

## **Auschwitz and Jewish Krakow**

**By Daniel A Metraux**

The brutal Nazi murder of over six million Jews during World War II is a well-known oft-told story, but one should visit the sites of the Jewish ghettos in cities like Krakow or Prague and the remains of death camps such as Auschwitz and Birkenau to fully grasp the horror of what happened here six decades ago. Fortunately, Poland has stoically preserved these camps and ghettos for the benefit of future generations.

To visit Krakow today is also to bear witness to the decline and final extermination of one of the world's great centers of Judaism. A century ago Poland was the home of more than three million Jews.<sup>1</sup> During the late Middle Ages Jewish communities flourished in all of Poland's major cities. Jewish traders, manufacturers, and businessmen grew in wealth and prestige and became important cultural leaders and patrons of the arts. Sadly, their decline began in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century when, gradually deprived of their property and rights as citizens, many Jews were forced to move into ghetto communities such as Krakow's Kazimierz quarter.

The Nazi goal was to eliminate forever the Jewish population of Poland and they were brilliantly successful. A few lucky Jews escaped to the West before the war, but most of the rest were forced to remain in their walled ghettos by the Nazis who gradually murdered them all. There were once 65,000 or more Jews in Kazimierz, but now there are fewer than 200 Jews in Krakow. Today dark and largely empty synagogues bear witness to the thriving and bustling community that once worshipped there.

To summarize the horrible termination of the Jewish community in Poland, one only needs to view a solitary picture now on exhibit at Auschwitz, 60 kilometers west of Krakow, taken by a German SS officer during the war. The photograph depicts a small group of middle-aged Jewish women and children standing at the railway terminus at Birkenau. They are carrying bags containing their most prized possessions and daily essentials. It is a bright sunny day and their smiles and hopeful expressions make it seem that they are looking forward to a new life and bright future. They most likely had been living in a dark and crowded ghetto replete with filth and disease and badly lacking in edible food and potable water. The Nazis had

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<sup>1</sup> According to a 1942 Nazi document on display at Auschwitz, there were eleven million Jews in the whole of Europe with well over three million living in Poland.

told them that they were going to be moved to a new settlement to the East where they could start new lives. They had endured a long ride in a crowded freight car, but now they were outside in the fresh air. They had been “temporarily separated” from their husbands, older sons and daughters to “facilitate” the processing of their official papers.

Behind the women in the picture, almost out of sight, is an oddly-shaped building which they would soon enter. They would each be given an identification number for their luggage which they were told to reclaim after they had taken a sanitary cleansing shower to remove the sweat and grime accumulated after days of riding in the train. They would then remove their clothing and step into Birkenau’s infamous gas chamber. But the smiles on their faces betray the fact that they were oblivious of their impending fate.

These unfortunates, like well over a million others who stood on that same railroad landing, would be dead within minutes. The ever-efficient German staff would quickly remove all gold fillings from teeth and all of their hair. Their shoes, clothing and such things as hair and tooth brushes would be sent back to Germany for re-use. The hair would be sent for use at German textile firms and the ashes from cremated bodies would go agricultural stations to be used as fertilizer. Nothing was wasted.

Today at Auschwitz there are vast piles of shoes, tooth and hair brushes, and a vast assortment of suitcases and clothing on display. The Nazi departure in January 1945 was so abrupt in the face of a major Soviet advance that although they tried to dynamite or burn down all buildings and other evidence of their wartime crimes, they left behind plenty of evidence of their crimes. Today the bunkhouses and other buildings at Auschwitz remain much in their previous condition as stern testimony to the many tragedies that occurred here.

