THE Polish conductor serves his passengers coffee a half-hour before the night train from Berlin pulls into Krakow's main station. After expertly stirring in her nondairy creamer, the Krakow-born economics professor who occupies the lower berth considers the question: What are her townsfolk like? With a resounding zip of her knee-high boots, she announces, with a hint of swagger, that they are proud.

Little wonder. The people of Krakow are citizens of one of nine cities chosen as European cultural capitals for the year 2000, with a recorded history dating back to 965; a city selected by Unesco in 1978 as one of the most remarkable architectural complexes in the world; home to one of Europe's largest medieval marketplaces; central Europe's second oldest university (after Prague); royal seat for six centuries of Polish kings with the kinds of names that make learning history fun: Boleslaus the Bold, Boleslaus the Chaste, Boleslaus the Squintmouth, Ladislaus the Elbow-High.

During the golden renaissance of Polish culture in the 16th century, Krakow was the capital of Europe's most populous kingdom, stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, harboring a medley of cultures including Poles, Germans, Lithuanians, Jews, Italians and Hungarians -- a veritable Euro-boomtown.

There remains, of course, the unhappy flip side of Krakow's history: the city's gradual decline after the transfer of the royal seat of power to Warsaw in the early 17th century, the subsequent partitioning of Poland and accompanying loss of independence, the years of Nazi occupation, wrenching postwar relocation, Soviet control, martial law. By the 1980's Krakow's dark side became physically manifest in historic monuments blackened by tons of ash that fell on the city weekly, courtesy of an indifferent industrial machine.

But to stand in the middle of the restored Rynek Glowny, the city's marketplace, is to sense the unique quality of Krakow's pride; a pride both because and in spite of the city's perceptible reality. The intersection of two medieval trade routes, from Prague to the Crimea, and the Amber Road from the Baltic to southern Europe, the 13th-century square marks the open center of a geometric checkerboard of streets that describes the old city. (These streets are, for the most part, wonderfully off limits to motorized traffic.)

Despite the vastness of the space, humanity clearly dominates the scene: South American street musicians gather before the Sukienice (Cloth Halls) that cut the square in half. The part-Renaissance, part-Gothic arcades now house cafes, rows of wooden stands selling souvenirs and crafts, and upstairs, the National Museum's picture gallery.

Beside an outdoor display of watercolor cityscapes, older men in peaked caps stop to chat, while mothers chase after toddlers who chase after pigeons. Tourist-bearing horse-drawn buggies clip-clop the perimeter, circling couples buying flowers from kerchiefed saleswomen who purposefully ignore the white-faced mime perched on a nearby soapbox. Other couples rest on benches watching other couples stroll, as clusters of laughing students, laden with shopping bags, cram themselves into phone booths. The young women wear short skirts and dark nylons and high black boots, their wide faces turned up.
The pace is appealingly slack. The feel, surrounded by pastel-colored Renaissance and Baroque town houses, amid ambling, stylish locals speaking their blurry, shushing tongue, is decidedly Southern European. Except for one thing: It is freezing. It is February. And this is Middle Europe. A penetrating icy rain slices down, blowing into the young women's upturned faces as a piercing wind rips across the open square, causing the old men to reach for their caps. All those short skirts! Such cold knees. And those frozen fingers, nonchalantly holding cigarettes (no gloves) while friends pause to exchange intimacies, exposed to the elements. It is an entirely imaginary spring that is in the air. The real thing must be breathtaking.

As the full hour approaches, some heads lift to the taller octagonal spire of the Church of the Virgin Mary, a red brick Gothic affair that historically served the city's German patrician class and now dominates the eastern corner of the square. On the hour (give or take a few minutes) one of the church's remote arched windows opens and a faint flash of brass indicates a lone trumpeter. The melody he plays is ancient and stirring, the Hejnal, a medieval reveille that unexpectedly ends mid-bar.

The practice memorializes a brave sentry who in the 13th century raised the alarm from the same tower to warn his townspeople of imminent Tartar invasion. Pierced in the throat by an enemy arrow, the guard was unable to finish his song. Every hour, every day and night these interrupted tones are repeated four times for the four points of the compass; the tribute dates back 700 years. Thus punctuating the day, the ghostly melody evokes a continuing memory of proud sacrifice, when spirited by the wind to the farthest reaches of the old city.

Inside the Church of the Virgin Mary, shortly before noon every day, the doors open to one of the largest Gothic altars in Europe. This most famous work of the Nuremberg artist Wit Stwosz (Veit Stoss in German), what he called his "Bible made of linden," was completed over a 12-year period, from 1477 to 1489.

Some 100 other churches and houses of prayer adorn the streets, covering every architectural period in the art history books and often combining several styles under one roof. There is the Church of St. Andrew, one of the few buildings in Krakow to survive the Tartar invasion of 1241, that conceals within its austere white limestone facade a later, richly ornate Baroque interior. The Gothic Church of St. Francis sports vibrantly colorful, sinuously formed Art Nouveau stained-glass windows by Stanislaw Wyspianski, as well as his decorative frescoes on the walls of the transept and presbytery; surprisingly temporal roses and lilies, seashells and peacock feathers.

