Destination: Poland
The Guide

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The place where it has been the lot of generations of Poles to live has had a huge impact on the nation’s fortunes. Even the name of the country is linked to its geography, taken from the name of the tribe that evolved into the Polish nation: the Polans, or “people of the open fields”. But before those fields could come into being, the forests had to be cleared. And before those forests grew up, all this was under the sea...
A place in the heart of Europe

The place where it has been the lot of generations of Poles to live has had a huge impact on the nation’s fortunes. Even the name of the country is linked to its geography, taken from the name of the tribe that evolved into the Polish nation: the Polans, or “people of the open fields”. But before those fields could come into being, the forests had to be cleared. And before those forests grew up, all this was under the sea...
At the beginning of the Palaeozoic era, Poland was at the bottom of a warm sea. In the place where the Świętokrzyskie (Holy Cross) Mountains are today, there was a kind of shelf – an area of shallow water where the tides alternately flooded and laid bare the land beneath. It was here, somewhere near Kielce, that the first fish left the water and came out onto dry land. The first land animals – a kind of transitional form between fish and mammals – were called tetrapods. They moved a little like seals and a little like crocodiles, and had limbs of a sort. Their beautiful tracks are clearly visible on the carbonate platform found in a quarry in Zachełmie and dated to the Middle Devonian period in a sensational discovery made by the Polish scientist Grzegorz Niedźwiedzki. Until recently it was thought that the first land animals came out onto land from fresh water, that their original environment was rivers or lakes. Yet the ground in which the Świętokrzyskie tetrapods left their prints was a marine shelf. What is more, the tracks in Zachełmie are 395 million years old, while the oldest tetrapod remains previously discovered indicated a period 18 million years later!

The tetrapod was the ur-ancestor of all land animals, including mammals – and therefore also humans. Until any older remains or tracks of this strange creature are found, it would be possible to say, in the simplest of terms, that we all hail from Kielce.

The Jurassic period left a great number of geological formations in what is now Poland. The deep deposits of limestone from this period built the Krakow-Częstochowa Uplands, which are in fact popularly known as “the Jura”. The land deposits of sandstone and mudstone in the region of the Świętokrzyskie Hills were the stomping grounds of dinosaurs, and many tracks have remained. In the Bątłów region near Sandomierz a Dinosaur Park has been created around the print of a massive foot, once thought by the local people to be the impression of the devil’s paw. A second “Jurapark”, in Krasiejewo (Opolskie voivodship), has been opened at the site of another sensational dig, where palaeontologists found the skull of a phytosaurus, a fish-eating reptile from the Triassic period, as well as the remains of a previously unknown early dinosaur, which was profiled and named *Silesaurus opolensis*.
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The Świętokrzyskie Mountains (the highest, at 612 m, is Łysica) are the oldest in Poland. Later on, to the south-west, the Sudeten Mountains rose up; the highest range in this system is the Karkonosze (or Krkonoše), and its highest peak Śnieżka (or Sněžka, 1,602 m). Further east, during the Alpine orogeny, the country’s youngest mountains were formed: the Carpathians. These cradle the south of Poland in an arc; the larger part of this system is spread between Slovakia and Romania, and also spills into Ukraine. When the waters of the primal sea abated here, it transpired that the flysch formed from the compression of sand deposited here over millions of years had also become folded and been pushed up, so forming the Outer Carpathians – the Beskids. The highest range in the Carpathians is the granite Tatra massif, part of which lies in Poland.

Mountains are not the dominant landscape in Poland, however, occupying less than 10% of the country’s overall area (the Carpathians 6.1%). Neither are they high mountains: Poland’s highest summit is Rysy (2,499 m) in the Tatra.

The north-eastern part of the country is also interestingly sculpted, but this is a result of glacial rather than uplifting. The Scandinavian ice sheet spread southwards across present-day Poland several times. On the first occasion, 480,000 years ago, it reached the Carpathians; 50,000 years later it reached halfway down the country, approximately to the line demarcated by the Warta river. On its last “visit” it extended only to the north of Poland, but on this occasion it stayed for longer, only receding 14,000 years ago. It left behind huge glacial erratics and moraine hills, some of them substantial enough to merit the installation in our times of ski lifts, as at Piękna Góra near Gołdap.

What the last glacial left more of than anything else in northern Poland, however, is lakes, from small pools to long post-glacial tunnel valleys. They are grouped in largest number in the Mazurian and Pomeranian Lake.

Great sculptors

Districts, Mazuria has Poland’s two biggest lakes: Śniardwy (113.8 km²) and Mamry (104.4 km²). Slightly further east, in the Suwałki Lakes, is the deepest: Hańcza (108.5 m), while Pomerania has several vast coastal lakes (Łebsko, Sarbsko, Dołgie Wielkie).

Poland’s sea border is 440 km long, which is far shorter than its irregular coastline (770 km). The Baltic beaches are wide and sandy, and some sections of the shoreline (near Rewal in the west, near Poddąbie in Central Pomerania, and in Jastrzębia Góra near Gdańsk) also have spectacular cliffs. The Gdańsk Bay is cordoned off from the Baltic by the sickle-shaped Hel Peninsula, while the Vistula Lagoon is protected by the Vistula Spit. The biggest island belonging to Poland in its entirety is Wolin (265 km²), at the mouth of the Oder.

Poland lies in the northern European lowlands and is dissected longitudinally by its longest river, the Vistula (1,046 km), which flows out of the slopes of Barania Góra in the south-west of the country all the way to the Baltic. The second-longest, the Oder, only flows through Poland for 742 km, though its tributary, the Warta, is Polish throughout its length (808 km). The Bug, which forms one stretch of the eastern border, flows into Poland at its 185th kilometre, merges with the Narew, and 587 km later flows into the Vistula. For canoeists, however, size is not all that matters. Among the most picturesque rivers in Poland are the Czarna Hańcza in the Suwałki area, the Krutynia in Mazuria, and the Drwęca, Drawa and Bida in Pomerania and Kujawy. One of the most hazardous from a human point of view is the Dunajec, which powers through the Pieniny Mountains in Lesser Poland.
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For all their deeply rooted national patriotism, the Poles have little sense of local patriotism. Germany was long a collection of small counties and dukedoms, and until the 19th century *Heimat* was something different for every German, something distinct, easy to encompass in heart and mind. Poland, a territory with little geographic diversity, soon fused into a homogeneous state. The Polish regions are differentiated more by their folk culture (which has lost its prominence since contemporary reunification) than by their history or historical relics. Moreover, the administrative divisions of the country are only loosely similar to the historical borders of the various regions.

