



House #107 is, to put it mildly, a shack – nearly abandoned but used principally as storage shed. Still standing strong and firm, roof intact and walls solid, the interior is anything but believable. Any semblance to someone ever living in it is long gone. Four simple rooms with a door to each half encompass this abode. The former kitchen is still evident. The oven, which doubled as a house heater, was still in place. Plaster was peeling at will but the floor was solid. Dolores found an old wedding picture (year unknown) hanging on a wall; it showed Aunt Valeria sitting in the wedding party. What more could be said other than the house was still standing but uncertain for how long. Houses of this type tend to give way to modernization; as land is precious and best not used up by useless outbuildings. Fifteen minutes is all it takes to explore this house.

Maria and Dolores walk over to the house next to House #108 and spend some time talking with another neighbor while I explore the nearby streets. Across the street from House #8 is a moderately sized pre-school, relatively modern and tidy. A block away is the Bielcza public school or gymnasium. The older portion of the school looks like it could use some major renovation but what surprised us was that the village was attempting to build a modern addition to it. I say attempting because it looked as, after construction started and the walls were put up, further building ceased. Half finished and looking half abandoned it is a stark reminder that when money dries up all activities stop. This may be what happened here. Returning to Helen Biel's house we resurrect our conversation and make plans to visit the Bielcza cemetery – the final resting place of many Trytek's. A little later we take leave of our hosts, but not before we take the usual array of pictures to be shared later.



We leave ancestral House #107; take the road past the Church of Bielcza and head north to the cemetery. While Wielsaw takes a break Dolores and Maria scour the cemetery looking for that familiar grave of Francis and Victoria Trytek, their grandparents. After finding other departed family member's headstones they eventually locate what they seek. They linger at this spot for the longest time (left). Victoria lived to the age of 97, Francis to age 94. Both passed away in the 1960s. The grave marker for the grandparents is cracked and needs replacing. Maria takes measurements. All is done in silence. I wander away for a moment and locate an Austrian Military section at the other end of the grounds. Iron crosses adorn all the graves. The year "1914" is prominent. What happened in 1914? We spend a few more minutes at the cemetery when the late hour beckoned us to leave. After a silent prayer vigil we hopped in the car and Wielsaw drove out of Bielcza for the return trip to Krakow. It was 4PM by now. Not much was said on the return leg ... mostly idle chatter. I suppose the emotions of the moment were finally catching up. We dropped off Maria at her home, made plans for a re-visit upon our return to Krakow from Przemysl and made our way to the hotel. Tomorrow, a less emotional but an exciting trip is planned – The Royal Salt Mine at Wieliczka.

Sunday ... we are going to the salt mines. But, we have a few hours free before our departure. With three hours to spare, after breakfast, we head for the Jewish Quarter of Krakow – Kazimierz. Over the river and into the "Jewish Quarter" we wander. No sooner had we arrived in the "Jewish Quarter" than Dolores complained about an irritating stomach. With no WC in sight, we had to take a taxi back to the hotel. Dolores decided that she could not continue until her stomach settled down so I decided to go back to Kazimierz on my own to explore this historic district. Since its earliest history Krakow has been closely associated with Jews. The reason for the growth of the Jewish community was twofold: Jews sought refuge from persecution in Western Europe, particularly violent at the time of the Black Death (1349-50), and Poland encouraged urban colonization especially under Casimir the Great. In 1334 Casimir regularized their legal status in Poland. At the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century King John Oldbracht ordered them to leave Krakow after an outbreak of rioting. The Jews moved to Kazimierz, giving birth to the "Jewish City", covering half of Krakow. The Kazimierz community's greatest prosperity coincided with the "golden century" of Poland, the 16<sup>th</sup> century. By the end of the Second World War the Jewish community in Krakow amounted to 60,000 members, about 23% of the population. At the time of the closure of the ghetto by the Nazis, who had moved many families there from areas outside the city, its population was almost 70,000. On March 13, 1943 the ghetto was destroyed; some inhabitants transported to the extermination camp at Plaszow, while others were murdered in the confines of the ghetto. Today, the "Jewish Quarter" of Krakow is enjoying a sort of renaissance, inviting visitors to see and experience the "Jewish Cracow". On our own we move along the various streets seeing and experiencing the "Jewish Krakow". We start at "Wolnica (Freedom) Square", which used to be a border between Christian and Jewish Kazimierz. We move to "New Square" where a ritual slaughterhouse used to be. Farther down stands a synagogue still in use today – Tempel (right). This



