

The Jewish Traveler

THE IRONY OF HISTORY TRAVELS IN KAZIMIERZ AND PODGORZE, KRAKOW

By Susan Cernyak-Spatz

Summer of 2001. We had some business to transact in Krakow. So as soon as we had installed ourselves in our favorite room at the Hotel Erzherzog Rainer in Vienna, we packed two small totebags and the next morning we were on our way to Krakow. Very good connections with Tyrolian Airlines in a 37-passenger jet, a trip of not quite one hour and 30 minutes; a complete lunch was served by two very competent flight attendants.

The Krakow airport had changed from the year before; it had expanded considerably. There were now large jets directly from Chicago and other Midwest cities arriving regularly and the whole layout was quite big-city compared to what it had been. The next morning, having finished with the lawyer and a few other meetings,



we headed from the Hotel Forum which lies at a bend in the Vistula River, to the district of Kazimierz.

The Forum Hotel probably has the most magnificent view to the Wawel the centuries old castle of Krakow that dominates the city. During the War it had been the private domain of one of the most vicious Nazis, Governor Frank, on whose order Krakow had been made "judenrein," free of Jews, as soon as possible, because he did not want to breathe the same air as the Jews did.

We crossed the river at the Gruenwaldzki Bridge and walked down the Dietla (the broadest street in Kazimierz) until we came to Bozego Ciala street, turned right there and found ourselves on the entrance to Miodowa street, where the corner building, now occupied by a bank, used to be the Hotel Spatz, the property of Hardy's grandfather. About 1/2 block further up Miodowa on the left hand side we find the Temple Synagogue. Probably one of the few conservative synagogues, as compared to the few existing very orthodox synagogues. It has been magnificently restored through the generosity of the Ronald Lauder foundation and is a marvel of gold and stained glass and carved wood on the inside. Compared to the other synagogues it is a relatively modern building. Walking down three blocks further, Miodowa intersects with Szeroka, the heart of Kazimierz.

Kazimierz had been given by one of the Polish kings as resi-

dence to the local Jews; it might have been a king named Kazimir. Szeroka is the heart of Kazimierz, thanks to Spielberg and "Schindler's List." One of the first things as you enter on Szeroka is the Landau house with a big banner, "Spielberg filmed here." Szeroka also contained the famed Rehmuh Synagogue, which is 101% Orthodox, and an old Jewish cemetery. On the right hand side, almost at the beginning of the square is a wall enclosing the old cemetery. About midway up, there is a sign on the wall which warns Cohanim to walk on the other side. They are not allowed in a cemetery or even near it.

On the left hand side of Szeroka, which is really more of a rectangular large square, than a street, are most of the well-known restaurants, the most famous being Ariel, which also has very nice gift shop, and has outdoor seating in summer. But the food is really only so-so.

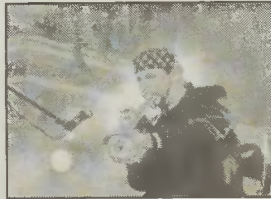
At the end of Szeroka, almost closing it off, is the "Old Synagogue," which is now a very interesting museum showing pre-war life in Kazimierz. The houses on the right side of Szeroka, where there are no restaurants, are rather dilapidated. But it seems that the city has a plan to undertake restoration of all of Kazimierz, because it has become one of the best tourist attractions of Krakow.

Walking down from Szeroka on Izaaka Street we came to Plac Nowy, another rather large square. We were there on a Saturday and the most incredible market took place there. It seemed as if all of Krakow, not just Jews, milled around looking for bargains. One did not ask obviously were the merchandise came from, but it was good and new merchandise clothing, shoes, household goods, everything at very, very low prices. And since Krakow is not an inexpensive city, people seemed to take advantage of the market.

Crossing the market on Plac Nowy we went down Meiselsa, where on the left hand side, about 1/2 a block from Plac Nowy is the Jewish Cultural Center, an old beautifully restored building, painted the Habsburg yellow on the outside. On the inside there is a totally modern community center, with a very good bookstore and gift shop, and an excellent cafe, the Cafe Sara, serving good pastry.

At the bookstore, we were selecting some posters, and among other things I asked whether the history of Krakow had more than the bedraggled Jewish figures that were depicted in the Old Synagogue Museum. The employee of the bookstore recommended a book to me, "The Jews of Krakow," which depicted the suc-

cessful and intellectual side of Krakow Jewry. We detected an accent in the young man's English, and asked him where he was from. He was Viennese, an Austrian Gentile who did his civil service as conscientious objector at the Krakow Jewish Center. It seems a large number of young Austrians do their civil service at Jewish organizations, like the Wiesenthal, the Holocaust Museum, or as this young man did, in Krakow. We told him of our past and he suggested that we let him guide us through Podgorze, the walled-in ghetto of Krakow, the location of the Schindler story. We made a date for the following Sunday, because Saturday night we wanted to see the Klezmer festival on Szeroka in Kazimierz.



It is a most astonishing site to see. In 2001 it was the XI Festival of Jewish Culture to be held in Kazimierz. It is a whole week of Jewish and Jewish-connected events all around Kazimierz, in the synagogues, at the "Kino Letnie" where they show films, at the Jewish Center on Meiselsa and of course on Szeroka. Theater, concerts classic readings, lectures, dance, and what they call "Klezinologia" (I presume the history of Klezmer).

We went Saturday evening at 6 PM to the final concert in the middle of Szeroka, where a gigantic stage decorated with Mogen Davids, and blue and silver ornamentation, like seven-branch candlesticks dominated the center. The square was wall to wall people, all cheering the Klezmer bands who rotated on and off the stage, with song, and dance and solos. The names of the performers showed where they came from, like Michael Alpert, Frank London, Gary Lucas, the singers, and band names like The Krakow Klezmer Band, Di Shikere Kapelye, Dave Krakauer Klezmer Madness, The Klezmatiks, and the All Star Festival Klezmer Orchestra.

The audience seemed to come from all over Krakow, hardly a Jewish face to be seen among them. One wonders, whether their grandparents, and/or parents were not the ones that chased Jews around Szeroka and herded them into Podgorze.

The next morning we met our

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