Thus the Zachodniopomorskie voivodship (with its administrative capital in Szczecin) is the former Duchy of Pomerania, though the state of the Gryfita (or Greifen) dynasty also encompassed lands now in Germany, as well as part of the Pomorskie voivodship (the Śląsk region). The Pomeranian voivodship (with its centre in Gdańsk) was historically the realm of the Gdańsk dukes, slightly augmented. Further east is Warmia and Mazuria (the Warmińsko-Mazurskie voivodship, with its regional centre in Olsztyn), formerly the lands of the Teutonic state, later Prussia. Adjoining this to the south-east is the Podlaskie voivodship (capital in Białystok), which takes in part of what was historically Podlasie (the rest now lies in Belarus) and the Suwałki region. These two voivodships (Warmińsko-Mazurskie and Podlaskie), which boast exceptional biodiversity, are together known as “the green lungs of Poland” and are governed strictly according to the principle of sustainable development.

The Podlaskie voivodship is bordered to the south by Mazowieckie (whose capital is Warsaw), which is little smaller than the Duchy of Mazovia once was. West of this were the Dobrzyń Lands and Cuiavia – today the Kujawsko-Pomorskie voivodship (with the twin administrative centres of Bydgoszcz and Toruń). Further west still is Wielkopolska, or Greater Poland (for administrative purposes the Wielkopolskie voivodship with its centre in Poznań), the cradle of the Piast state. Over its western border lies Lubuskie ( Zielona Góra and Gorzów), which also takes in some of the lands of the Brandenburg margraves and the Silesian dukedoms. South of this is the Dolnośląskie voivodship (Lower Silesia, and Wrocław), where the heritage of the Piast dukes has been well preserved, and the palaces of the German counts are in better condition still. South of Lower Silesia the Sudeten range begins, while the Śląskie voivodship (Silesia, administered from Katowice) takes in the highly industrialised Upper Silesia region, part of the Krakow-Częstochowa Uplands, and the gentle ridges of the Silesian and Żywiec Beskids. The Małopolskie voivodship (based in Krakow), aside from the lowlands around Krakow and Tarnów, also extends south to the Tatras and Podhale with its colourful highland culture, the Babia Góra massif, the Gorce range, the Śącz Beskids, and the picturesque Pieniny. The south-eastern corner of Poland, once part of Galicia and today the Podkarpackie (Subcarpathian) voivodship (capital Rzeszów) has the Low Beskids and the Bieszczady, depopulated by edict after World War II, and their pretty foothills. North of Subcarpathia is the Świętokrzyskie voivodship (with the regional capital Kielce) and Lubelskie (Lublin), neither of which have any historical base. In geographic terms the former is the region of the Holy Cross Mountains and the latter of Roztocze, a hilly landscape that extends well beyond the border and on to Lviv. Two economically powerful regions that nevertheless have little geographical or historical context are the central Łódzkie voivodship (centred around Łódź) and Opolskie (Opole) in the south, between Dolnośląskie and Śląskie.

Poland’s history and geography teach us that elements of the cultural landscape are rarely coincidental with administrative and political border, which are usually artificial.

### Vital statistics

Poland today is the eighth-largest country in Europe in terms of population (sixth in the EU), with 38,482,919 inhabitants (2009 data). By area it is ninth-biggest. It shares borders with Germany, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania and Russia (Kaliningrad). Its lowlands are inclined to the north. The mean average height of the Polish landmass is 173 m. Its highest and lowest points are, respectively, 2,499 m (the summit of Rysy) and 1.8 m below sea level (Żuławy, near the mouth of the Vistula). Poland lies in the Baltic basin (99.7%), and few of its rivers flow in the ultimate direction of the Black Sea or the North Sea.

Calculations by a royal astronomer in 1775 found that the geometrical centre of Europe is in Suchowola in the Podlasie region. A plaque and a boulder mark the site.
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A chronicle of Poland: a stroll down the ages

For well over a millennium Poles have been active participants in the flow of ideas and cultural and material assets across Europe. In the process they also assimilated the Christian values and form of exercising power common to the whole of the continent. Before long they also began to offer their own original contributions to European culture, science and custom. Even the country’s loss of sovereignty did not halt the process of exchange.

Wawel Hill, on the bank of the Vistula river – witness to the might of the Kingdom of Poland and the Commonwealth of the Two Nations.
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Wawel Hill, on the bank of the Vistula river – witness to the might of the Kingdom of Poland and the Commonwealth of the Two Nations.
From around 3000 B.C.E. Indo-European peoples began to flow into Europe. Of this vast linguistic group, only the Slavs were not in a hurry to move further west. Several tribes lived for brief periods on the territory of what is now Poland (Goths, Scythians, Gepids and Celts), and many others passed along the “promenade” that was the belt of the Great European Lowlands.

In times before the early modern age, and when Rome was at the height of its power, the territories lying well to the north of the limes – the frontier of contemporary European civilisation demarcated by the Danube and the Rhine – were largely outside the central sphere of interest. Only occasionally did merchants venture in this direction in search of the “Baltic gold” – amber. Yet other natural resources were exploited too, such as banded flint and bog iron. In the first centuries of our era Germanic tribes (the Scirii or the Bastarnae) developed a veritable armaments plant in the Świętokrzyskie (Holy Cross) Mountains. They smelted bog iron in primitive furnaces called bloomeries and fashioned swords from it. In the second century C.E. the Marcomanni tribe, armed with swords from this Świętokrzyskie manufactory, set about assailing the mighty Roman civilisation, assimilating many of its achievements in the process.

Ślęża, also known as Sobótka, was a centre of the pagan solar cult

The remains of the stone circles in the forests of Pomerania are testimony to the presence of the Goths in this region

The promenade of Europe

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Swords for vandals

This Świętokrzyskie “Bog Iron Valley” was spread over an area of 800 km² and comprised some 6,000 bloomery complexes – in all, around 400,000 furnaces. In Nowa Słupia, a village at the foot of Święty Krzyż (Holy Cross) Mountain, where 42 bloomeries were discovered, a Museum of Ancient Metallurgy (Muzeum Starożytnego Hutnictwa Świętokrzyskiego) has been created, and every year an archaeological fair, “Dymarziki Świętokrzyskie” (Holy Cross Bloomeries) is held in its grounds, with demonstrations of the smelting process in the clay-clad furnaces. A path – once a pilgrim trail, now a tourist route – leads up through Nowa Słupia to the monastery and church on Święty Krzyż Mountain. This has been a place of cult since the dawn of our age: the pagan foundry workers made offerings to their gods there to ensure success in the magical process of smelting the ore.

