



A trip to explore the landscape, culture and history of Poland

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Our trip

In June 2019, we went to South-West Poland to learn more about the culture, history and landscape of the country. We did this by visiting the towns of Kraków and Wrocław, the historical sites of Auschwitz and Osówka, and by walking along the Główny Szlak Sudecki trail in the Karkonosze mountains over a period of 8 days from 22-29 of June 2019. The trip was partially funded by the Henry Morris Memorial Grant; we were each given £80 for accommodation, public transport in Poland, and tickets for historical sites.


Goals

1. Explore the Karkonosze mountains (part of the Sudetes mountain system)
2. Learn about the impact of WW2 on Poland, as well as the wider history of Poland
3. Learn basic Polish and improve our understanding of life and culture in Poland
4. Develop and grow as individuals

Trip diary

Day 1

Everyone woke up early and made their own way to Stansted, where we met before going through security. We flew out and got a bus into Kraków and walked to our hostel. There was a small drama with a lady who tried to steal a chair from the hostel and was stopped by several fire engines, police cars and ambulances. After leaving our stuff at the hostel, we walked into town. Kraków is a beautiful city, although the architecture and state of preservation of the buildings changes very quickly, with houses on one side of the road being often in completely different styles and conditions. We made our way to the main square (Rynek Główny) and went on a guided tour, seeing St. Mary's Basilica (Kościół Mariacki), Juliusz Słowacki Theatre (Teatr im. Juliusza Słowackiego), the Barbican (Barbakan), St Florian's Gate (Brama Florianska), Jagiellonian University (Uniwersytet Jagielloński) - which is the oldest university in Poland and was attended by Mikołaj Kopernik and Pope John Paul II - and finished by visiting the Wawel Castle (Zamek Królewski na Wawelu). This is where many of the Polish Kings were crowned and was a very important place when Kraków was the capital of Poland. Many saints, kings and famous Poles are buried in its chapel. Our tour guide was nice and informative. He said that Poles could be described as 'Catholic and alcoholic', and, although it was partially a joke, the legacy of the Catholic church is evident, especially in Krakow; there are 164 churches in the city, both the largest and the smallest of which are located in the main square



(Bazylika Mariacka and Kościół Świętego Wojciecha respectively). In the evening, Daniel and Ellie cooked dinner and we ate chocolate and ice cream together in the hostel.

Day 2


We woke up at around 4:30 am local time and cooked scrambled eggs and sausage for breakfast. We walked through Krakow and found the bus stop just in time to catch the bus to Auschwitz. Being in Auschwitz was very moving and almost surreal to see something we've learnt so much about at school in real life, especially as it is often hard to comprehend the scale of the Holocaust when in a classroom and removed from the physical evidence. We found the mounds of shoes and hair taken from the bodies particularly disturbing. It really put into context the sheer scale of the executions and the feeling of disgust and horror we experienced is something that will stay with us forever. We also visited Auschwitz II-Birkenau and were shocked by the size and efficiency of the killing process. It's sickening to think of what humans can do to each other, and the remains of these death camps act as a reminder to future generations of the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. Today has taught us a lot about the importance of compassion and valuing our differences and diversity in our society, and hopefully we will become better people because of what we've seen. After leaving Auschwitz, we walked to Oświęcim station, where got a little confused about the state of Polish railways (often overgrown with grass verges and paper timetables). Then we went to Czechowice-Dziedzice, where Robin got déjà-vu about the station, tried some Polish snack food. We went on another train to Daniel's grandma's house and tried (and mostly failed) to find seats. We met Daniel's lovely family in Zdzeszowice, had gulasz for dinner and went to bed.

Day 3

We woke up relatively early to get a train to Wrocław Główny. We had Hungarian sausages and lemon honey tea for breakfast (thanks to Daniel's grandma!). We got a lift to Zdzeszowice station and set off. We took 3 trains and eventually arrived at Głuszyca Górna. We walked 5 km by improvising a route to Osówka. Osówka is a man-made 'underground city' built by the Nazis using slave labour from 1940 to 1945. The size and scale of it was very impressive and it was another reminder of the impact of WW2 on the Polish landscape. The tour guide was very enthusiastic, although the line between facts and folk tales was often blurred, telling us rumours about the Nazis using the caves to hide gold. From Osówka we walked a further 5km to our hostel in Sokolec. The last kilometre was 20% incline but the view from the hostel at the top of the hill was worth it. We ate placki and tomato soup, and played cards in the evening while watching the sun set.