Neo-Renaissance building belonged to the progressive Jews and was famous for innovations in liturgy, which shocked the Orthodox Jews. We tour the inside, but only after donning a paper "skull cap". After viewing the outside of Kupa Synagogue (under renovation) we next visit Isaac's Synagogue, built in 1644. Built in Baroque style, on the façade facing the street there is a staircase and loggia leading to a separate women's gallery upstairs. Considered lower and unclean, women were not allowed to join the male congregation in their ceremonies. We next visit the High Synagogue (so called because it occupied the upper floor), built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century followed by the Old Synagogue (left), which is the oldest in Poland, erected at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. We next visit the Remuh Synagogue with the cemetery. Founded in 1553 by a rich merchant it still serves religious purposes today. The Remuh cemetery, which adjoins this synagogue, is the oldest in Europe. We notice little stones placed all around on the tops of graves, which are tokens of memory. They symbolize the passage of Moses through the desert, when stones covered the bodies of his perished followers. We next see Mikveh, a ritual Jewish bathhouse, dating back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Men take the ritual bath in the "mikveh" before "Yom Kippur" holiday and by women right after menstruation. Also, all pots and dishes bought from Christians are washed here in order to purify them. We continue our walk under a railway bridge and find ourselves right at the gates of the New Cemetery, a place of rest for eminent Krakow Jews.



With its gravestones (right) leaning with age and overgrown with ivy, it is a quietly sad and remote place, poignant with its eternal calm. We cannot enter the grounds, as we are not wearing the required head covering (skull cap). We leave as we entered and re-trace our steps back to the hotel.

No sooner do I arrive back at the hotel than Wieslaw, Iwona and Dolores (who has recovered from her ordeal) emerge. We hop in the car and head off for Wieliczka – The Salt Mines. Surprisingly, the Salt Mine of Wieliczka is short drive from Krakow. Traffic is light that Sunday as we arrive at the mines. Plenty of places to park in every conceivable private parking lot. We find a close lot, park, pay and navigate the short distance to the mine entrance up a little hill. Tickets are purchased but we are a little bit early for the next English-guided tour. We locate an outdoor café, order cold drinks and sit and wait. The Wieliczka Mine reflects the achievements of simple miners. It has nine working floors; the first at 64 meters (192 feet) underground and the last one at 327 meters (980 feet). The total length of the galleries is 250 kilometers (550 miles). It was always the property of the ruler who entrusted it to the loyal men. The proceeds from salt under the Piast and Jagiellon kings provided almost 1/3 of the royal revenue. In the seven centuries of mining, 7.5 million cubic meters of salt have been extracted, which is equivalent to a train measuring about 1/5 of the length of the equator. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century almost 10% of the workforce fell victim to accidents. As a result the miners were more religious than other social groups. When in 1697 a chapel was consumed by fire, a royal commission forbade to furnish chapels with inflammable pictures and statues. Paradoxically, this prohibition resulted in developing the unique tradition of rock-salt sculpture, which has been kept up in the mine for three centuries. Miners carved rock-salt sculptures. The greatest achievement is the St. Kinga chapel, carved 101 meters (310 feet) underground. According to legend, St. Kinga, daughter of King Bela IV of Hungary, was responsible for discovering the salt deposit at Wieliczka. On her marriage to the Polish Duke Boleslaw the Chaste, she received a salt mine at Marmaros as her dowry. She cast her engagement ring into the shaft of the mine. When on the way to Krakow Kinga's retinue stopped at Wieliczka, she ordered a well to be dug. Yet instead of water, salt was discovered, and in the first lump of salt extracted, Kinga's engagement ring was found. Thus St. Kinga became the patroness of salt miners. A nice story. In 1978 UNESCO entered the Wieliczka Salt Mine on the first list of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage. After commiserating for a while we head off for the mine entrance and que up in a line (top).



In short order the doors are opened, we are given our instructions by a gruff guide and start the descent down a (almost) spiraling staircase – 299 steps to be precise – into the bowels of the mine. The air in the stairwell is dry and the graffiti on the wooden plankings of the walls makes it an interesting descent. After what seemed like a 10-minute walking descent we emerged in a mine tunnel whose walls were shored-up on all sides by heavy timbers. Receiving our introduction by the gruff female guide we head off for the inner sanctums of the mine. Passageways are long and dimly lit; the walls caked with salt residue and the shoring timbers are a stark reminder that we are in a mining enterprise. The female guide had a soft speaking voice and our position at the end of this mass of people (probably 35 strong) made listening to her difficult. However, because we were on



