

EASTERN EUROPE BY TRAIN

2. Krakov to Vilnius



Text: John Biggs © 2008

Images: Catherine Tang © 2008

www.johnbiggs.com.au

Krakow

The train takes us through Slovakia and Polish countryside of fields of maize and brilliant sunflowers. Soon we are gliding past villages with pretty steep-roofed houses with flourishing vegetable gardens, chickens, pigs, sheep, cows; not much evidence of industry. Like the villages from Germany onwards, the people here seem to be subsistence farmers and doing well: a man leads a cow on a rope, a farmer scythes long grass. Into Poland, the countryside became hillier, more interesting. I am reminded of the farms around Scottsdale, Tasmania, sixty years ago.



We arrive in Krakow early evening, at the Sheraton hotel, nicely placed by the Vistula River. Two boys are riding their bikes along the river wall. I photograph them, and they say: ‘Thank you’ in cute English. So many times, without saying a word to them, Eastern Europeans immediately use English to us. Why are a grey headed man and a Chinese woman greeted instinctively in English? Why not Italian, German, or even Mandarin?



A fierce dragon lived in a cave below King Krakus’ castle, just a stone’s throw from the Sheraton. Unfortunately we don’t get to see the animal, because many centuries earlier Krakus had offered a reward of his daughter and half his kingdom to anyone who could kill it. A shoemaker called Dratewka stuffed a sheep’s carcass with sulphur and left it outside the dragon’s cave. The dragon ate it and was so afflicted with thirst he drank deeply from the Vistula, metres away. The dragon swelled horribly and burst. Dratewka in turn became king.

Up the path behind the dragon’s cave is the magnificent Wawel Castle and Cathedral, where Pope John Paul II was once a priest, then a bishop. Poland was the only Soviet occupied country where Christianity was continuously tolerated; now 90 per cent of Poles are Christian, 80 per cent Catholic. Our guide takes us to a street corner to point out five large, elaborate churches, all well preserved.



The market square is one of the largest in Europe, lined by shops and restaurants, plumed horses waiting patiently for tourists, buskers and stalls for tourist trinkets. In the centre is a large market for jewellery and especially amber of all sorts, green amber, white amber and amber amber, some with unlikely large insects trapped inside, others with authenticity certificates. Amber is washed up along the Baltic coast; we are to see much more in our travels. Catherine is very interested but cautious; she buys only one large bangle

she can pull apart and turn into individual pieces. It turns out her caution is justified: better amber bargains are to be found at Vilnius.

At the far end of the square is St Mary's Cathedral built in the 13th century for a secular as well as a sacred purpose. A trumpeter high up in the tower saved the city when he sounded a reveille on seeing Tartar hordes about to invade the city, but at a price: an arrow struck him in the throat and killed him. A trumpeter sounds a reveille every midday but the re-enactment today stops short of an arrow in the throat – he waves down to the crowd below instead.



We have dinner 140 metres underground in Wieliczka salt mine. Salt has been mined here for 600 years, leaving huge rock-solid caverns of pure salt. The history of the mines is told in statues carved out of the salt as we walk to the enormous dining hall. On the way, we pass through a cathedral, everything carved from salt. We start a magnificent meal with soup served in hollowed out loaves of bread, followed by a slice of pork beaten wafer-thin, topped with a mushroom-sauce sauce.

A bus takes us to the Highland town of Zacopane, high in the Tatra mountains. The Polish Highlanders have their own culture and, like Scottish Highlanders, are said to be very frugal. They grow most of their own food in summer and store as much as they can for the long snowbound winter. They live as extended families, the eldest male the boss of the household, in narrow four-storeyed houses with very steeply gabled roofs to shed the snow; a generation for the first three floors, so they say, the top attic rooms let out to tourists during the skiing season.



A funicular takes up to a plateau where one looks across to the highest peak of the Tatras, on



which is a large cross. Back here is a market and funfair. A boy rock-climbs an artificial wall to grab a bag of sweets at the top. Stalls sell *okocim*, smoked sheep's cheese, that looks like small loaves of bread and tastes better than any Australian smoked cheese. Fortunately we leave room for a lunch: an evil lard spread on bread, pancakes topped with friend garlic, smoked sheep's cheese with cranberry jam, all these served as separate starter courses. The mains comprise thick weisswurst, blood sausage, roast pork, sauerkraut and potatoes served on a thick

wooden plate, and three different cakes for dessert. Typically Highlander, we are told. All necessary calories for the severe Highland winter, no doubt, but it's a hot summer's day. No-one in our party of 100 strong can finish.

