



The grid of streets around Rynek Glowny are well planned and preserved



Empty chairs in the Ghetto Heroes Square commemorate the mass deportation of Jews

# Krakow of Dawn

The Polish city, carrying the scars of Nazi occupation, now crackles with a hip, bohemian spirit

**:: Rathina Sankari**

Polish weather is unpredictable,” said Emilia Kubik, my host in Poland, as I peered through the train window to bask in the warmth of the summer. It was a three-hour journey from Warsaw to Krakow, but I was in no hurry as Emilia kept me engaged with her childhood stories from the communist era.

Poland in Central Europe has had a turbulent history and been a victim of changing borders due to several invasions from Russia, Prussia and the Ottoman Empire. The final alteration was the aftereffect of World War II: modern-day Poland is an outcome of the Potsdam Conference of 1945.

In 1939, when World War II erupted, Krakow was home to 70,000 affluent Jews living in Kazimierz district located in the outskirts of the city. This suburb on the Vistula River was named after its founder, Casimir III, in 1335. In 1495, due to rising opposition against the Jews from the locals, King Jan Olbracht expelled them from the Old Town of Krakow to Kazimierz. But the steadfast Jews soon converted Kazimierz into a prosperous, viable destination with synagogues and markets. Wealthy Jewish immigrants from Germany, Italy, Spain and Portugal made a beeline to this commercial haven.

## The Dark Past

During World War II, Jews were relocated by the Nazis to the Podgorze ghetto on the other side of Vistula River. From here the Jews were deported to the Plaszow concentration camp and the gas chambers of Belzec. I could witness some of these dark chapters from history as I walked through the streets of Podgorze.



PHOTOS: RATHINA SANKARI

The Gothic altar of St Mary's Basilica was hidden during World War II, but the Nazis found it and took it to Nuremberg. After the war, it was brought back in 1957

Grey, weather-beaten buildings strewn around the area, fragments of the ghetto wall and the Ghetto Heroes Square with large metal chairs, denoting the thousands of Jews who were deported, spoke volumes of what the Jews underwent during the Nazi regime.

As I took one of the tourist-friendly, converted club cars, Andrei, the driver, says that he isn't sure if he has Jewish roots as some assimilated Jews over the years had become practising Catholics after the war. Until the 1930s, Poland was a centre of multiethnic society, with the Germans, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Jews living together. After the war, the country became a homogeneous Catholic country governed by the communist system of the Soviet Union.

Andrei adds that the infamous SS (Schutzstaffel, Nazi's Special Forces) commander Amon Goeth's house at Plaszow was recently on sale and would soon be converted into an apartment. The pharmacy of Tadeusz Pankiewicz, the non-Jew who refused to relocate to the Gentile side of the city and operated from within the ghetto even during Nazi occupation, still stands tall beside the Historical Museum of Krakow. Parts of Podgorze, Kazimierz and the pharmacy were showcased in Steven Spielberg's Academy Award-winning film *Schindler's List*.

The Jews who weren't deported to the camps were forced into manual labour in the factories that mushroomed around the ghetto. Oskar Schindler's Deutsche Emailwarenfabrik – a factory producing enamelled goods – was one such where Jews worked during the Nazi rule. But this was a different kind of factory as the workers were given refuge and escaped the horrors of Plaszow concentration camp, thanks to Schindler. This noble act of the German who risked his life to save 1,200 Jews was chronicled by Thomas Keneally in his book *Schindler's Ark*. As I walked through Schindler's museum, the mood was sombre and brooding, with sordid short videos, Nazi posters, pictures of the Jews in the ghetto and poignant quotes from Jewish survivors and victims on display.

While Schindler's museum narrates stories of Krakow's bloodied history, Kazimierz today is strikingly different. Hip, bohemian and vibrant, its scars of Nazi persecution aren't evident unless you scratch the surface.



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Tinware produced in Schindler's factory is on display at the museum

### The Old and the New

As I walked through its cobbled streets, the excitement was infectious. Cafes and restaurants with signages in Hebrew script were bursting with youngsters as local bands play Jewish klezmer music. The place wears a cool badge which has become synonymous of Jewishness. Surprisingly, this area was neglected during the communist era and not frequented even by the locals. The district gained popularity with the release of movies like *Schindler's List* and the annual Jewish cultural festival that has revived Jewish culture from the shadows of Holocaust.

I ambled with my effervescent guide Marta Weigel through modern Kazimierz peppered with synagogues, kosher restaurants, Jewish bakeries and cultural centres. At Plac Nowy, a lively market in the heart of Kazimierz, I dug into the Polish street food *zapiekanka* to satiate my hunger pangs. A crispy, cheesy *smorrebrod* (open sandwich) made with long bread like a baguette with various toppings, primarily cheese and mushroom, it is quite popular. We then walked into the 16th century Remuh Synagogue at Szeroka Street – the smallest and busiest synagogue