the "tail-end" of the group we could take photos at will without interference or jostling for position. Fact is, the tour would probably be better off "self-guided" and "self-paced" rather than having to follow a guide who spoke erratically and ushered her charges like a pack of school kids. Nonetheless, we wound our way from corridor to corridor, from chamber to chamber, following the group like a child on a string. The various chambers were unique and interesting, although we had to purchase a guidebook later to really appreciate what we were seeing. Deeper and deeper we walked into the mine, each time passing salt excavation chambers that harkened to medieval days. Each chamber had its own story to tell. The air in the mines is dry and the atmosphere is chilly. Like moles we move from chamber to chamber admiring the specialty of each particular chamber – high, wet, small, or enormous. After 15 minutes it seemed that all chambers began to look alike, but then we approached a ledge over an enormous room – St. Kinga's Chapel (right), at a depth of 101 meters (roughly 310 feet) below the surface. Cavernous, this chapel is surrounded by a host of masterpieces carved in salt, mostly in "relief" on the walls. A walk around the perimeter of this chapel reveals the artists' attention to detail. The statue of Pope John Paul II is extraordinarily life-like. For 15 minutes we lingered here, exploring every carving, statue and "relief". The air was cool, the lights were dim but there was enough "effect lighting" to make each carving come to life. However, this group was "pushed" by the following group and we were ushered on ... as this tour has essentially been completed. Disappointed, we head for the lunchroom to sit a spell and reflect on what we have seen. In one way Wieliczka Salt Mine is unique and warrants more time to explore. However, with the number of tourists that make a pilgrimage to this mine increasing yearly, the guided tours are increasing in numbers and are rushed to complete the circuit without hesitation. In time, we finish our "lunch", head for the elevators and are shepherded up to the surface. In a way Wieliczka was a new experience but in a way it was much too quickly processed. Perhaps we should return another day to gain anew perspective on its many wonders. We head for the car and wind our way back to Krakow. Wieslaw dropped us off at the hotel. Tomorrow we would head for Oswiecim (Auschwitz). After we discussed our plans for the next few days and our return to Krakow from the Ukraine Iwona bid us good night. We reflected on our day as we cleaned up, went out for another Krakow dinner near Rynek Glowny and eventually ended the day with a fitful sleep.



Monday morning came on "cat's paws" – it was foggy. After the usual Polish breakfast, Wieslaw met us at the hotel and we left for Oświęcim, the notorious Nazi death camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau. For five long years the name of Auschwitz aroused fear among the populations of the Nazi-occupied territories. It was established in 1940 for the Polish political prisoners. Originally it was to be an instrument of terror and extermination of Poles. As time passed, the Nazis began to deport to the camp people from all over Europe, mainly Jews - citizens of various countries. Soviet prisoners-of-war, Gypsies, Czechs, Yugoslavs, French-men, Austrians, Germans and others were also among the prisoners of Auschwitz. Polish political prisoners were being deported here till the camp ceased to exist. After the defeat of the September Campaign of 1939, when Polish soldiers had attempted to repel the German invasion, the town of Oświęcim and the surrounding areas were incorporated within the Third Reich. At the same time its name was changed to Auschwitz. By the end of 1939, at the SS and Police Headquarters in Wroclaw (Breslau), the idea of setting up a concentration camp had already been proposed. The ultimate choice fell upon the deserted pre-war Polish barracks in Oświęcim. Situated some distance away from the built up area of the town, they could quite easily be expanded and isolated from the outside world. Another factor not without significance was the convenient position of Oświęcim - an important railway junction - within the existing communications network. The order to proceed with plans to found a camp was given in April



1940, and Rudolf Hóss was appointed its first commandant. On June 14, 1940, the Gestapo dispatched the first political prisoners to Auschwitz - 728 Poles from Tarnów. Altogether the camp contained 28 one-story buildings (excluding kitchens, storehouses etc.). The average number of prisoners fluctuated between 13-16,000, reaching at one stage (during 1942) a record total of 20,000 people. They were accommodated in the blocks, where even the cellars and lofts were utilized for this purpose.



As the number of inmates increased, the area covered by the camp also

grew, until it was transformed into a gigantic and horrific factory of death. The monstrosity in Oświęcim - Auschwitz I - became the parent or "Stammlager" to a whole generation of new camps. In 1941 the construction of a second camp, later called Auschwitz II - Birkenau, was commenced in the village of Brzezinka, 3 kilometers away. The camps in Oświęcim (Auschwitz I) and in Brzezinka (Auschwitz II - Birkenau) are now maintained as museums open to the public. The most important constructions and objects in Birkenau are: the remnants of four crematoria, gas chambers and cremation pits and pyres, the special un-loading platform where the deportees were selected and also a pond with human ashes. In Auschwitz such a construction is the "Death Block". Furthermore in both camps are well-preserved blocks and a part of prisoners' barracks, the main entrance gates to the camps, sentry watchtowers as well as barbed wire fences. Some of the constructions destroyed by the Nazis were rebuilt from the original elements - for instance the ovens in the crematorium I (left). Some objects were completely destroyed by the SS obliterating the traces of their crimes. Above the main gate at Auschwitz - through which the prisoners passed each day on their way to work (returning 12 hours or more later) - there is a cynical inscription: "Arbeit macht frei" (right) (Work brings freedom). And on the small square by the kitchen the camp orchestra would play marches, mustering the thousands of prisoners so that the SS could count them more efficiently.