A reconstruction of an ancient ore-smelting oven – a bloomer

A Lusatian settlement on a peninsula jutting into Lake Biskupińskie, dated to 747–722 BCE
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The Slavs were the last of the Aryan peoples to leave the original home of the Indo-Europeans in Asia, at the turn of the third and second centuries B.C.E. On their journey they made a number of halts, each several centuries long. One of these was on the river Dnieper. The final stage of the Slav peregrination drew to a close in the 6th century C.E.

The Slavs were not unanimous in their choice of destination. Some of them crossed the Carpathians and went south, others went further west and settled along the Elbe, and another group surveyed the lands lying in the basin cradled by the Vistula, Oder and Bug rivers, and said to themselves: why not here?

And so it was that the Lechitic tribes plumbed for the flat northern terrain, dissected by a mesh of rivers. This choice was decisive in the formation of the Polish identity. Within a few centuries a realm evolved here that was a fusion of smaller tribes, gradually brought together by Mieszko I and Bolesław the Brave. There then ensued a long chain of events that determined the make-up of the Polish national character. Their mental map was a product of their tribal traditions, their historical past and the spiritual sphere of their beliefs.

The northern Slavs continued to live in tribal communities which often took their names from rivers or lakes (e.g. the Bobrzans, Goplans and Vistulans). The first to recognise their own weakness were the Vistulans, who lived across the Carpathians from Great Moravia. The barbarian prince of the Vistulans is mentioned in the *Vita Methodii* (the “legend of Pannonia”). Methodius was archbishop of Great Moravia, where he spent his last years (from 873 until his death in 885). This is what the anonymous hagiographer wrote about him: “There was, however, in him [Methodius] also a gift of prophecy, so that many of his predictions were fulfilled, one or two of which we shall tell. A pagan prince, very powerful, seated on the Vistula, greatly reviled the Christians and did them harm. Methodius, having sent to him, [bade him be] told: It [will be] good for you, my son, to be baptised of your own free will on your own land, that you should not be baptised by force in bondage in a foreign land; and you will remember me. And that is what happened.”

If this document is to be believed, then, the Lechites were Christianised almost a century earlier than has traditionally been believed, and probably by force, in the Byzantine rite. One thing is certain: until the end of the 10th century the land of the Vistulans (Małopolska, or Lesser Poland) remained a vassal state: first of Great Moravia and later of Bohemia.

A page from the Codex Supraślensis, an 11th-century manuscript written in Old Church Slavonic

The annual Viking and Slav festival on Wolin
The Slavs were the last of the Aryan peoples to leave the original home of the Indo-Europeans in Asia, at the turn of the third and second centuries B.C.E. On their journey they made a number of halts, each several centuries long. One of these was on the river Dnieper. The final stage of the Slav peregrination drew to a close in the 6th century C.E.

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The Slavs of the north were first documented at the turn of the 6th and 7th centuries C.E. by the Byzantine author known as Pseudo Maurice, who wrote: “the settlements of the Slavs […] lie in a row along the rivers very close to one another. In fact, there is practically no space between them, and they are bordered by forests, swamps, beds of reeds.” Maurice admired the Slavs’ skill in making use of water, including fording and crossing rivers.

The Lechites were slow to accept any form of supremacy. Bulgaria and the Balkan Slav states emerged earlier, and at the beginning of the 9th century Great Moravia was formed and its ruler accepted Christianity from the Franks. The duke of the Moravians, Rastislav, invited Cyril and Methodius, missionaries from Thessaloniki, to his state to entrench the new faith more deeply. They devised the Glagolitsa, a 40-letter Slavic alphabet, and translated the Bible into Old Church Slavonic. In recognition of their work, John Paul II designated them both patron saints of Europe.

As the Slav realms developed in the south, Emperor Charlemagne annexed the lands of the Polabian Slavs, who recognised his supremacy.
The birth of the state

The cradle of the Polish state was Wielkopolska (Greater Poland); here a leader emerged who was sufficiently ambitious and valiant to unite the tribes living between the Oder and the Vistula. The sudden emergence of a strong state to the north and east of the Christian world came as a surprise to its neighbours. The first documented Lechite duke, Mieszko I, has traditionally been considered a member of the Polan tribe, but in fact this tribe appears to have been non-existent. In any case it is not mentioned by the Bavarian Geographer, who described the tribal territories of central Europe. The name must have evolved at a later date. It is identified with the word pole – “field”, which might indicate that the people were farmers, or with opole – the Slavic settlement. It may have evolved out of the small Goplan tribe living in the Warta basin. In any case, the unusual belligerence of the prince and his team was divergent from the normally peaceable disposition of the Slavs. Mieszko’s tribe rapidly dominated its neighbours and created “the vastest of the Slavic countries”, as the 10th-century merchant Ibrahim ibn Yaqub described it.

Initially Mieszko ruled over a territory corresponding to Wielkopolska (Greater Poland), Kujawy (Cuiavia), and the Sieradz and Łęczyca region, centred around a few fortified settlements on the Warta river. The Mazovians lived separately beyond the Vistula, the Pomeranians in the north, and the Polabians west of the Oder. Silesia and Małopolska (Lesser Poland, the land of the Vistulans) came within the Bohemian sphere of influence and may even have been part of the Premyslid state that emerged after the fall of Great Moravia. The Polan realm had no permanent borders; Mieszko often seized new lands but was not always able to hold them. Neither did it have a name; the word Poland only came into being under his son.

Hot blood

The blood of Mieszko I also flowed in the veins of Canute the Great, King of England (1016–1035), Denmark (1018–1035) and Norway (1028–1035), known for his ruthlessness, cruelty and bravery. On his conquest of England he led 10,000 of his own soldiers, as well as reinforcements sent by his uncle, Bolesław the Brave. His mother was Bolesław’s sister, Mieszko’s daughter Świętosława, who is known in Scandinavia as Sigrid Storråda and in Britain as Gunhild of Poland.

The Millennial Monument unveiled in Kolobrzeg in the year 2000 is an allegory of the difficult Polish-German relations.

The Golden Chapel in the archcathedral in Poznań with statues of the first rulers of Poland.

The Museum of the First Piasts at Lednica in Lednogóra.