In a country that is over 90 percent Catholic, all these churches are very much in use. On a given Sunday you can even find small crowds outside the houses of worship listening to Mass on a loudspeaker. And yet the spirit of Krakow would appear to be dominated by its most populous secular group of citizens -- the students. For this, if there ever was one, is a university town. There are no less than 100,000 students attending 15 institutions of higher learning. That's one eighth of the city's population.

Step into the courtyards of the 16th- and 17th-century houses along Florianska Street or Grodzka Street, the main pedestrian arteries pumping a steady current of life into the market square, and you will find happily ensconced behind Baroque porticos, beneath vaulted passageways, up exterior courtyard staircases, all the commercial byproducts of a vibrant student body: music shops, clothing boutiques, art galleries, bookstores and enough cafes and restaurants to rival the city's roster of churches -- with equally packed houses.

Clearly Krakow's restaurants differ from their Middle European neighbors. While Berliners and Viennese enjoy their kaffee and kuchen behind large windows, to maximize their climate's limited light, Krakow stashes its eateries in the cellars below the old city streets. Here, too, it would seem, the southern European illusion is in effect: as if in need of escape from an invisibly glaring sun, throngs of Krakow's young people retreat into windowless, candlelighted caverns for cappuccino and cheesecake.

Roughly one quarter of Krakow's students attend the Jagiellonen University, founded in 1364 by Casimir the Great. The 1492 Collegium Maius on Jagiellonska Street, with four red-brick Gothic wings enclosing an
arcaded courtyard, is the university's oldest building. It houses a museum that includes displays of the medieval ceremonial garb still used today during graduation ceremonies, as well as precious works of art and instruments of science. The library, communal dining hall, treasury and auditorium tell the tale of the university's rich history. Copernicus studied here from 1491 to 1495 and his astronomical instruments are displayed in a room bearing his name. The medieval astrolabes, torquetum and globe of the skies appear, to the uninitiated, as gleaming brass disks and spheres, dangling from chains, mounted on clawed feet, meticulously inscribed with a secret systematic beauty. A mappamundi from 1510 is the first globe to indicate the then-newly discovered American continent: America terra noviter reperta.

The relics are not all ancient. Neil Armstrong left an autographed picture of the Moon with special thanks to Copernicus. A pen on display was used by the university's most prominent recent alumnus, the theologian Karol Wojtylas, later Archbishop of Krakow, now Pope John Paul II.

Upon returning to the hustle of the market, a distinct and directed undercurrent can be detected in the general comings and goings. This popular stream follows the historic royal processional route south on Grodzka Street, ending at the foot of the Wawel Hill, or "Polish Acropolis." Pedestrian traffic jams the 82-foot climb to the renaissance Wawel Castle where Polish kings reigned for over 500 years, and its adjoining Gothic Cathedral, the site of coronations and royal funerals until 1734.

Upon the hilltop, an imposing and messy complex of towers, cupolas, bastions and battlements commands a magnificent view of the Vistula River and the surrounding city. Within the medieval fortifications -- near the tapestried royal chambers and carved marble tombs of Poland's royalty -- school classes, families, the Polish equivalent of Boy Scouts in uniform, elderly couples puffing from the exertion, babies in carriages, all bask in the warmth of grandeur on a bitter cold day. The crowd contains almost no foreigners. Here, one senses, Poland was never partitioned, reduced or dominated. Here Poland is big. As big as the view. And Krakow remains its capital.

And yet, ironically, the view from Wawel Hill features the single portion of Krakow and Krakow's history that could throw the proud citizenry off stride. A mile southeast of the castle, Kazimierz became the home to Krakow's Jewish population after pogroms drove them out of the Old City at the end of the 15th century. During the golden Polish renaissance, Kazimierz represented the undisputed capital of the Diaspora, a lively cultural and intellectual center that attracted the largest Jewish community in Europe.

By the start of World War II, one quarter of Krakow's residents were Jews. The Jewish quarter itself boasted eight synagogues and numerous other places for religious studies and prayer. Then the Nazis established the Krakow ghetto in Podgorze on the other side of the Vistula. By 1943 Kazimierz was completely emptied of its inhabitants. Many of the Jews of Krakow were transferred to the Warsaw ghetto. Others perished in the Nazi death camps -- Plaszow. Belzec. Auschwitz-Birkenau. Of the 69,000 Jews living in Krakow in 1939, roughly 150 returned after the war.

The gradual revival of so-called "Post-Jewish" Kazimierz coincided with Polish political unrest in the mid-1980's. Some people in Krakow sensed that resurrecting the city's Jewish history was one of the keys to saving their own.

Nevertheless, today's non-Jewish Krakowers dedicated to the ethnic revitalization of Kazimierz are walking a fine moral line, and they well know it. On the one hand, ever since Steven Spielberg shot "Schindler's List" on Szeroka Street in 1993, there has developed an undiscriminating and in some ways unhealthy interest in all things Jewish. Some fear the neighborhood would turn into an Old World Disneyland, featuring kosher vodka, klezmer music and gefilte fish.