Day 4

We woke up early. Jackie found a tick. We spent an hour getting it out and trying to shorten the route to find a doctor but decided to do the planned route and find a doctor the next day. Our first aid knowledge and planning allowed us to identify it and remove it. We went quickly for the first 9km but then the heat and elevation got to us. Big and steep hills took a lot of energy and Robin's knees started to give way so Daniel and Ryan took turns carrying Robin's bags up the hills to protect them. We went up a lot of tough 'bumps' (read: huge steep inclines), but after an ice cream break we eventually made it to the hostel. We had traditional Polish food for dinner which we all thought was



delicious. In the evening, we taught Robin how to braid his hair. We had another tick crisis: Jacquie found another which was successfully removed by Robin, and Ellie thought that she found one too.

Day 5

We woke up late and had scrambled eggs for breakfast at Andrzejówka hostel. We had a chat before we left, so it was a slow start. We walked past a working quarry and saw a wooden church from 1608 (Św. Jadwigi Śiaskiej) in Gmina Mieroszów. We decided to take a taxi to Lubawka as to avoid the heat and walking too far. We choose to skip the walking route for today because no one was feeling too good and we thought that a break would mean we could complete the rest of the walk without too many injuries and maintaining morale. It was also very hot (over 33 degrees) and so we decided that it was too big of a health risk to walk the planned 17km. In Lubawka, Ellie and Jacquie went to the hospital with Daniel to translate. There, they quickly removed Jacquie's tick head and said that Ellie didn't have a tick after all. After some ice cream in the town square, we went shopping to buy food for dinner and the next day's walk. We missed the bus so waited in the park for an hour for the next one. We then got the bus and walked to the hostel. In the evening, we ate and played catch outside as it was still very warm. We cooked pasta for dinner and tried some regional Polish drinks with it.

Day 6

We had porridge and tuna for breakfast before setting off. We started with a nasty uphill but were mostly in good spirits throughout. We eventually climbed over 1,200m and saw some amazing views. We followed a path that went along the Polish and Czech border and ended up crossing it around 20 times. After more hill climbing, we reached the top of Svorová hora at 1411m elevation. We continued and decided to add more to the route so we could climb Sněžka (or Śnieżka). It is the tallest peak in the Czech Republic and the views from the top were incredible. We arrived at the hostel in good spirits and in the early afternoon. We quickly realised that we had all got pretty sunburnt (except Robin) so we decided to stay inside in the evening. For dinner we tried Russian and meat pierogi for dinner. We spent the evening together enjoying ourselves playing games and chatting.

Day 7

We had a snack breakfast because there wasn't a kettle in the hostel so we couldn't make our porridge as planned. The mountain was covered in fog and clouds but we quickly walked the first 8km in 2 hours over difficult cobbled paths. We saw lots of unique rock formations as we went, including Słonecznik. The fog gradually went away and we crossed into the Czech Republic again (we walked along the border for a lot of the day). There were a couple of climbs but they were a lot less steep than we had imagined. We saw Śnieżne Kotły (two glacial cirques) and a radio mast at the top of a hill then had a snack lunch nearby sheltering behind a rock (it was very windy). From there, we only had a few more kilometres left so walked the rest of the route quickly. We were all in high spirits at the end of the walk, although we were also very sad that it was the last full day in Poland for most of us. We arrived at the hostel at 2:30pm and spent the afternoon resting, playing cards and planning a new trip next summer. Daniel and Ryan went on a run to the Czech Republic which

made them very happy. In the evening, we had schnitzel and placki. We passed the rest of the day playing fussball and watching the last sunset of the trip.

Day 8

The last day of the trip started with lots of porridge for breakfast and a 5km downhill stretch. We walked quickly, despite the steep path and cobbled surface, and soon arrived in Szklarska Poręba. We went shopping to buy things to bring back to the UK and for lunch. After waiting an hour at the station and sorting out what we owe to each other, we got the train to Wrocław. We arrived after 3 hours at Wrocław station and bought some Polish sweets to bring back home. We had some ice cream, bought Daniel an atlas of Polish national parks to say thank you for all his planning and translating, and bought bus tickets. We very sadly said goodbye to Daniel and Ellie (who spent another week with Daniel's family) and took the bus to the airport. Ryan, Jacquie, Robin and Lizzie flew back to the UK and made their way home, arriving back late at night.