This archaeological find from Lednica remembers the dawn of Christianity in the Polish lands.
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Otto I, a member of the Liudolfing dynasty, systematically colonised the westernmost Slav territories (Brandenburg and Lusatia). In the year 950 he received homage from the Bohemian Premyslids, and Mieszko presumably also paid him homage at least once. He may even have made tribute payments on some of his lands. We know that in 979 Mieszko repulsed an expeditionary force sent by Otto II, who wanted to punish him for not paying homage. From the time of Otto's victory over the pagan Magyars on the river Lech (at Augsburg, in 962), the German king wore the crown of the Holy Roman emperor. A missionary bishopric was established in Magdeburg charged with Christianising the Slavs to the east.

Mieszko I was not going to wait to be baptised by force. He also knew that this new religion would help him to reinforce his ducal authority. He allied himself with the Bohemian ruler, Boleslaus, and embraced Christianity with his marriage to Boleslaus's daughter Dobrava. In his efforts to strengthen his state Mieszko also aligned himself with the German margraves, and in his approach to the pagan Slav tribes he adopted a policy that was essentially compatible with theirs.

Foremost among the fortified settlements of the Polan state – Gniezno, Poznań, Giecz, Lednica, Kruszwica and Kalisz – was Gniezno, whose name is derived from the same root as the word gniazdo, or “nest”, the term used to denote a dynastic seat. The stronghold on Lech Hill, built in the 7th century, was reinforced further by Mieszko, and it was here that the most important pagan shrine probably stood. Given that it is unlikely that the ruler would have made his formal acceptance of the new faith at a centre of pagan cult, a sacred site for his subjects, it is thought that Mieszko, his personal guard and his entire court were baptised in 966 in Poznań, where he had built a stronghold on Ostrów Tumski, an island surrounded by marshes and the flood plains of the river Warta. Two years later the first Christian church in the realm was built in Poznań, and Bishop Jordan commenced his mission.

Mieszko brought his Bohemian princess to his palatium on an island on Lake Lednickie connected to the land by two bridges. It was here that Dobrava and Mieszko’s son Bolesław (later: the Brave) was born. Mieszko had brought Poland into the Christian world, and his son was to reinforce its position in that world.

Remains of the ducal chapel on Ostrów Lednicki Island

The future king of Poland Bolesław the Brave was born in the ducal palatium (palace) on Ostrów Lednicki Island
Marriage to Europe

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Remains of the ducal chapel on Ostrów Lednicki Island

A detail of the Dogome iudex issued by Mieszko I
Subjects of one king

In medieval Europe one was not a Pole, a Bohemian or a German, but the subject of a particular king. It was the Enlightenment that awakened the sense of a national consciousness, but not until the Romantic age did the view develop that the nation was equivalent to the state. This was a noble idea but one that fed nationalisms, and this in the 20th century led to true tragedies.

In the 13th century trade developed in the Polish lands and towns were chartered. There were iron ore mines in the Świętokrzyskie Mountains, tin and silver mines in Olkus, and salt mines in Bohnia and Wieliczka. The lands depopulated by wars and the Tatar invasions were recolonised by offering attractive terms to settlers. In Silesia Duke Henryk the Bearded gave each family one lan (nearly 17 ha) of land rent free. Settlements were governed by elected village leaders (sołtys) and rural aldermen. This method of supplementing the population with colonists from overpopulated areas of Europe or people fleeing religious persecution spread throughout Poland. To this day the traditional costume worn in the village of Wilamowice near Oświęcim, for instance, is Friesian dress. Under Kazimierz the Great Jewish refugees from Germany began to come to Poland, and in 1363 a new town grew up alongside Krakow, bearing the king's name. Kazimierz today is a district of the royal city with a rich fabric of Judaica.

The Black Death, the scourge of Europe in the mid-14th century, fortunately passed Poland by and the country continued to develop apace. The king built 40 castles to guard its borders. He systematised its laws and issued statutes – separate ones for Greater Poland and Lesser Poland; brought together in a single codex – the dygesta – under Jagiello, these became the foundation of the Polish legal system.

The expanding towns attracted merchants from all Europe and soon began to take on a highly cosmopolitan air. Their patricians had German, Italian, Hungarian and even Scottish and Flemish roots. In Krakow's St Mary's Basilica (Mariacka) on the Main Square in Krakow

The Piast Eagle –
the official seal of King
Kazimierz the Great
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Mary's Church (Mariacki) there were sermons in Polish in the mornings and in German in the afternoons. The royal cities enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy. The city councillors (rajcowie) became more powerful after the suppression of a rebellion in Krakow, when King Władysław the Elbow-High made a preventative strike against the aldermen (wójtowie). This strengthened the position of the patriciate, whose political influences were safeguarded by the fact that they issued loans to the rulers. Several dynasties with foreign roots rose to positions of unprecedented power – in Krakow the Boner, Turzon and Montelupi families, and in Warsaw the Blanks and the Teppers. The influences of the councillors were counterbalanced by well-organised guilds, while the lowest strata of urban society were the Jews and the plebs.

Under Kazimierz the Great, the last Piast king (though this is a dynastic name given by historians; they themselves did not use it), a “congress of monarchs” was held in Krakow in 1364, intended above all as a display of the Polish king’s might. It also provided a forum in which to resolve some inflated disputes and to convene an anti-Turkish league. As well as Emperor Charles IV of Luxembourg, three other kings attended (Louis I of Hungary, Valdemar IV of Denmark, and Peter of Lusignan, king of Cyprus), as well as the dukes of Brandenburg, Silesia and Mazovia. The congress was a continuation of the wedding celebrations that had begun in May 1363 to mark the marriage of Kazimierz’s granddaughter Elżbieta (Elizabeth of Pomerania) to the widowed Emperor Charles IV, who was also the king of Bohemia by birth. The emperor was aging, but his new wife was young and hale, extremely beautiful, tall, and strong – it was said she could break a horseshoe with her bare hands. The marriage proved successful. Elżbieta supported her husband in health and tended him in sickness. She bore him four sons and two daughters. Their eldest son, Sigismund, became Holy Roman emperor and inherited the crowns of Bohemia and Hungary, and their daughter Anne of Bohemia married Richard II of England.