Auschwitz-Birkenau



ARBEIT MACH FREI Work will set you free!

These words greeted the hundreds of thousands of hopeful Jews as they entered Auschwitz Concentration Camp, carrying their 20 kg of allowed luggage, in the belief they were being relocated to a more hopeful setting, the murders and persecution of the ghettos behind them. But these were the last of the hope-inducing lies they would ever see.

In the late 30s, the solution to the 'Jewish Problem' was to relocate them to Madagascar, but that never happened. Instead they were 'relocated' to concentration camps all over Nazi-occupied Europe. Hitler thought that too expensive and too slow so the concentration camps became extinction camps. The Final Solution was to pack them into trains that led directly in Auschwitz, and as that became too small, to nearby Auschwitz-Birkenau; in 1944, up to 7,000 a day. In Warsaw, a railway led straight into Treblinka Extermination Camp. On arrival, they were told to put down their luggage and get undressed for a shower. Only when they were locked inside the 'showers' did they realize that what issued from the ceilings vents was not water but a deadly gas, Zyklon B, a cyanide-based gas that kills agonisingly in 5 to 15 minutes. As Commandment Hoess said: 'You can tell because after that time they stop screaming.' Zyklon B was first used in Auschwitz in 1941, on 600 Soviet prisoners and 250 sick Polish prisoners. The Wall of Death was where prisoners were taken out and shot for minor infringements, looking just as we saw it in *The Counterfeiters*, but without the floral tribute that is there today.



Auschwitz appears at first like any other prison: barbed wire, square blank buildings, watchtowers. It's only when inside that that very ordinariness hits you. The Nazis wasted nothing. Here is a room full of human hair, which was used to make felt. Glasses, false teeth, combs, toothbrushes, shoes, suitcases, all the dull personal details of everyday living, were meticulously sorted into massive piles. On seeing all this, there in front of your eyes, Hannah Arendt's famous phrase, 'the banality of evil', written during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, takes on the meaning she intended. For what was being done was totally without feeling. Auschwitz was not run by maniacs crazed with blood-lust. The placement of the railway, gas chambers and adjacent ovens for incinerating the corpses, all were designed with

an eye to efficiency. The wife of Commandment Hoess said she loved life at Auschwitz because you could get so many useful and interesting items from the Jews' luggage. Our group is silent as we enter one of the gas chambers.

Jews weren't the only ones imprisoned and massacred at Auschwitz. About 1.3 million died there, of which 1.1 million were Jews, as far as can be estimated. All inmates wore a coloured star to distinguish what group they belonged to: physically handicapped, Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, all people who fell short of the Aryan ideal, were colour-coded according to their deviation.

The Auschwitz tour was one of the options during the Krakow leg of the trip. My first reaction was definitely not: it seemed a ghoulish thing to do. But having seen it, I am glad I did. No doubt there are those who visit for the same reason they watch horror movies, with the added kick here that this is real. Probably neo-nazis come to gloat: I saw a group of bikies with skulls-decorated T-shirts who might, but hopefully not, fall into this category.

How anyone could visit Auschwitz and in honesty remain a Holocaust denier is not believable, which is the main reason why it should be visited. As George Santayana said in a quote displayed at the entrance: 'Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' Holocaust deniers handle this by revisionism: things didn't quite happen that way. Which is, when you think of it, a version of John Howard's 'black armband' theory of history: that the massacres of indigenous Australians didn't quite happen that way, so we needn't feel guilty or even sorry.

A visit to Auschwitz puts paid to that line of thinking.

Warsaw



The atmosphere of Auschwitz looms over Warsaw, a city that copped it first from the Germans, then again when the Russians 'liberated' the city. The Warsaw Uprising began on August 1, 1944, just before the Russians arrived. It had the dual purpose of joining forces against the Nazis and to liberate the city so it could be Polish once again before the Russians arrived. However, the Russian army parked on the opposite side of the Vistula and stayed there, hoping the Uprising would fail. It did. Before retreating, the German army systematically blew up every Jewish house and murdered nearly 200,000 citizens. From the first German invasion in 1939 to the Russian occupation, 800,000 Poles had died and 85 per cent of the city was left in ruins. The Jewish Ghetto, once the largest in Europe, was wiped out: the Germans built a railway from the Ghetto direct to Treblinka extermination camp.