While the Germans were more successful in dynamiting most of the buildings at Birkenau, a short ten-minute drive from Auschwitz, there are a few barracks left standing. Today the casual visitor can aimlessly wander through these structures where able-bodied men and women were taken directly from the freight cars and stuffed four or five at a time into small lofts the size of a normal double bed. They worked twelve-hour days wearing only thin clothing to protect them from the bitter Polish winters and eating so little food that many eventually starved to death. The barracks were made of thin wood with clear separations between the planks that allowed in cold air from the outside. There was only room for 200,000 prisoners at the camps, so the Nazis counted on a constant stream of death to make room for the daily arrivals of new

inmates. There are also the dynamited remains of the gas chambers and two small ponds still gray with the ashes of the more than a million and a half unfortunates who died here.<sup>2</sup>

Birkenau today is surrounded with woods and fields bright with flowers and the chirping of birds. The 90-minute bus ride from Warsaw takes one through charming farm villages and luscious countryside. Only the remains of the death camps remind one of the horrible tragedy that occurred here a mere six decades ago.

Once back in Krakow one can walk the streets of the old Jewish ghetto in Kazimierz. Kazimierz grew as an independent town in the 1400s and became a Jewish ghetto when the Jewish population was expelled from the city and forced to live there. The ghetto itself was quite small -- today one can walk across the district in about 10-12 minutes—but it grew so rapidly in population that by 1939 there were 65,000 Jews living within its walled confines. Gates at both ends of the ghetto regulated the flow of people in and out.

Kazimierz grew as a haven for Jews seeking refuge from persecution in Russia and elsewhere in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Economic life centered around trade and the manufacture of commodities like fine woolen cloth. Prewar photographs show a tightly knit community centering on a half dozen or more synagogues and a central square surrounded by a concentric layering of small homes and shops and large tenements that held its very dense population.

The Jews of Kazimierz suffered horribly during World War II. At the start of the War the Germans relocated the Jews to another walled ghetto in Podgor, just south of the Vistula River. Most were eventually exterminated in the nearby Plaszow Concentration Camp (See Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* for a further view of the fate of Kazimierz's Jews). A few also died at Auschwitz.

The Germans also commandeered the synagogues in Kazimierz, hacking down religious objects and using the buildings as housing for farm animals and as storage space for military equipment. Amazingly, the synagogues survived the war and today a couple have been restored for religious or museum purposes while the others sit largely abandoned as silent testimonies to the Nazi's brilliantly successful campaign of massive genocide.

Hitler's success has left Kazimierz as an empty shell of its former self. Parts of the neighborhood have been carefully and lovingly restored, but many of the old tenements sit

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<sup>2</sup> About ninety percent of the victims were Jews. Many Poles, gypsies, homosexuals, and other political prisoners also died here.

abandoned with the windows all boarded up. Most of the houses are now occupied by non-Jews, but local authorities have placed maps and historical markers throughout the district to give one a sense of what was once there.

We are all familiar with the history of the Holocaust, but a visit to Krakow and to nearby Auschwitz and Birkenau gives one a clearer sense of the depth of the horror.

### ***Poland Rebuilds its Past to Bolster New Nationhood***

Any intrepid traveler desiring to experience how a new nation rising from the ashes of a tragic and miserable past can successfully define itself should undertake a lengthy sojourn to Poland. While every nation seeks to identify itself through its links to its past, Poland, in reality a very new nation, has gone to extremes by reconstructing its major cities to their medieval magnificence.

No developed nation with the possible exception of Korea has suffered as much as Poland over the past two or three centuries. Poland, like Korea, sits between three traditional powers – Germany, Russia and the Austrian empire – all of which coveted Poland's lush farm land for a variety of economic benefits and as a buffer against the other powers. Poland's flat landscape is also most difficult to defend against a determined invader.

Poland proudly maintained its independence well into the early modern era, but by the late 1700s the Poles had lost their nationhood when Austria, Prussia and Russia partitioned the kingdom into their respective realms. A newly independent Poland emerged from the ashes of World War I, but Polish freedom only lasted for a generation.