A measure of the prosperity of Krakow’s burgher class is the banquet laid on by the city council for the delegates to the congress of monarchs, held in the house of the patrician Mikołaj Wierzynek in September 1364. The feasting went on for 21 days! An account survives in the chronicles of Jan Długosz. Each of the guests received precious gifts from the Krakow patriciate – the value of those bestowed on the Polish king was estimated at over 100,000 florins! We do not know for certain which of Krakow’s burgher houses was owned by Wierzynek and was the venue for the feast – it may have been on Św. Jana Street, or perhaps it was the Grey House, one of the most magnificent on the Main Square. The tradition and honour of hosting heads of state is continued today by Krakow’s most stylish restaurant, Wierzynek, which occupies the Morsztynowska and Pinocińska houses on the Main Square.
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Wierzynek’s Feast

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The Kingdom of Poland had caught up with the rest of Europe in civilisational terms and was no different from similar monarchies in the west of the continent. There was one exception to this, however: the Polish knightly class was reluctant to take part in the Crusades, and few felt the pull of the Holy Land. The Poles had enough pagans of their own just across the border – in the 13th century Mazovia was the last outpost of Christianity in the north and east: to the north lay the lands of the pagan Prussians and Yotvingians, and to the east were the Lithuanians, who were still unbaptised. From all over the country younger sons for whom there was not enough land on the family estates, and ruffians who had gained a bad name for themselves at home flocked to the burning borderlands, where every sabre counted. Hence the idiosyncrasy of this region as a backwater inhabited by titled nobility living at the material standard of peasants.

Leszek the White, Duke of Krakow, though under oath to Pope Honorius to make pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre, was one of those reluctant to go on crusade. Summoned to Rome to fulfil his vow, he wrote back: “Stricken with illness, I cannot sail to the Holy Land, the more so that owing to a condition affecting the nature of my body, I can drink neither wine nor simple water, being accustomed to drink only beer or mead”. He did promise the pope that he would convert the pagans along the Baltic instead, though he had an original concept for their Christianisation. He believed that Prussia should be colonised peacefully by establishing factors in the pagan lands and offering favourable trade terms to those who would agree to convert. Alas, he never had the opportunity to put his plan into action – he was attacked in a bathhouse and murdered by the duke of Pomerania.

The Piast dukes joined forces for a few armed expeditions into the Prussian and Yotvingian territories, but each one simply provoked a yet more violent retaliation. In the end, the ruler most plagued by the pagans of Mazovia, Konrad I, invited to Poland the Order of Brothers of the German
Crusaders and Knights of the Cross

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House of St Mary in Jerusalem, famed in the west for its valiant Teutonic Knights. In Poland this formation was to gain a sinister reputation as Krzyżacy, the Knights of the Cross (from the black crosses on their white tabards). The invitation from Konrad of Mazovia salvaged the Order’s raison d’être: the Kingdom of Jerusalem had fallen and the king of Hungary had banished it.

At first relations between the Order and the Piast dukes were pleasant enough. The Knights reclaimed the Chelmno lands from the pagans, and dazzled society with their manners, art of building defensive fortresses and system of administering the lands they conquered. Konrad of Mazovia was even made a “confrater” of the Order, as the Knights titled their most generous donors. The crusades organised by the Order attracted the flower of knighthood, including such famous names as the king of Bohemia, Premysl Otakar II, and the earl of Derby, later King Henry IV of England. In the process of “converting” the Samogitians, after every battle Grand Master Konrad Wallenrod would hold an Arthurian-style round table, to which the bravest of the brave would be invited, and grand banquets would be held at Malbork Castle.

In the end, the conflict of interests between the Order and the Polish dukes came out, however. Konrad’s design had been to use “hired hands” to increase his realm, but in fact he had succeeded only in diminishing it irrevocably. The Knights had no intention of giving up the Chelmno Lands they had captured, and set about building a state of their own on the territories they had conquered. Real enmity ensued with their occupation of Pomerania, including Gdańsk. This was not something any Polish ruler could accept. A chain of Polish-Teutonic conflicts began, and the pope was called on to adjudicate. His verdicts favoured the Poles, but the Order refused to respect them. The armed clashes became more and more bloody, and at the Battle of Płowce both sides massacred their prisoners – something unheard of in chivalric Europe.

The period of feudal partition of Poland was drawing to a close, and the united kingdom proved a formidable opponent for the Order. Lithuania, worn down by Teutonic invasions, after considerable wheeling and dealing between the two sides ultimately opted to align with Poland. Pursuant to the act of union concluded in Kreva in 1385 the Lithuanian duke Jogaila (Jagiełło) was to be baptised in the Latin rite, marry the 14-year-old Jadwiga d’Anjou, who had been enounced on the Polish throne a year previously, and then himself be crowned king. Lithuania was Christianised in 1387 by the Polish clergy. This left the Teutonic Order bereft of the moral right to convert the Lithuanians, something that the Knights, by now attached to their fortresses in Samogitia and their warring lifestyle, were loath to accept. There could only be one outcome: war.

The battle royal was fought on 15 July 1410 at Grunwald (Tannenberg). The Order’s troops were reinforced by knights from all over Europe, who had responded to Grand Master Ulrich von Jungingen’s appeal. Jagiello’s Polish and Lithuanian forces were supported by Ruthenian detachments and Tatar cavalry. Both sides treated the clash as a form of divine judgement. At the height of the battle, the Grand Standard of the Polish Kingdom was threatened. The hymn Christ ist erstanden (“Christ is risen”) rang out. But the standard was raised, and Jagiello’s armies responded with the Bogurodzica (“Mother of God”), Polish most ancient religious hymn. And they were victorious. As one of medieval Europe’s greatest battles drew to a close, the sun set over a field strewn with Teutonic corpses. The grand master had fallen, and 51 Teutonic standards were laid at Jagiello’s feet. In accordance with chivalric custom, the king of Poland and Lithuania ordered the bodies of von Jungingen and his commanders to be found and sent back to Malbork. That was the beginning of the decline of the Teutonic state, bound over to pay homage to the Polish kings, and stripped of its illegally garnered territorial gains, including Pomerania.
House of St Mary in Jerusalem, famed in the west for its valiant Teutonic Knights. In Poland this formation was to gain a sinister reputation as Krzyżacy, the Knights of the Cross (from the black crosses on their white tabards). The invitation from Konrad of Mazovia salvaged the Order’s raison d’être: the Kingdom of Jerusalem had fallen and the king of Hungary had banished it.

At first relations between the Order and the Piast dukes were pleasant enough. The Knights reclaimed the Chelmno lands from the pagans, and dazzled society with their manners, art of building defensive fortresses and system of administering the lands they conquered. Konrad of Mazovia was even made a “confrater” of the Order, as the Knights titled their most generous donors. The crusades organised by the Order attracted the flower of knighthood, including such famous names as the king of Bohemia, Premysl Otakar II, and the earl of Derby, later King Henry IV of England. In the process of “converting” the Samogitians, after every battle Grand Master Konrad Wallenrod would hold an Arthurian-style round table, to which the bravest of the brave would be invited, and grand banquets would be held at Malbork Castle.