What we learnt

I. Polish phrases

While Daniel speaks both Polish and English fluently and did a lot of the translation for the group, the others also picked up basic Polish to help in day-to-day situations:

dzien dobry = good morning /
hello (or just dobry)

cześć = hi

dziękuję = thank you

przepraszam = excuse me / I'm
sorry

prosze = please

tak = yes

nie = no

nie mówię po polsku = I don't
speak Polish

mówisz po angielsku? = do you
speak English?

chleb = bread

herbata = tea

kawa = coffee

woda = water

niegazowana = still (water)

gazowana = sparkling (water)

zupa = soup

czekolada = chocolate

lody = ice cream

ciastka = biscuits

na zdrowie = cheers / bless you

złoty = zloty (Polish currency, 1zł =
20p roughly)

groszy = groszy (1 hundredth of a
złoty)

II. History of Poland

Pre-1900

Until 1596, Kraków was the capital of Poland and the city's main square is now a world heritage site due to the high number of historically significant buildings in it, such as St Mary's Basilica and the cloth hall (which was used as a trading centre for centuries). The Catholic church has had a huge impact on Polish history and culture, with the country stuck between Protestant Prussia and Germany and Orthodox Russia for much of its history. Poles normally build their own houses, rather than renovating existing buildings, meaning that the oldest buildings are nearly always churches. In the medieval era, many wooden churches were built, including the Św. Jadwigi Śląskiej church that we saw on day 5, and 6 such churches in Southern Poland are also UNESCO sites. Between 1569–1795 Poland was part of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth which ended after Poland was annexed by Austria, Prussia and Russia, thereby removing Poland from the political map in Europe until 1918. Despite there being no official Polish state, Polish culture remained, and the current Polish national anthem 'Poland is Not Yet Lost' (called 'Mazurek Dąbrowskiego' in Polish) was originally written in the late 18th century to maintain Polish soldiers' hope in regaining an independent Polish state.

World Wars

Poland changed dramatically as a result of the World Wars. While Poland wasn't technically a country during WW1, lots of the fighting occurred in modern day Poland and impacted Poles. WW1 negatively impacted the 3 powers that had partitioned Poland; the Russian revolution gave an opportunity for Polish rebellion, and both Germany and Austria were weakened both militarily and economically by the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles. This treaty also created an independent Polish state with Piłsudski as the head of state. In the interwar period, Poland fought many border wars, particularly against the Soviet Union 1919-1921. The country also experienced significant cultural and social growth in this period, although the Great Depression brought high unemployment and rises in nationalism and anti-semitism. In September 1939, Hitler's armies invaded Poland, provoking the start of the Second World War. Poland was soon invaded from the East by the Soviet Union, and the Polish government fled, eventually to Britain. The Second World War had a profound impact on Poland; 3 million Poles were killed, over 90% of buildings in the capital Warsaw were destroyed and 12 concentration camps were built by the Nazis. The largest concentration camp built was Auschwitz-Birkenau, and 7 out of the 8th largest camps by the number of deaths were located in modern-day Poland. Over 3 million lost their lives in Nazi camps in Poland, with over 1.1 million deaths occurring at Auschwitz-Birkenau. Jews, Poles,

Gypsies and other minority groups were rounded up and sent to camps on trains. At Auschwitz-Birkenau, arrivees were immediately separated into two groups; those who were fit enough to work and those who would be sent immediately to the gas chambers. The bodies of the victims were stripped and then burnt in huge crematoria by prisoners in the 'Sonderkommando' unit, who led a failed uprising in 1944. Today, many of the camps are open to the public as memorials and museums so that the Holocaust is taught and remembered as one of the most horrific crimes against humanity. The Nazis also altered some of the physical landscape of Poland during their occupation. The 'underground city' of Osówka was built 1943-45 by prisoners of war and prisoners from the concentration camp Gross-Rosen. The reasons for its construction are unknown as many documents were destroyed in the closing stages of the war, but theories suggest that it could have been used to store weapons, as a munitions factory or as a bunker to protect Nazi leaders in the case of a prolonged bombardment. After the end of WW2, the borders of Poland changed dramatically. Territory east of the Curzon line, including the cities of Lwów and Wilno (modern day Lviv and Vilnius) were transferred to the Soviet Union, whereas land east of the river Odra, including Wrocław and Szczecin, and part of Eastern Prussia, including Gdańsk, was transferred from Germany. The border changes caused many Poles to become exiles, but after ethnic Germans, Poles, Ukrainians and Russians migrated to their countries, a relatively ethnically homogenous Poland was formed under communist control.

Post 1945

After the Second World War, the Polish People's Republic was formed. Its politics were heavily influenced by the Soviet Union as it was a member of both COMECON and the Warsaw military pact. Communism brought some development to Poland and its legacy can be clearly seen on the streets of Poland; the communists favoured concrete blocks of flats that were quick and cheap to construct, and many of these buildings still stand, often having been painted bright colours to cheer them up. Communism also brought shortages, environmental damage and social tensions, however, and the anti-Communist Solidarność movement was born in 1980, led by Lech Wałęsa. Following the ascent of Gorbachev as the leader of the Soviet Union, communism weakened its hold over Eastern Europe and, in the first free elections in Poland, Solidarity won and took power from the communists. The Polish People's Republic was replaced in 1989 with the Republic of Poland (Rzeczpospolita Polska) and the country moved gradually towards the West, joining NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. Poland is now a high-income country that enjoys a high level of social and cultural development and good international relations. The EU provides funding for many infrastructure projects as part of the EU regional development fund. For example, the Szklarska Poręba Górna station was funded jointly by the EU and the Polish government.