The Remuh Synagogue with the Aron Kodesh (Holy Ark) from the Renaissance period

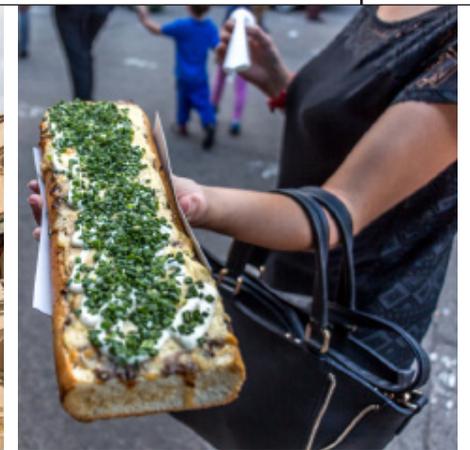
of Kazimierz – where religious services are still conducted. It houses the Aron Kodesh – the Holy Ark or the Torah Ark – from the Renaissance period. The tomb of the venerated Rabbi Moshe Isserles in the Old Jewish Cemetery behind the synagogue attracts Jews from across the globe and is regarded as an important pilgrimage site for the community. After the war, some of the fragments of the recovered tombstones were used to construct the monument called Wailing Wall within its premises in remembrance of the Jews who lost their lives.

### Gothic to Baroque

While Kazimierz has shown exemplary re-



Krakow's main square, Rynek Glowny, is a World Heritage Site



The zapiekanka is a popular open sandwich



Klezmer music played on the streets of Kazimierz

silience to resurrect from the dead, I was keen to explore the old town which is the identity of the imperial capital. I headed to Wawel Hill with an arresting complex of castles, chapels and churches. With turrets, spires and gilded domes of various shapes, sizes and colours, there wasn't any harmony between the structures. Marta saw my bemused look and responded, "Each structure was built in a different era hence the hotchpotch of architecture." The seat of the Polish monarchy, the castle has witnessed many coronations and funerals when the nobles ruled. Marta took me on a tour as I revelled in the beauty of the crypt of St Leonard from the Romanesque period, the Gothic sarcophagus of King Vladislav II Jagiello, the centrepiece Sigismund's Chapel from the Renaissance to the baroque shrine of St Stanislaus. Priceless paintings, tapestries and porcelain objects were on display in every alcove. During World War II, the castle functioned as the headquarters of the Nazi governor general Hans Frank, and hence escaped the perils of war.

All the talking had got Marta parched and we decided to visit one of the cafes at the Krakow Main Square aka the Rynek Glowny. Declared as a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1978, this plaza from the 13th century is the hub of Krakow's life. Christmas and Easter markets, festivals and concerts are held in the square every year. The market is lined with bookshops, cafes and restaurants, Town Hall Tower, Cloth Hall and the magnificent St Mary's Basilica. Many restaurants and nightclubs dot the cellars of the square, entertaining its patrons with jazz. When we arrived, the square was bustling

as families had stepped out to enjoy the summer. Horse-drawn carriages clattered on its cobbled streets, street performers, musicians and flocks of pigeons ensured the market was abuzz. At Cafe Noworolski that was opened in the ground floor of Cloth Hall in 1910, I finished the creamy Kremowka in quick bites and washed it down with coffee. I am told the Polish pie made of puff pastry and cream was a decadence that the Polish Pope, John Paul II, loved to indulge in.

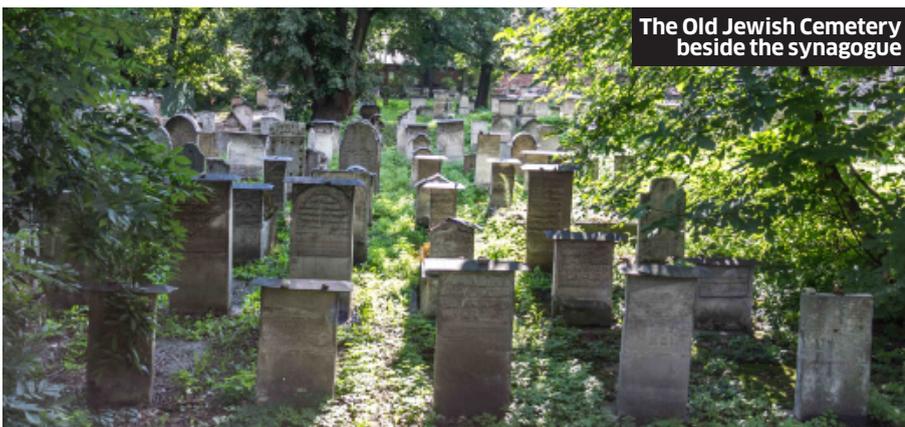
### The Resurrection

We sauntered to the Cloth Hall where tourists and locals crowded the numerous shops selling curios, souvenirs, jewellery made of Polish amber, embroidered dresses and wood carvings. In the medieval period it was here that vendors sold their wares. It was a major hub in the Black Sea trade. I was fascinated by ambers and stopped by a shop when I heard the cry of a bugle. Marta says, "Legend has it that in the 13th century the city was attacked by Tartars. A trumpet signal from the tower of St Mary's Basilica warned the inhabitants of the invasion, but an arrow pierced the bugle player's neck, ending the tune abruptly." It is played every hour of the day and has continued over the years. As I strolled towards the church, I noticed a vivid juxtaposition; beside the 14th century Gothic-styled St Mary's Basilica stood Hard Rock Cafe belonging to the modern era.

While the country has weathered and suffered the onslaught of invasions and political drama, the indomitable Poles have risen like the phoenix never to be crushed. Krakow has come back to life. ■



Restaurants and cafes in Rynek Glowny



The Old Jewish Cemetery beside the synagogue