Krakow
By John Hatt

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Although my main destination was Krakow, it seemed a waste not to spend a couple of days first in Warsaw; and perversely I was pleased that I did, for the bleakness of Poland's modern capital made me doubly savour the miracle of Krakow's survival. Warsaw has never recovered from its destruction in 1944. After the heroic Polish uprising, the Germans spent months dynamiting every quarter of the city; by the time they had finished, 90% of Warsaw had been destroyed. This destruction was done not in pursuit of any military strategy, but out of malice.

A large area of Warsaw's historic centre has been marvellously reconstructed, using the detailed records left in the 18th century paintings of Bernard Bellotto, a nephew of Canaletto. The enormous Royal Castle has been rebuilt with such remarkable care that, until I read the guidebooks closely, I hadn't realized that it was entirely a fake. The story of its rebuilding is astonishing. The Poles have always believed that the Germans have a supplementary aggressive gene, and expecting therefore the likely destruction of the Royal Castle, they smuggled out samples of cornices, floorboards, and even frescoes. The precautions proved wise: before leaving Warsaw, the Germans inserted 10,000 sticks of dynamite into every corner of the castle, and blew it into smithereens. Using the evidence of the smuggled relics, the Poles were eventually able to recreate the original castle.

Walking round the rebuilt historical centre of Warsaw, one is moved and lost in admiration; but one is also forced to admit that the city hasn't truly regained its soul. Even though street after street has been rebuilt, and even though the reconstruction is faultless, the ultimate effect still has a touch of Disneyland - it is impossible to recreate the atmosphere that accumulates so haphazardly over the centuries. When planning the reconstruction, it was bravely decided to exactly recreate the era of Bernardo Bellottos paintings, leaving out the Nineteenth Century additions. This was an admirable experiment, but it may have added to the area's mild sterility.

Once outside the perfect streets of the historical centre, nothing ancient remains. The vast empty spaces indicate that there hasn't been enough prosperity for Warsaw to recover. If you come across a 19th century block of flats with iron balconies - such as you might see in a thousand dull Parisian boulevards - you stop and savour them. Warsaw is the only city where I have felt that there were too many green spaces, too many empty squares; there aren't enough people to fill them up. Cities are comparable to a party: too high a density (as in Oxford Street) is stressful and exhausting, but a sufficient density is necessary to give animation and liveliness to the streets. Even old photographs of Warsaw reveal a vitality that no longer seems to exist.

It isn't surprising that so few people now live here. About a third of Warsaw's pre-war population was Jewish, and they were all slaughtered. After the Warsaw uprising the Russians stood aside, while the Germans killed more people than were destroyed at Hiroshima. All in all the Germans killed about six million Poles, and they paid special attention to the educated classes, killing for instance more than half of the doctors and lawyers. The Russian occupations also devastated the population: more than a million Poles were sent off to camps in Siberia and the Arctic; of those who remained huge numbers emigrated to freedom in the West.

Krakow, the Polish capital until 1596, makes a stunning contrast to Warsaw. By some miracle it has escaped the worst ravages of the endless armies that have burnt, looted, and bombed their way across the country. The main square is the largest of its type in Europe, and only one modern building has infiltrated its harmonious rows of gothic, classical and baroque facades. Several fast-food stores, the advance armies of our tacky monoculture, have attempted to get footholds in the square, but so far they have been resisted. The equally unblemished streets around the square are lined with churches, palaces and the stately houses of burghers. A few minutes walk south of the square brings the visitor to a steep hill surmounted by the immense Wawel Castle, seat of the Polish government until the end of the Sixteenth Century. It is still filled with treasures, including its original Sixteenth Century tapestries, which are among the finest in the world.
After the government moved to Warsaw, Krakow still remained in the forefront of Polish culture, a culture that has been preserved only by heroic stubbornness. In 1795 Russia, Austria-Hungary and Prussia divided every square inch of Poland between them; the three foreign powers tried to obliterate the national culture, and they usually forbade the use of the Polish language for education, business or government. Poland was briefly free after the First World War, but during the Second World War the Germans were keen to crush every aspect of Polish culture: as part of this ambition they invited the academic staff of Krakow's university to a conference, and then bundled their guests into covered wagons which took them off to be murdered.