In the end, the conflict of interests between the Order and the Polish dukes came out, however. Konrad’s design had been to use “hired hands” to increase his realm, but in fact he had succeeded only in diminishing it irrevocably. The Knights had no intention of giving up the Chelmno Lands they had captured, and set about building a state of their own on the territories they had conquered. Real enmity ensued with their occupation of Pomerania, including Gdańsk. This was not something any Polish ruler could accept. A chain of Polish-Teutonic conflicts began, and the pope was called on to adjudicate. His verdicts favoured the Poles, but the Order refused to respect them. The armed clashes became more and more bloody, and at the Battle of Płowce both sides massacred their prisoners – something unheard of in chivalric Europe.

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The victory at Grunwald elevated the Jagiellons to the position of one of the foremost dynasties in Europe. After the conclusion of personal union at Kreva in 1385, the Polish Crown and the Duchy of Lithuania were ruled by a single house. The foreign policy of both states was, out of necessity, compatible, and economic and cultural integration proceeded gradually. The Polish Crown was stronger in economic terms, and more developed in civilisational terms, but was far smaller. The vast Duchy of Lithuania spread from the Baltic to the Black Sea, though only 10% was ethnically Lithuanian; most of its territory was settled by Orthodox Ruthenians. Not until 1569, three years before the death of the last of the Jagiellons, was an act of union signed in Lublin establishing a federal state with a joint (thenceforth elected) ruler and Sejm (diet). That solemn occasion ended to the joyful cries of the senators: “Joined as free men with free, equal with equals!”

And so the biggest realm in Europe was created. The competencies of its rulers were effectively limited, however, by the numerous privileges of the noble estate (the szlachta). The first step down this road was taken by Louis d’Anjou, king of Poland and Hungary, who due to his lack of a son, and in violation of Polish law and custom, had resolved to pass the crown to his daughter Jadwiga. In order to secure the consent of the magnates, in 1374 he issued the Koszyce privilege, which exempted the szlachta from most taxes. After the Jagiellons came an age of elected kings, and each election was an opportunity to force concessions from candidates to the throne. In times when other states across the continent were entrenching systems of absolute power, Poland was creating a curious set-up: a democracy of the nobility. After the citizens of the Venetian Republic (Serenissima), the szlachta began to call their Republic “Najjaśniejsza” – “most serene”. The superiority of its system was justified with references to the degeneration of powerful rulers, such as the paranoia-stricken tsar Ivan the Terrible, or the Habsburgs, who murdered the Bohemian nobles.

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The Union of Lublin by Jan Matejko
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were thus all the keener to safeguard the principle of equality of the nobles. The owner of even one village, or a landless official could address a magnate as “pan brat” – literally “my lord brother” – and each one’s vote carried the same weight in the Sejm, though the richer ones had no qualms about buying the votes of their poorer “brothers”. The anarchy among the szlachta spread slowly, however; the age of the Jagiellons was still the golden age in Poland’s history.

Prior to Poland’s accession to the European Union, some circles of society feared the loss of their newly regained sovereignty. But when Pope John Paul II made reference to this page of the country’s history, with the words: “From the Union of Lublin to the European Union”, the Poles voted overwhelmingly in favour of accession in their referendum. Counting from the Union of Kreva, Poland and Lithuania were joined for an impressive 400 years – longer than England and Scotland, not to mention the positively youthful European Union.

The Te Deum of the last of the Jagiellons

The Dominican friary complex is one of the oldest religious sites in Lublin, and in the eastern part of the cloister is the Union Hall. It was here, in the former refectory, that the act of federal union between Poland and Lithuania was officially signed in 1569. It was here that King Zygmunt August patiently explained that “great things that are to last for ages thus also require lengthy deliberation and good caution”. And when these deliberations had reached their successful conclusion, he led the signatories to the act into the Church of St Stanisław, knelt down before the high altar, and with tears in his eyes intoned a powerful Te Deum. The king’s emotion is easy to understand. Married twice to Habsburg princesses, he nevertheless did not produce an heir. Even his marriage to Barbara Radziwiłłówna, which was not recognised by the szlachta, did not bring him a son – or happiness. At the end of his life, realising that the dynasty – and with it the personal union of the Crown and the Duchy – would expire with him, he strove desperately to break down the resistance of the Lithuanian boyars and to achieve his goal, the Union of Lublin.
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The Polish Renaissance and the flourishing of science, culture and art that came with it were directly linked to the prosperity generated by the Polish grain that was shipped down the Vistula to Gdańsk and then on to numerous European ports. Gdańsk enjoyed considerable autonomy and was granted a raft of privileges by the Polish kings, enabling it to grow into a tremendously rich, cosmopolitan city, greater not only than the still provincial Warsaw but even than the capital, Krakow. All that contemporary Europe and the world had to offer could be bought in Gdańsk; to the Polish szlachta Gdańsk was one big EXPO.

Young nobles travelled abroad to study, above all to Padua and Bologna. They returned from their Italian universities inspired by humanist ideals, bringing with them new styles in art and new ways of thinking. No-one in Poland could build like the Italians, so architects were brought over from Italy. Wawel royal castle was reconstructed in the Renaissance style by Francesco Florentino and Bartolomeo Berrecci of Padua. The wife of Zygmunt I, Queen Bona, from the Italian house of Sforza, brought her new country a whole host of Italian builders and artists. Gucci Santi set up a studio in the town of Pińczów (in the Świętokrzyskie region) decorating magnates’ palaces. Bernardo Morando was employed by Jan Zamoyski (1542–1605), at one time the rector of Europe’s leading university, in Padua, and at home in Poland a politician, grand chancellor and grand hetman of the Crown, and a true Renaissance man. He built Zamość, an ideal town, and founded the Zamość Academy (1594). The Renaissance did not turn out any outstanding constructors, painters or sculptors in Poland, but it did produce talents of no less calibre: thinkers, scholars and writers.