The Soviet Union and Germany brutally partitioned Poland in September, 1939, thereby inflicting untold misery on the Poles. Indeed, no nation in World War II suffered as much death and destruction as Poland as a full 18% of its population died in the conflict (compared with 7.4% in Germany, 11.2% in the USSR, 0.2% in the US, 2.5% in Japan and 0.9% in Britain). Fully 6 million Poles died, half of them Jews. All of the major cities were burned to the ground.

Poland then had to endure over four decades of Soviet domination after World War II—but Communism really never took hold in the countryside where over 80% of the land remained in private hands even at the worst of times. But it can be said that Poland only achieved real independence with the rise of the Solidarity movement in the 1980s and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Poland has taken advantage of its newfound independence to faithfully and beautifully reconstruct its past from the ashes of World War II and prior conflicts. The emphasis is on a very faithful restoration and recreation of whole towns and cities, especially “old town” districts, to their traditional beauty and stature. The rebirth of Warsaw, Gdansk (Danzig) and Krakow are excellent examples of this development.

Warsaw’s Royal Castle is an outstanding example of this development. Over half of the city’s citizens died at the hands of the Germans during the war and as the Germans began their retreat in early 1945 in the face of a Soviet invasion, Hitler ordered the complete leveling of the city which his army carried out with utmost efficiency. The castle and the surrounding old town were dynamited beyond recognition. Photographs taken at the end of the War show devastation akin to that of Tokyo or Hiroshima.

The Royal Castle, however, has been painstakingly and very lovingly rebuilt. Since prewar pictures and diagrams of each room in the castle exist in abundance, it is possible to reconstruct the rich grandeur of the castle in a most faithful manner. Indeed, photographs hanging in each room give the visitor the sense that what he is seeing is indeed very faithful to the past. The designs of wooden floors and paintings on the walls and ceilings are very faithful to the original. Some art treasures were hidden away from the marauding Germans before the start of the War and have been returned, but fine paintings and other furniture on loan from other European palaces. The result is a stunning presentation of the wealth and beauty of the palace as it was in the late 1700s before the abrupt termination of Polish independence.

The Palace is surrounded by an equally meticulously reconstructed “Old Town” district – at least a square mile – with stunning streets, open squares, parks, ancient churches, and other palaces. What makes traversing this quarter even more fun is that it is also a lively residential neighborhood with a wide variety of shops, restaurants and theatres.

Gdansk’s reconstruction is even more spectacular. This ancient port and ship-building center on the Baltic coast presents a superb example of Hanseatic architecture of the late Middle Ages. Because the city became very wealthy through its control of most of Poland’s foreign trade, it is one of the great architectural gems of Europe even today. Gdansk has a long history of German control and its stately buildings strongly reflect this heritage—one finds much the same architecture in Hamburg, for example.

The “Old Town” of Gdansk has a multitude of examples of late medieval architecture including massive gates, a gothic town hall, and St. Mary’s Church (Cathedral), probably the largest old brick church in the world with 406 steep steps to the top of its incredible tower. The many hundreds of buildings in the central part of the city have been individually and very carefully reconstructed to their former glory. The district’s streets are open pedestrian walkways replete with ancient fountains and modern restaurants. A river inlet contains a restored dock area and a variety of attractive ships as the remains of a couple of bombed-out old buildings to remind the visitor of what once-was. I took my students to many cities in Europe on this tour, but none compared in beauty with Gdansk which should be on everybody’s itinerary. A museum and highly moving memorial to the Solidarity Movement proclaims that Poland shall never again lose its independence and freedom to an oppressive authority.

Krakow has always been the cultural hub of Poland. Founded in the 7<sup>th</sup> century by the legendary Prince Krak, it was the nation’s capital from the 11<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> century. Even after the capital was moved to Warsaw in 1596, Polish kings continued to be crowned and buried at the stunning and beautiful Wawel palace and cathedral complex on a hill overlooking the river above the city’s “Old Town” district. The current Pope hails from this jewel in the crown city.

No other city in Poland better captures the medieval legacy of the country and it is no surprise that the city was listed on UNESCO’s first list as a World Heritage Site.