When the Russians replaced the Germans, they were also determined to erode Krakow's catholic and patriotic culture and, in pursuit of this aim, built a huge steel-town just north of the city. From the surrounding countryside they then imported large numbers of peasants whom they hoped to turn into modern deracinated citizens. But national cultures are surprisingly tenacious, and the newly urbanised peasants remained fervent patriots, became enthusiastic audiences for satirical plays, and never wavered from devoted attendance at church.

Although religion in other European countries is sharply declining, it is thriving in Poland. The Catholic Church has more often than not been an enthusiastic supporter of dictators, but here the church is still covered in glory as a result of its resistance to the Soviet-imposed regime. Everywhere there are signs of a vibrant religious life: the churches are often so packed that participants can be seen kneeling outside on the streets; and thousands of people, including the best educated, make the nine-day walking pilgrimage from Warsaw to the shrine of the Black Virgin at Czestochowa. During my own visit to the shrine I was struck by the groups of adolescents, dressed in trainers and T-shirts, who enter the church while strumming guitars and singing hymns; on entering the shrine they put their rucksacks on the ground and lean on them to say their prayers.

But not all Poles are as religious as the rest of the world believes. When I visited a church outside Krakow, a Polish friend refused to accompany me inside; she had noticed that a priest was giving a sermon, and she was allergic to the clergy. I later discovered that a surprising amount of Poles agreed with her. After the church's success against the communists, the prelates made the same mistake as their Italian counterparts, becoming too worldly and too militantly involved in politics. They harangue the population through propaganda on their own radio station, they interfere with legislation (successsfully maintaining an implacable opposition to abortion), and they are building ugly modern churches throughout the land. Polish friends also complained that local priests often give aggressive sermons, which criticise specific villagers who have failed to turn up at a recent service or who haven't given enough money to church funds.

My trip to Krakow would have been perfect, if my hotel hadn't spoiled it. Many months in advance I had asked to stay in the Francuski which is bang in the centre, and only three minutes walk from the museum which houses Leonardo da Vinci's Lady with the Ermine. But instead I was put in a large modern hotel, the Forum, having been assured that it was just next to the Wawel castle. Although the castle was visible from my bedroom, the hotel was in fact next to a multi-lane highway on the other (wrong) side of the river. Not many years ago, most city hotels used by tourists were in the centre of the city, but it is increasingly easy to be ensnared by these new out-of-town hotels, which all too often cocoon their customers in a sterile ghetto. At the Francuski I would have been able to potter out of the hotel straight into the continual passeggiata of the city centre; it would have been easy to catch the best light for photographs, and to relish the city's many cafés and restaurants. At the Forum, a modern hotel equipped with casino and discotheque, I was dependent on taxis that, knowing I was trapped, habitually overcharged. On some evenings I baulked at the cheating taxi drivers and the traffic jams on the bridge, and instead of eating in a small restaurant in the city centre, I ate a gloomy dinner in the hotel's cavernous and empty dining room. Perhaps because the Forum was so cut off from the social life of the city, it felt obliged to offer two television channels of hard-core pornography.

At my first breakfast in the hotel dining room, the continuous pop music was interrupted by an airport-style ding-dong, and then a jaunty voice announced, "The coach for Auschwitz will be leaving from the lobby in fifteen minutes". Although no doubt this announcement has to be made, I was at first startled by the commercialisation of such recent horrors. And when I later visited the extermination camp, I was also startled to find shops selling the usual tourist tat, including postcards of idyllic views and twenty-five different styles of sunglasses.