The first university in Poland was founded in 1364 by Kazimierz the Great. The Krakow Studium Generale post-dated the Prague university (1348), but pre-dated those in Vienna (1365), Pecs (1367) and Heidelberg (1386). At first the only subjects that could be read in Krakow were philosophy, medicine and law. Queen Jadwiga later successfully petitioned in Avignon for permission to establish a faculty of theology, a prestigious subject; she also bequeathed her entire fortune to the university. In the 15th century the university began to grow. Its first rector, Stanislaw of Skarbimierz, author of the work De bello iusto, is considered one of the fathers of international law. Another, Paweł Włodkowic, came to fame during the Council of Constance with a speech on the inadmissibility of using force to convert pagans.

The Krakow school of astrology and mathematics was particularly brilliant. Among its brightest stars were Marcin Bylica of Olkusz, later astrologist to the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus, and Marcin Biem, the author of the reform of the Julian calendar. Krakow also produced adepts to rival Faust: the famous alchemists Maciej Miechowita and Adam of Bocheń. Among the university’s famous alumni were also foreign students: Konrad Celtis, Erasmus Horitz and Stefan Roslein all went on to shine at mathematics in Vienna.

The Greats of the Golden Age

In the years 1491–1495 Mikolaj Kopernik (Copernicus) was also a student at the Krakow Alma Mater. He went on to study law in Bologna and Padua, but it was the teaching of Wojciech of Brudzewo that awakened his interest in astronomy. Copernicus’s breakthrough and the revolution in science ignited by his work De revolutionibus orbium coelestium are common knowledge. But Mikolaj Kopernik was also an economist (in a treatise on the monetary system he formulated one of the fundamental laws of economics: bad money will drive out good), a lawyer, a translator of poetry – and a poet himself (he had a Greek epigram and a Latin epic poem published), a cartographer (he drew up a map of Warmia), an administrator of the Warmia Chapter assets, and one of the defenders of the castle in Olsztyn during an attack by the Teutonic Knights. Another great humanist, who extolled the joy of life in every line of his epigrams – up to the tears shed over the death of his daughter in his Laments (Treny) – was Jan Kochanowski, also an alumnus of an Italian university, writing in both Latin and Polish.
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Zamość – a perfect city

Zamość: a fortified town, built according to an anthropomorphic conception and the principles of harmony as enumerated by Cicero, considered the pearl of the Renaissance and often called the Padua of the North, was born out of cooperation between the Italian architect Bernardo Morando and the Polish humanist Jan Zamoyski. It was built in 1578–1605 by Italian constructors and German stonemasons. An equestrian statue of Zamoyski, unveiled on the 400th anniversary of his death, stands outside the Zamoyski Palace. In 1992 the town of Zamość was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.
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For centuries the Poles held the conviction that their country was the last bastion of Christianity, which burdened them with special obligations. It was in the name of this idea of *antemurale* that the young king Władysław IV died in 1444 fighting in the Battle of Varna against the Turks in a war that had nothing to do with his country. Two and a half centuries later the elected king of Poland Jan III Sobieski also saved Europe from the Turkish foe.

The Republic of the Two Nations was constantly exposed to attacks from the east. Jan Sobieski was born on a stormy night during a Tatar attack on his family seat. As he himself remarked, "[my] great-grandfather, grandfather, uncle and my own brother [were] felled by the pagan hand". As a defender of the faith he spent his entire adult life battling the hordes that beleaguered the eastern borderlands. A hostage in Bakhchisaray and an emissary in Istanbul, he learned all there was to know about the secrets of the oriental art of war. His adversaries called him respectfully "the Lion of Lechistan".

Sobieski's most famous battle was at Vienna. He responded to Leopold II's plea for assistance in the defence of Vienna against the horde advancing from Belgrade by relieving the siege and taking command of the whole defence, numbering 74,000 men. The Poles crossed the Danube with a pontoon bridge to set up their artillery on the hills surrounding the city. The cannonade proved effective, and in the final battle on 12 September 1683 Sobieski headed a charge of his hussars into the vizier’s camp. The victory was unequivocal; the spoils included Kara Mustapha’s own tent, Turkish bunchuks and standards, and wagons loaded with all kinds of material goods. The death toll was 12,000 Turks to just 3,000 Christians. Sobieski attributed the victory to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the pope appointed 12 September a Marian feast in commemoration of the occasion.

The vast commonwealth was not Catholic even in half, however. The Cossacks and Ruthenians who inhabited its eastern territories had for centuries confessed Orthodoxy, and there were also Muslims living in the same areas – the Polish kings readily installed Tatars in these borderlands in recognition of their valiance.

The Polish szlachta’s affair with the Reformation was tempestuous but brief. Many were attracted to the teachings of Calvin but in view of the Protestant invasions from the north (the Swedish “Deluge” of 1655–1660) would not convert to the faith of their enemies. One of the expressions of antipathy towards the Reformation was the ardent Marian cult. When the entire country was
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King Stan in life and death

The last king of the Commonwealth of the Two Nations, Stanisław August Poniatowski, is a controversial figure. He proved to be of weak character, and ultimately hastened the collapse of his own realm, but he is due some credit. He established the Cadets’ Corps, an elite military school, and himself donated to it. Prevented from significant achievements on the political level, he was a wise and active patron of Polish culture and the arts. He established a tradition of “Thursday lunches”, prepared by Europe’s leading chef, Paul Tremo, to which he invited poets, thinkers and artists. These lasted 3–4 hours; in the winter they were held at the Royal Castle and in the summer in the Łazienki Royal Baths. This Warsaw park, with its lakes, exquisite garden architecture, and Palace on the Water, built for the king by Dominik Merlini, has survived to this day.

After his abdication in favour of Russia (signed in return for the repayment of his debts, which totalled 40 million roubles), Stanisław August Poniatowski was remanded in internment in Grodno Castle. Not until Empress Catherine died was he able to move to Petersburg, where he died. When the Soviet authorities repatriated his remains to Poland after World War I, his coffin was placed in the crypt of the village church in Wołczyn without any ceremony. After World War II Wołczyn was in Belarusian territory (Vowchyn). In 1988 Belarusian conservators rediscovered the king’s body and it was once more returned to Poland. After much debate the decision was taken that the monarch did deserve a place in St John’s Cathedral in Warsaw. His funeral there was held in 1995.

For freedom on two continents

Two heroes of Poland’s struggle for independence also fought for the independence of the United States of America. Kazimierz Pułaski, the 24-year-old commander of the Bar Confederate, for which he was sentenced to death in absentia, fought in America in Washington’s army. Considered the founding father of the American cavalry tradition, he formed a cavalry legion, which routed the English at Charleston under his command. He died from wounds sustained during the cavalry charge at Savannah in 1779. There is a biographical museum devoted to him in his childhood home in Warka near Warsaw.