At a distance of 3 km from the main camp, in the village of Brzezinka, the camp of Birkenau - Auschwitz II - was situated. Covering approximately 175 hectares (425 acres), it contained over 300 buildings. Of these, 45 made of brick and 22 of wood have survived almost intact. In the places where the other buildings previously stood (these were either burnt down or demolished) only the hearths remain. The camp in Birkenau was divided into several fields and sectors, which in fact constituted separate camps. The total number of men and women prisoners reached approximately 100,000 in August 1944. The camp inmates were plagued by a lack of water, terrible sanitary conditions and huge numbers of rats. It was on the territory of Birkenau that the Nazis constructed most of their instruments of mass destruction, namely: 4 crematoria with gas chambers, two makeshift gas chambers in specially converted farmhouses, cremation pyres and pits.



In Birkenau we have the opportunity to view the prisoners' living quarters as they really were. The brick barracks are situated to the left of the unloading ramp (left). They were built without foundations, directly on the swampy ground. Most of these had no floor at all, apart from the compressed earth, which often turned into a veritable quagmire. The brick barracks housed the women prisoners, who slept on three-tier berths spread over with rotting straw. On one level an average of 8 persons would lie. At the end of the unloading ramp there are the remains of 2 crematoria and gas chambers, blown up (right) by the retreating SS men in an attempt to conceal their criminal activities. In the ruins it is still possible to discern the



underground changing room, where the victims were made to undress, the gas chamber, and, on the surface, we can see five large hollows left by the furnaces, as well as the rails along which the corpses were pushed. Crematorium IV was partially destroyed by Jewish prisoners during the revolt on the 7th October 1944. Between the ruins of crematoria II and III there stands the International Monument to the Victims of Auschwitz, which was ceremonially unveiled in April 1967.

Our tour through both camps was mainly in silence for who could imagine man's inhumanity to man. The displays in Block 10 and 11 in Auschwitz were most telling in that they graphically showed the remnants of what the men and women left behind on their way to death. The younger people on this guided tour could not grasp the horror or the significance of what they were seeing. But for this individual the horrors of WWII are somewhat vivid and can only be put into perspective when it is said, "there for the grace of God, go I". Our tour of these two camps was over by 3PM and we left in quietness to reflect on what we have seen. The drive back to Krakow was occasionally sprinkled with conversation but for the most part the return was in silence. That evening, our meal was somber and reflective. Who could forget what they have seen. Tomorrow we depart Krakow for the Ukraine. Sleep came easy but not without some pangs of conscience.

Next morning, after a hardy breakfast, the taxi ride to the train depot was rather quick. The 9:05AM train to Przemysl was on time. We double-checked the platform from where we would depart; we looked forward to this leg of the trip. As the train pulled in to the station, the mad people rush to climb on board was matched by our enthusiasm to get going. Nearly dropped the luggage under the car carriage in our rush to climb on board. Finding an empty compartment we settled in for the 3½-hour ride. As the train pulled out (on time) Dolores and I had ample time to reflect on the family members we have met and spend time with. The cost and headaches to get here was worth the price. Our train to Przemysl made a stop at every hamlet along the way, its seemed. The countryside was rolling by as we gazed out the window on this bright morning. In time we reached the Bielcza area and recognized the church steeple in the distance. Soon after we stopped in Tarnow, followed by Rzeszow, Jaroslaw and finally Przemysl. We arrived on time (12:30PM) and disembarked. Now it was time to find Slavko Fot (right) ... our Ukrainian driver. Moving from one side of the tracks to the other I could not see him and he was guaranteed to be here. But then again, I only met Slavko once and I believe I can recognize him. Finally, out in the distance, Slavko approaches me. Luckily he recognizes me before I recognize him. He's been in Przemysl since 6AM and looked anxious to leave and return home. Hoisting our luggage into his car and meeting his two other passengers (son and his girlfriend), we head out of town towards the Polish/Ukrainian border at Medyka. Making good time we arrive at the border checkpoint in 15 minutes. A surprise awaited us ... no traffic. The border crossing was virtually deserted. Forgot ... it was the Constitution Day weekend and all border-crossing traffic came to a halt. We crossed both sides of the border in less than 15 minutes (normally this process takes hours) and were on Ukrainian soil heading for L'viv. Slavko was an entertaining companion as well as a master driver on our drive to L'viv.



[Continued in Section 6](#)