Warsaw's history is one of violence and misuse of power. Sigismund III, the last Polish king, started wars with Sweden, the Ottoman Empire, and other places that only led to



impoverishment and the end of the once powerful Polish Empire. Yet his son was proud of him, erecting a statue of Sigismund in the family tradition: trampling a Turk under his horse, while Sigismund looks disdainfully into the middle distance, unaware or uncaring of what is happening beneath him. Warsaw is a city of statues, many commemorating recent events: the Warsaw Uprising, the Treblinka train. Although Chopin left Warsaw when he was 22, he is Warsaw's favourite son: a magnificent statue is in one of the royal parks. We are treated to a piano recital of Chopin with champagne in the orangery of one of the palaces, the walls lined with priceless Greek and Roman statuary.



Across the road from our hotel is Stalin's only remaining gift to Warsaw, the massive Palace of Culture and Science (his other gifts have been lovingly removed). The square stepped design, topped with a tower, becomes familiar again in Moscow, where Stalin built seven of the things. Across the road from our hotel is Stalin's only remaining gift to Warsaw, the massive Palace of Culture and Science (his other gifts have been lovingly removed). The square stepped design, topped with a tower, becomes familiar again in Moscow, where Stalin built seven of the things. The Old Town with Castle Square, and the 'Royal Way' lined with palaces and churches, were all but demolished in World War II. The buildings we now see are modern, but carefully designed and constructed so that they look exactly as if they were built centuries ago – surely an economic miracle, given the fifty years of cold Soviet stagnation. Not to say a regard for heritage that Tasmanians could do well to emulate.



It is a Saturday and an official wedding day; the lovely churches in the Old Town are in high demand. The public is welcome to enter the churches while a ceremony is in progress, and we hear the bride say in Polish, presumably 'I do', but for all I know it could have been: 'He will.'. Outside a trio of teenage boys expertly play baroque music. Further down the street a virtuoso violinist is giving Vivaldi the sort of treatment you'd expect to hear in a top concert hall.



Warsaw is our last major city to visit with Andreas and his crew. His train takes us to Shestokay, a small town near the Polish-Lithuanian border where we change to a Russian train that takes us to Vilnius, then into Russia and St. Petersburg and Moscow. Andreas and his crew dress up in period costume to say goodbye.

Vilnius

We stop near the Lithuanian border at Shestokay to exchange trains with another Captain's Choice tour, doing exactly our trip but starting from Moscow. That tour is led by our old friend Gordon Higman, who took us around South America the previous year. Gordon finds time during the hectic rush in swapping people and luggage for a photo with Catherine and our current tour manager John Cowper.



The Russian train has old-fashioned corridor carriages in need of clean-up with made up beds for seats. The crew has thoughtfully placed the pillow end under the smallish window so if we lie down we gaze not at scenery but at the corridor outside. Every twenty minutes or so a noisy blast of cold air refrigerates the compartment.

Another idiosyncrasy is that toilet paper is NOT to be flushed down the toilet under any circumstances: the hole is tiny and paper would block it and the train would have to be stopped while technicians worked on it. So: please to place used toilet paper in the bin provided and the attendant will remove it from time to time. We carefully do not put our vivacious hostess Galina to that unpleasant task. It seems inappropriate in these circumstances that the Cantonese for Russia, Catherine tells me, is 'orlorsi', very close to 'orjorsi', which means 'I have shat.' Galina is as helpful as her limited English allows, we are provided with a 200 ml bottle of vodka each, and the meals are splendid, even including caviar, with Australian and New Zealand wines, not rough Georgian red as you might expect.



Our hotel, the Vilnius Novotel, is a symptom of Vilnius struggling out of the poor times; it is not working very well, the lifts are tiny and won't take our luggage. This leads to an altercation between our staff and the hotel staff, ending in an invitation to one of our escorts to 'step outside'. We try to exchange a few euros for toilet money but the hotel won't do that:

'You must go to a casino,' the girl at Reception says.'

'A casino?'

'A casino,' she affirms. 'You find next door is one.'