Auschwitz presents a problem. It must be right that visitors should come here, and that the remains of the camp, including its mounds of hair and spectacles and children's shoes, should provide an authentic testimony of the
holocaust; but now that the trickle of tourists is becoming a torrent (considerably increased by the film Schindler's List) it will take skill to prevent the camp becoming as commercialised as so many of the world's other tourist destinations.

The same problem hasn't yet reached the associate camp of Birkenau, only two miles away. For some reason many fewer tourists are taken here. Only one stall, selling trinkets and Polish contraceptives, has been installed outside the gate. I walked alone around the vast expanse of the camp, where the long low huts, still crammed with the original wooden bunks and long rows of stone latrines, are a devastating reminder of recent evil.

There was one other ding-dong announcement at breakfast - for those wishing to visit the salt mine at Wieliczka. There can be nothing else like it in the world: miners have been digging here for more than 700 years, so there are now more than 180 miles of tunnels. Although my tour lasted for three hours, it was so huge that I never saw any of 1,300 miners who were working there. Several of the 2,000 excavated caves have been turned into chapels, some of these elegantly sculpted as early as the 17th Century; other caves have been turned into boating ponds, museums, and a basketball court which is used on the festival of the miners' patron saint. But the most awesome chamber is the colossal forty-foot high church, whose stairs, altar, religious statues, and chandeliers are all carved out of salt.

Most of the countryside between Warsaw and Krakow is flat and drab: mile after mile of plain agricultural strips, unrelieved by hillocks, valleys, woods, or hedges. However from Krakow I made several excursions on smaller roads, using a search for wooden churches and decaying country houses as an excuse to get into more appealing country. Due south, towards the Czechoslovakian border, I found magnificent views of the Tatra mountains, and even in other directions the landscape was sometimes improved by a willow-lined valley or some gentle hills. Nevertheless alarmingly large areas are disfigured by a scabby sprawl of unplanned buildings. The Lonely Planet Guide had told me that Polish villages look "as if the 20th century got lost down the road". It is true that much of Polish agriculture is still very traditional, and you often see carts drawn by magnificent horses; but almost every village is a mess, with ugly outcrops of Swiss chalet-style houses. After a few days of touring I would have been delighted even by the over-manicured perfection of a Surrey village. It made me realize that our own countryside is immeasurably precious, far more deserving of heritage funds than, say, the retention of a Canova statue which is in no way essentially British.

Remarkably few traditional peasant houses have survived in Poland; this is mostly a benefit for the inhabitants, as the ugly modern ones are more comfortable. Some of the more interesting examples have been scooped up and taken to open-air museums called Skansens, an idea imported from Sweden. These are interesting places, where the visitor can walk around a variety of typical traditional houses, and often visit the interiors, which have been recreated complete with furniture and cooking equipment. These open-air museums are admirable, but it is still a bit depressing that such charming architecture can survive only in a type of Disneyland, having almost entirely vanished from the real world outside.

Poland's grander houses and palaces have also suffered. For hundreds of years Poland's plains have been an easy prey for foreign armies, which have burned, looted, and destroyed so many buildings in their path. Apart from devastating invasions by Germans and Russians, there were two cataclysmic ones by the Swedes in 1685 and 1718, both considered even more destructive than earlier ones by the Tartars. The surviving palaces, castles, and country houses then had to face communism. Some of the great palaces didn't fare too badly, but the vast majority of castles and manor houses have deteriorated almost irreparably. With the aid of a decrepit out-of-print guide book I discovered quite a number, but it was easy to see that even if the owners wanted to reclaim them (as now sometimes happens), few are suitable for restoration. Occasionally a ballroom or dining room reveals a vestige of charm, but usually the cornices, pillars and fireplaces have been ripped out. And even if the money and energy were available for restoration, a clutter of dismal post-war houses has mostly spoiled the surrounding parks.

Of the thousands of small manor houses that existed in pre-war Poland, almost none are inhabited by their original families. But a manorial guesthouse had advertised itself in the Spectator, so I drove off to stay at Lasdin, a few hours west of Krakow. Like many of Poland's manor houses, it was a pleasant white unpretentious building - more like a modest rectory than a British manor house. It had escaped the usual state expropriation because the owners, having lost much of their money, had been left with an estate of only a few acres.

