

**SFGate.com**[Print This Article](#)[Back to](#)advertisement |[your ad here](#)

Article

**SFGate.com**

## Often-captured Krakow now conquering hearts

Spud Hilton, Chronicle Travel Editor

Thursday, September 29, 2011

[More...](#)

The ancient white marble was too far away to brush with fingertips, but the sarcophagus of King Jadwiga certainly seemed real.

As did the rest of the 14th century cathedral built by Wladislaw the Elbow-high, and the sprawling Renaissance castle next door - seemingly very real neighbors atop Krakow's Wawel Hill, which, in all likelihood, also was real.

I was having trouble grasping such a magnificent seat of power for a nation that, well, didn't exist. At least not for centuries at a time.

As the frequent capital of a country that has been on the wrong end of dozens of hostile takeovers - even disappearing from the map for 120 years - Krakow is having the last laugh.

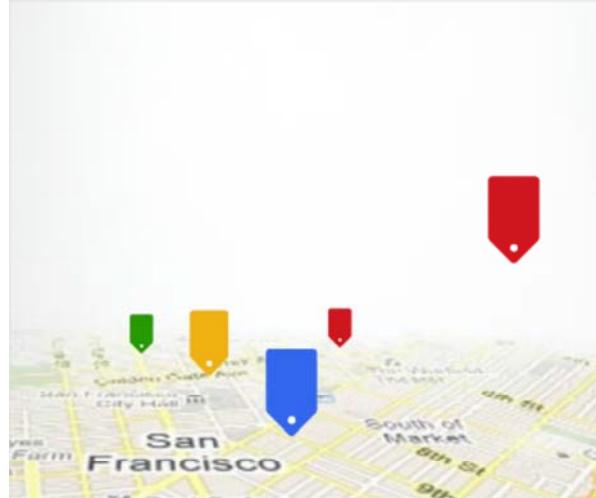
Whereas Dresden, Germany, and Warsaw had to be rebuilt from rubble (and Poles joke about Prague becoming a theme park), Krakow's medieval and Gothic treasures are intact in large part because of its invaders (but more on that later). Add to that dozens of contemporary galleries and museums covering the best (and worst) of times in Poland, and the kind of nightlife that comes with being home to 100,000 college students.

I was in Krakow to seek out the new vibe in an old city, especially as Poland strives to meet European Union goals, as well as to better understand why the city, no longer the capital, is still considered the cultural heart of Poland.

Or, as a fellow passenger on the train into town put it: "Warsaw is for business. Krakow is for life."

### Aggressive neighbors

It's difficult enough keeping track of your own monarchs over the past 1,000 years, no less rulers during foreign occupations, but Jerzy Korta seemed to have it covered.



Korta, a longtime guide in Krakow, had already shown my wife, Ann, and I the Gothic Church of St. Mary and its 39-foot-tall high altar (carved by Veit Stoss when Columbus was still trying to prove the world isn't flat), and we had moved on to the Wawel Hill. Wandering among the cheek-to-jowl chapels, tombs, statues and sarcophagi in the Wawel Cathedral, Korta rattled off dates, legends and names, from Boleslaw the Brave (not to be confused with Boleslaw the Curly, Boleslaw the Wrymouthing or Stanislaw the Furrowed Brow) to hometown hero Pope John Paul II, archbishop of Krakow for 15 years.

An odd jog in the royal line: King Jadwiga, a 10-year-old girl who was crowned "king" in 1384 instead of "queen" to make it clear she was the ruler, not a consort. She was later sainted and her cross at the cathedral is a major pilgrimage goal for the Polish. (An American living in Krakow told me there are two religious groups: conservative Catholics and *really* conservative Catholics: "This is a city that likes to go to church.")

Interspersed throughout Korta's patter were glimpses of times when Krakow and Poland were run by someone other than Poles. Much of the story, however, is of geographical (not philosophical or psychological) subjugation.

Captured, not conquered.

According to Korta, Krakow never embraced communism; fought back during the Partition years when Poland was divided up among Russia, Prussia (Germany) and Austria; and maintained the unique language through occupations by Hungary, Prussia, Russia, the Soviet Union, Sweden, the Tartars, Nazis and, in the middle 1600s, the army of Transylvania.

There were silver linings: Krakow ended up part of Austria (instead of Prussia or Russia) during the Partition era, a fact that Krakovians say gives them a better disposition. And the lone positive note in the Nazi occupation during World War II is that the city was used as a regional command - much of which operated out of Wawel Royal Castle - and was spared the bombing that flattened Warsaw.

"Poland has a very, very difficult history because of a very bad neighborhood," said Korta with a wry smile. "We have very aggressive neighbors."