III. Polish landscapes

We aimed to learn more about the Polish landscape by going on the trip. We hiked along a trail through the Karkonosze mountains, part of the wider Sudetes mountain system that stretches between Germany, the Czech Republic and Poland. During the hike, we were able to see many spectacular views and climbed the highest peak of Karkonosze and the Sudetes; Śnieżka (or Sněžka in Czech). Sněžka-Śnieżka is the highest peak in the Czech Republic, and the summit lies 1,603m above sea level. For comparison, Ben Nevis is 1,344m tall, and Snowdon 1,085m. At the summit, there are 3 buildings; the Polish meteo observatory and St. Lawrence Chapel on the Polish side and a post office / cafe on the Czech side. It was interesting that the chapel was seen as a priority for the summit as it was built as early as the 17th century. It just shows the continuing legacy and impact of the Catholic Church all across the Republic of Poland. The Sudetes mountain range was formed by glaciation, and evidence of this can be seen in some prominent landforms, such as glacial cirques and moraine deposits. The site of Śnieżne Kotły, which we visited on day 7, is famous for its two large glacial cirques.

While on our long train journeys, we were able to catch glimpses of other parts of Poland. The most notable difference between Poland and the UK was the abundance of open space in the Polish countryside; in the UK, land is normally either used for housing, for farming, for industry or is parkland, whereas in Poland there are wide stretches of countryside with zero or little human intervention. We also saw many allotments, the majority of which had semi-permanent buildings on them; Daniel explained that gardening and growing your own food is a much bigger thing in Poland, as many Poles still remember the shortages of the Communist and war-time eras and how they had to be more self-sufficient in their food supply. Nowadays, Poles enjoy escaping the city to spend a day at their allotment and use the buildings on them throughout the day

The architecture in Poland is also very different to that in the UK. Poland is home to many communist-era concrete blocks of flats, but recently they have been made nicer by painting bright colours and patterns on the exterior. Many Poles also choose to build their own houses, particularly in the countryside and small towns. Often buildings become derelict as people choose not to renovate them. The oldest buildings are usually churches as the Catholic Church has always been important to Polish culture and society, meaning churches are better maintained. It was interesting to see building styles subtly change across the Czech-Polish border, as well as seeing the impact of industrialisation in the form of factories and industrial chimneys scattered everywhere across the countryside except for in national parks.

IV. Self-development

Throughout the trip, we were faced with new experiences and challenges that have helped to make us more confident and independent. We had to overcome physical, logistical and emotional challenges during the hike. Climbing over 4000m in just a few days, there were times when we struggled with the physical challenge of walking the distance and elevation in high temperatures and with a large rucksack. However, all of us completed the walk, completing day 7's 19km in only half a day; we even chose to add an extra section to day 6 so that we could summit Śnieżka. The logistics of catching trains in a foreign country and getting to Lubawka on our rest day also proved difficult, but over the course of the week we all learnt how to read Polish train timetables, pronounce station names, and even say a few phrases to the ticket collector. The hike could also take an emotional toll, particularly during long ascents, but the group stuck together and looked out for each other.

The trip also made us more independent as we had to travel by ourselves and be self-reliant in planning and organising everything, from the walking route to booking hostels to packing for the hike. Learning how to be flexible was key as we faced several challenges that forced us to alter the plan. When Jacquie got her tick bites, we had to make arrangements to see a doctor so that the ticks could be fully removed and Jacquie checked for signs of illness. The temperatures in the middle of the trip also got dangerously high for hiking (around 32 degrees), and so we unanimously decided to take a rest day, go to a doctor in Lubawka and explore the town. Unlike in Duke of Edinburgh expeditions, we were able to adapt plans to the situation in order to maintain our safety, health and morale. This ultimately made the trip more enjoyable and helped us to become more independent.

We also gained the opportunity to explore new cultures. Ryan had never been abroad before, and so the trip allowed him to visit new places, try different food, and see another way of life. Staying at Daniel's grandmother's house, we were able to taste homemade traditional Polish food, such as gulasz and pierogi, and we bought a variety of food and drink from Polish supermarkets to try and take back home. Poland is a country that is often absent from UK school curriculum and general knowledge, but with over 800,000 Poles living in the UK, it is a culture worth exploring when trying to understand modern Britain. This trip has made us more aware of the intricacies of the country and its culture, as well as having expanded our understanding of Polish influence on Britain and vice versa.

We would very much like to thank the Henry Morris Memorial Trust for their financial contribution, without which this trip would not have been possible. We have learnt a huge amount and enjoyed it so much that we plan to organise a similar trip next summer.