Its current owner, my host, turned out to be a young man who spends half his year teaching windsurfing and skiing. His ancestors had always married women of similar social standing from one of the plentiful manor houses within twenty miles, but such neighbours no longer exist. Maintaining the house is a struggle, and he isn't going to make a fortune out
of his guests, his charges include delicious Polish food cooked by a village lady who was old enough to have been trained in the pre-communist era. Because the family has always owned the house, it still contains some traditional furnishings including a few portraits and a piano. An African Grey parrot lurks quietly in a cage, but squawks and warbles when the owner plays Chopin.

The renovation of the manor had had to be done in stages. Running water was installed fifteen years ago, although the hot water is still a touch unreliable. The house now has a telephone - the only one in the village - and last year a bathroom was built; it has five doors and I always expected someone to burst through one of them, as in a Whitehall farce. My bedroom was large and harmonious with windows on two sides but as yet no curtains.

The house lies at the edge of gentle hills, a landscape far more appealing than the huge plains further north. So on a glorious sunny day I set off for a long walk behind the house. The valleys were lined with glistening willows and shimmering silver poplars; the un sprayed crops were thick with harebells, poppies and blue geraniums; the meadows were covered in frothy yellow flowers smelling of honey; emerald dragonflies hovered above the ditches. And here for the first time in my life I was aware of seeing a lark. Frequently in Britain I had wondered whether some nondescript little bird was a lark, but it always turned out to be some type of pipit. It seems strange that I had waited more than forty years without identifying our literature's most famous bird. But here in Poland I learnt that a lark is unmistakable. The little bird would lift off from the meadow and then, singing continually, ascend vertically into the sky, eventually becoming invisible; after a while the song would cease, and then the bird would dive down in silence. A few moments would pass and then another lark would fly up, fervently singing as if in competition with its predecessor.

I returned to Krakow to catch my plane and, as I had failed to take a good photograph of the main square, I wanted to climb up the Fourteenth Century tower of St Mary's church to get the whole enormous square into one aerial photograph. I went with my guide to the church's ecclesiastical offices, but was told to go to the fire-brigade authorities, who control the tower, from the top of which a fireman blows a trumpet on the hour. In accordance with hundreds of years of tradition the trumpet is blown on all four sides of the tower - once for the King, once for the Town Hall, once for the public, and once for the fire brigade. At midday the solo is broadcast on Polish radio, with much the same significance as Big Ben. The broadcast is live, not a recording, and if you listen carefully you can hear the trumpeter's footsteps as he walks to each window.

As we left the church, wondering how we would find the fire brigade, we were accosted by a short shabby man, who whispered that for a tip he could let us into the tower. I paid up, and after many furtive glances around him he unlocked the tower door. We climbed up 239 steps, and found two trumpeters who welcomed us with warmth. The elder one told us that he had been trumpeting here for twenty-four years, and that his father had done the same for thirty-five years before him. The trumpeters always come up here in pairs, and stay up for twenty-four hours at a stretch. At the top of the stairs there is space for a cozy little room equipped with a tiny television, a stove, and a small bed where one of them can rest.

After the trumpeters had confirmed that their tower was outside the jurisdiction of the cathedral, my guide asked if it was acceptable for them to entertain girlfriends while on duty. They said that there wouldn't be any problem, but that they never did. The younger one had only recently married, and his wife had already been up the tower once; the elder one had been married for twenty-three years, but his wife had been up only twice. And yet, despite loyalty to their wives both men were as flirtatious as most Poles: when we turned to leave, they said to my guide "Now, of course, your friend will be leaving, but you will be staying with us". My guide, a confident married lady with two adolescent sons, responded to this gallantry with an appreciative laugh; and before we returned down the stairs, each trumpeter made an elegant bow and kissed her extended hand.