So there is, but they won't oblige. We walk up the street until we find another.

'But you must register,' a hostess says. 'Passport please.'

I don't have my passport with me. 'Will a driving license do?' I ask, certain that it won't. But it does do. 10 euros (\$17) change hands for toilet money. We blow what is left on a bottle of cherry vodka (awful) and chocolate biscuits.

Lithuania is only a small country of 3.5 million but it has 17 universities, 3,000 lakes and a heritage we had never dreamed. In the 1300s the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was the largest in Europe, and in an alliance with Poland continued prosperous until the 1700s, when Russia annexed most of Lithuania's land. Lithuania was declared a sovereign state in 1918, but over twenty years later, Russia came marching back again, then Germany, then Russia again at the end of the war. In March 1990, Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to declare its

independence, and is today finally on the up and up, due to become the capital of the EU in 2010.

But before that, during the Stalinist years, the KGB headquarters was in the centre of town in a drab looking building. They had a ‘dob-in-your-neighbour’ scheme, not unlike one aspect of John Howard’s anti-terrorism legislation, except that Howard didn’t actually murder those so reported and the KGB did. Our guide told us her grandfather was reported for having anti-Stalin views – he hadn’t any more than any other Lithuanian – but spent the next ten years in Siberia. At least he didn’t get the full treatment. Inside the building, now a museum, are several cells. In one, the floor was flooded with ice-cold water; the prisoners stood on a block to keep out of the water until they fell off exhausted. The death room, now with a glass floor and a pair of dead man’s shoes visible, is downstairs. The prisoner entered believing he was being released but was shot in the head from behind. A door opened onto the street, the body loaded onto a truck and dumped in a mass grave on the outskirts of town. The grave was discovered comparatively recently; it contained 800 bodies – its discovery led to forensic work that revealed what had really been happening in the ordinary looking KGB HQ. The Soviet occupation also had a deadly effect on architecture as well as people: many residential blocks still exist in the grim, no-nonsense style of communist Russia; each flat was around 50 square metres and facilities shared with other flats in the block.



Lithuania has Poland’s 90 per cent Christianity rate, but unlike Poland, ten per cent are Russian Orthodox (you can tell from the dome topped with a double cross). St. Peter and Paul has 2,000 statues and the interior walls are pure white, a wire-mesh model of a Viking long boat hangs in the chancel. During the Russian occupations the churches fell into disuse but as they were the only really solid buildings, they were used for other purposes. The Vilnius gaol has massive secure walls because it was once a monastery.

Opposite the monastic prison is the Gate of Dawn, once the start of long pilgrimages to the Holy Land. High in the Gate is St. Theresa’s chapel, in which the celebrated Black Madonna is visible from the street way below. Unlike more modern Africanised versions, in which the Virgin Mary is depicted as black so that locals can relate more easily to her, the medieval Black Madonnas



were made on the assumption this was how she probably looked.



Heading down the street away from the Gate of Dawn, Catherine and a friend discover where the best value amber shops are. They skip lunch in order to browse, rejoicing that they could now shed their wise caution in not buying up in Krakow. Vilnius is where the famous Baltic amber is at, as this sample shows!

As with most other Eastern European cities, Vilnius has a very well and blessedly preserved Old Town, most buildings having been revitalised. Vilnius University is in the Old Town, with beautifully preserved buildings in Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and classic, with an elaborate organ in the Main Hall.



Then a castle from fairyland standing in a lake, a few miles from Vilnius. Trakai Castle was the seat of the Grand Duke of Lithuania. It was built in several stages, starting in the 14th century and the last stage built in the late

15th century. Inside the moat and walls is a massive six storey complex, with wooden balconies, the Grand Ducal Hall occupying an entire wing. Renovations started in the 19th century and continued on and off for years. The major reconstruction, with pains to be as close to the original, was completed in 1961 – again rather amazing as this was during the tight years of Soviet rule.

Lithuania seems like its cuisine – once rich and gamy, but today struggling to find itself. We had a couple of pleasant Western-style meals, tomato sauce all but compulsory, and a memorably dreadful lunch comprising bits of bland chicken on a skewer followed by half a banana with yucky caramel topping. Ah yes, and one excellent wild-berry dessert.

We have completed two thirds of our trip. Now we are to enter Russia herself.