### **Where poles attract**

Krakow's 13th century Market Square, the centerpiece of the Old Quarter and the largest medieval town square in Europe (roughly the size of seven NFL football fields), is laden with atmosphere and attractions: more than two dozen cafes with bistro tables; the venerable Cloth Hall, still home to scores of vendor stalls and now a few of Poland's most impressive art museums; the (literally) Underground Museum, a modern take on the square's ancient past; the Town Hall Tower; and, in the morning shadow of the Church of St. Mary, an oddly placed Hard Rock Cafe.

And lots of pigeons.

Preferring both pigeons and tourists in smaller doses, we migrated to the Planty, a 52-acre greenbelt of gardens, trees, trails and monuments that circles the bulb-shaped Old Quarter.

We strolled the walking path up the east side, the raised Old Quarter on our left and the bustling modern city on our right, stopping often to examine the gardens, to watch the mix of travelers and locals and, a few times, to just stop.

Once the location of the city's defensive walls and moat, the Planty was converted in the 1820s under Austrian rule - another silver lining from its many foreign occupations.

### **Factory unsealed**

The sign was in Hebrew and Polish, but I'm pretty sure it said: "The remaining portion of this wall witnessed the absolute depth of mankind's cruelty - as well as the peak of a people's ability to survive."

Or something like that.

Having crossed the Vistula River to find the newish Schindler's Factory museum, I cut through Podgorze, the former Jewish Ghetto under Nazi occupation, now a blue-collar neighborhood dotted with tributes and reminders of its brutal past: the memorial chairs at Plac Bohaterow Gettath; an art-installation cement tunnel with the letters AUSCHWITZ cut into the roof; and the aforementioned plaque on a 40-foot hunk of otherwise unremarkable gray wall built in 1941 to corral Polish Jews.

The latest addition is the Schindler's Factory museum (the full name goes on for a while), that is attracting crowds to an out-of-the-way industrial neighborhood (much to the joy of taxi drivers).

Thankfully, the labyrinthine exhibition doesn't focus just on the events of the movie but on the entire occupation of Krakow, using sounds, scenes, photos and artifacts to re-create the experience of Nazi occupation - of living with little food and shelter and even less hope.

With too much to absorb in a single visit, I drifted among the more visually striking and thought-provoking displays, scanning as much of the accompanying text as time - and psychological comfort - would allow. In an airy black-and-white room dedicated to Nazi life in Krakow, I felt my stomach drop when after five minutes, I finally noticed the entire floor was covered in swastika tiles.

The factory isn't intended as a substitute for nearby Auschwitz. Because the Jewish community was so large in Krakow, it is a proportionate part of the exhibition. Schindler's slice of the tour - other than the name on the front of the building - is limited to a couple of rooms staged as the man's office, and the cafe off the lobby (the only place you'll see references to the movie - including one of Spielberg's hats).

## Way off the grid

One of the more difficult tasks in the neighborhood started by (and named for) Kazimierz the Great in 1335 - long before the concept of streets on a grid, apparently - is trying to find the Hawaiian-themed cafe from the Cuban-themed bar.

The former Jewish Quarter (before World War II) has become a focal point for an edgy, arty music and club scene where dozens of bars, from chic to shabby, vie for the zlotys of the thousands of students looking for a place to drink Piwo Zwyiec (the local brew) while the tourists invade the Old Quarter across town.

During the day we had toured the Remu'h Synagogue and Cemetery in Kazimierz, where the wailing wall is a puzzle of slabs from tombstones knocked down by Nazi soldiers, and that night we sampled traditional Polish and Jewish fare from a restaurant on Szeroka Street. While the buildings and businesses honor Kazimierz's ethnic past, barely a handful of Jews still live in the quarter.

After dinner, we wandered the twisty streets in search of Propaganda, another themed bar that seemed an appropriate spot for toasting this former Eastern bloc country.

Climbing the stairs into Propaganda, we were met with "Blinded by the Light" blaring and a room colored only by red lights and Soviet-era memorabilia. Quickly the noise outweighed the novelty and we ducked into La Habana with its Cohiba cigars and menu offering Cuba Libres, mojitos and something called "Adios Amigo." We lifted cold Piwos and toasted a picture of Che.

While Krakow never embraced communism, the locals are big fans of toasting to its demise, apparently, in bars full of reminders among college-age drinkers not old enough to remember.

Who's laughing now?

## If you go

### Where to stay

**Hotel Kazimierz II:** 60 Starowioelna St., Kazimierz; +48 (012) 426-80-70; [www.hk.com.pl](http://www.hk.com.pl) (click on the British flag for English). Rates: \$60-\$80 per night, depending on booking method. The company has three other small hotels in Kazimierz.

## What to do

**Historical Museum of the City of Kraków** (Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory branch): 4 Lipowa St., Podgorze; [www.mhk.pl](http://www.mhk.pl).

## More information