets. Dinky shops, no bigger than a walk-in-wardrobe, sold absolutely everything - bottles of Vodka, children's toys, porn magazines, mini hi-fis, and cigarettes called Spike, Dark, Vogue and Wave. And there was a wholesome earthiness in contrast to the rarified atmosphere in the centre of town. In the main market, out by the bus terminus, slabs of cake were sold by the kilo alongside rows of garish multi-coloured tights, strings of wild mushrooms, piles of bright red sausages, and dead hares.

Maria and Alex assured me Krakow's top, and least known, attraction was the 19th century Rakowicki cementery, where every grave told a story. There was the graves of writers Luijan Rydel and her husband Jadwiga Rydlowa, the most famous married couple in Poland, celebrated in a play about their betrothal called Wedding, first performed in Krakow in 1901. Next door lay Poland's most famous modern painter, Piotr Michalwoski, who had fought in the 1830 November Uprising against the Russians. His grave declared him a genius; Krakowians are not known for their modesty. It's understandable; this graveyard was evidence of the mighty weight of Krakow's contribution to Polish culture. Everyone who was anyone in the arts is buried here.

Except, that is, the Jews of Krakow. Once, the Jewish population was 70,000; transported to death camps by the Nazis, they now number little more than a hundred. Kazimierz, the only remaining Jewish area on the edge of the city, was run down and forgotten until Schindler's List hit the screens, a multi-million dollar advertisement for the area. Now it's fashionable to eat Jewish. In a former miktavah, a Jewish bathing house, the five-tabled Klezher-Hois restaurant serves traditional, though non-Kosher, Jewish food while a three-piece band plays popular hits from Fiddler on the Roof. But not all celebrations of this near-obiterated culture are so cheerful. Isaac's Synagogue is now a stark museum with few exhibits. Some battered wooden benches remind us that once their were enough Jews to fill it; in the corner, a black and white TV screen flickers with documentary footage of the same streets during the last war, the forced removals to the ghetto, the determined extermination of a people. Auschwitz is only a day trip away.

I walked back from Kazimierz, underneath the Wawel, pulled by the magnetism of Main Square. Passing the Church of St Andrew Apostle, I didn't bother to go in. I'd grown nonchalant with buildings of historical
significance. Only 18th century interior, I sniffed, quite new. Hanging from an adjacent building was a sign 'Tattoo'. I ascended a creaking 12th century wooden spiral staircase, and stood before a door with a single red light bulb above it. I went inside.

Jacek was sitting at his desk, sketching out a pattern for a tribal tattoo. A poster of John Paul II read, 'I like the Pope. The Pope likes dope.' Jacek held up his sketch.

“This would look good on your leg,” he drawled seductively. A little more of the same, and I could have returned from Poland with my first tattoo. Instead, I decided to have my ear pierced - although other places were suggested. Jacek's partner Ania offered to hold my hand as comfort. She pulled up her sleeves to reveal a riot of snakes and leaves, winding from her elbow up to her armpits. I imagined that underneath every seemingly straight-laced Krakow citizen's outer clothing was an outrageous tableau of tattoos.

Krakow had proved to be full of such surprises. Haughty on the outside, garish and daring on the inside, there was nothing stuffy about this city. I went to Krakow expecting stifling sobriety and impossibly high culture. I came away with a pierced ear and a tattoo artist as a pen pal. I hope we keep in touch.