On the other hand, since "Schindler's List," there has developed a very real and sincere dedication to restoring the quarter's Jewish heritage, featuring historical exhibits in the former synagogues, a modern Jewish Cultural...
Center committed to international discourse, a charming hotel and cafe in the former mikvah, or ritual bath, and, well, kosher food and klezmer music. The distinction is not entirely abstract, for of course there is gefilte fish, and there is gefilte fish. Such subtle variances in flavor are also a Jewish tradition.

The simple fact remains that early on a Saturday morning, before the 16th-century Remu'h Synagogue, the ancient melodies of the Shabbat service still drift from the intimate sanctuary where Krakow's Jews come to pray. A peek inside the entrance reveals a bare wooden table set for kiddush: 12 plates of checkerboard poundcake and 12 cups for the fruit of the vine. Two more than needed for a minyan. In light of the history that these streets have witnessed, this humble scene would appear to be a final heartbreaking wonder in this wondrous city.

Tables and beds in a former seat of kings

For information on events for Krakow 2000, contact the festival office at (48-12) 421 8693, or go to www.krakow2000.pl on the Web. Highlights include the Krakow Ballet Spring, May through July; the Jewish Culture Festival in July and the Tadeusz Kantor Festival in November and December.

The Old City (Stare Miasto) and the Jewish quarter (Kazimierz) are north of the Vistula River. Vehicular traffic is restricted in the historic center; taxis are at stands only.

Where to Stay

The owners of the newly opened Hotel Klezmer-Hois, Szeroka Street 6, telephone and fax (48-12) 411 1245, were among the pioneers in revitalizing the Jewish quarter. The antique-furnished hotel, in a former mikvah directly across the square from the Remu'h Synagogue, has 11 rooms, a restaurant featuring Middle European Jewish cuisine and nightly klezmer concerts. Doubles: $58 to $67, with breakfast, at 4.17 zlotys to $1.

The 54-room Pod Roza, Florianska Street 14, (48-12) 422 9399, fax (48-12) 421 7513, is one of the oldest hotels near the market square. The renaissance portal has welcomed such guests as Franz Liszt and Czar Alexander I. Doubles with breakfast: $100; after April 1, $118.

Where to Eat

Pod Aniolami, Grodzka Street 35, serves perfectly executed traditional Polish dishes -- borscht, various grilled meats served with baked apples and horseradish, hot spiced mead -- in a darkly romantic vaulted cellar. Dinner for two with wine runs about $22; (48-12) 421 3999. Open Monday to Thursday 1 p.m. to midnight, Friday and Saturday 1 p.m. to 1 a.m.

The peasant fare is delicious at Chlopskie Jadlo, Agnieszki Street 1, (48-12) 421 8520. Guests are seated on farmstead antiques and served specialties like spicy goulash with potato pancakes, pork chops with kasha and steaming pirogi (along with the bread, schmaltz and pot cheese that accompany meals). Dinner for two is roughly $21. Open Monday to Thursday and Sunday, noon to 10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, noon to midnight. Live Polish folk music Thursday to Saturday.

The walls of Cafe Jama Michalika, Florianska Street 45, (48-12) 422 1561, Krakow's most famous Jugendstil (or Art Nouveau) cafe, are covered with caricatures and drawings donated by artists at the beginning of the century in lieu of payment. The not-too-sweet apple cake with fresh whipped cream is a treat. Open daily 9 a.m. to 10 p.m.

Sightseeing
The Jagiellonen University Museum in the Collegium Maius at Jagiellonska Street 15, (48-12) 422 0549, is open for guided tours only, Monday to Friday, 11 a.m. to 2:20 p.m.; Saturday 11 a.m. to 1:20 p.m. The 30-minute tours ($1.75) can be arranged by appointment upstairs.

The royal chambers of Wawel Castle are open Tuesday to Thursday 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Friday 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m., Saturday 9:30 a.m. to 3 p.m., Sunday 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tickets: $2 October through April, $2.50 May through September. Admission is free on Sunday from October through May, and Wednesday from June through September; expect large crowds these days.

Wawel Cathedral is open Monday to Saturday 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Sunday and holidays 12:15 a.m. to 3 p.m.; Tickets: $1.50.

Krakow's only active Jewish house of worship, the Remu'h Synagogue at Szeroka Street 40, is named after the famous writer and philosopher, Rabbi Moses Isserles, who is buried in the cemetery next door. A donation of $1.25 is required. Cemetery and synagogue are open to tourists Monday to Friday 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The State Museum Auschwitz-Birkenau, at the site of the infamous Nazi death camp, is 36 miles west of Krakow, just over an hour by bus or taxi. The Auschwitz museum, (48-33) 843 2022, is open daily as follows: Dec. 15 through February, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.; March and April and October to Dec. 15, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.; May and September, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.; June through August, 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. The Birkenau memorial is open daily 8 a.m. to sundown.

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