In 1777 Tadeusz Kościuszko also set sail across the Atlantic to take part in the British colony’s War of Independence. He helped to fortify military camps – including West Point on the Hudson river, now the seat of the famous military academy – and was instrumental in the victory at the Battle of Saratoga. In recognition of his service he was promoted to the rank of brigadier general. He spent his military pay on buying African American slaves their freedom. He returned to Poland to take command of the insurrection, during which, wounded at the Battle of Maciejowice, he was taken prisoner. In Maciejowice, in a manor house close to the battlefield, there is a museum about the insurrection and the person of its commander.
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For freedom on two continents

Two heroes of Poland’s struggle for independence also fought for the independence of the United States of America. Kazimierz Pułaski, the 24-year-old commander of the Bar Confederate, for which he was sentenced to death in absentia, fought in America in Washington’s army. Considered the founding father of the American cavalry tradition, he formed a cavalry legion, which routed the English at Charleston under his command. He died from wounds sustained during the cavalry charge at Savannah in 1779. There is a biographical museum devoted to him in his childhood home in Warka near Warsaw.

In 1777 Tadeusz Kościuszko also set sail across the Atlantic to take part in the British colony’s War of Independence. He helped to fortify military camps – including West Point on the Hudson river, now the seat of the famous military academy – and was instrumental in the victory at the Battle of Saratoga. In recognition of his service he was promoted to the rank of brigadier general. He spent his military pay on buying African American slaves their freedom. He returned to Poland to take command of the insurrection, during which, wounded at the Battle of Maciejowice, he was taken prisoner. In Maciejowice, in a manor house close to the battlefield, there is a museum about the insurrection and the person of its commander.
From hope to mourning

The Polish-French friendship established during the Bar Confederation reached its apogee under Napoleon, in whom the partitioned nation vested great hopes. The song of the Legions, sung with such fervour during each successive uprising that it became the national anthem, also makes reference to Bonaparte: Przejdziemy Wisłę, przejdziemy Wartę, / Będziemy Polakami / Dał nam przykład Bonaparte / jak zwycięzać mamy [We’ll cross the Vistula, we’ll cross the Warta, we’ll be Poles. / Bonaparte set us an example / of how we are to be victorious.]. It was written in 1797, when Napoleon was still a republican general. When as French emperor he created the Duchy of Warsaw, a surrogate for a free Poland, he earned universal adoration. Polish soldiers fought for him with enthusiasm; the charge of the Polish light cavalry at the Somosierra Pass in Spain is national legend. In 1809 the newly established Polish army under Prince Józef Poniatowski defended Warsaw against the Austrians. The nephew of Poland’s last king was a faithful servant of Napoleon to the end: he fell in battle at Leipzig.

After the liquidation of the Duchy of Warsaw, at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 the partitioning powers founded the “Congress” Kingdom of Poland, with the Russian tsar as the king of Poland. The tsarist secret service installed a closely woven network of secret agents. First to feel the implications of the repressions were the intelligentsia and the young people studying at the university in Wilno. Following the deconspiracy of the Decembrists’ plot in Russia, the discussion societies operating at the university were ruled equally dangerous, and sleighs full of Polish exiles (kibitki) were dispatched to Siberia. The natural bonds between the anti-tsarist Russians and the Poles, though they had produced a poem by Mickiewicz (Do przyjaciół Moskali – to our friends the Moskals [Moskal – slang expression for Russians, more derogatory in tone than the English “Russky”]) and the slogan Za naszą i waszą wolność [For our freedom and yours], were soon broken. Even the more progressive Russians could not conceive of any loss of territory to the Russian Empire, while the Poles refused to accept that their state would not be restored.

In 1830 Russia was ruled by a progressive tsar, Alexander I, and in many areas of life there was a palpable sense of a thaw… Nevertheless, one November night the young cadets took to the streets of Warsaw and called on their fellow countrymen to fight. This spontaneous uprising forced the government of the Kingdom of Poland to decree the dethronement of the tsar and to declare war on Russia. In vain Prince Czartoryski sought to unite the governments of Europe in the Polish cause; the insurrectionists were ruled rabble-rousers. Pope Gregory XVI excommunicated them for “rising up against an authority endowed by God”.

The war lasted almost a year – 325 days. When the uprising collapsed, a huge wave of émigrés passed through Prussia to France. The blood sacrifice of the patriotic young generation and the wave of repressions that followed it (exiles and confiscation of assets) took a heavy toll on the nation.

When the rest of Europe was swept up in the Springtime of Nations, in the Russian partition the memory of the suppression of the uprising was still too fresh and painful. Krakow and Galicia, however, ruled by the Habsburgs, did rise up, but this led to internecine peasant rebellions directed against the patriotic szlachta. This provided the Austrians with a pretext to bombard the recalcitrant Krakow from its artillery positions.

The Polish cause did not figure very frequently in the debates that accompanied the awakening of the nations of Europe. In Germany only the extreme left called for the right of such a big nation to its own state. Karl Marx, speaking at a congress in Brussels, thundered: “…the liberation of Poland has become a matter of honour for all democrats in Europe”. At the height of Europe’s thaw, the parliament in Frankfurt annexed the Duchy of Poznań to Germany, and a similar fate befell the Republic of Krakow, which was subsumed into the Habsburg state. The French issued some moving declarations, but these proved empty words…

The last rebellion of the nations of the former Commonwealth took place in 1863. Poles, Belarusians, Ukrainians and Lithuanians stood shoulder to shoulder in battle against the tsarate. This time the uprising was carefully planned, with an underground state in place, including a government and a treasury, funded by donations (which were not always voluntary), and its own law and order service (the sztyrelnicy – “dagger-wielders”). Begun with a manifesto issued on 22 January 1863, it was a typical partisan war, comprising some 1,200 skirmishes. By the autumn of 1864 most of the divisions had been smashed. The tsar suppressed the uprising severely, and proceeded to show no mercy in punishing its participants. A thousand insurrectionists were sentenced to death and nearly 40,000 to exile (and they were never amnestied), and 1,660 estates were confiscated. Many small towns had their urban charters rescinded by the tsar for abetting the insurrectionists.

This time public opinion in Europe came down firmly on the side of the nation in its desperate struggle for independence. The insurrectionists were joined by volunteers such as O’Brien de Lacy of Ireland. One of those who fell in action for the insurrectionists was Francesco Nullo, a friend and confidant of Garibaldi, who had come from Italy with a detachment of men. In Ojców, near Krakow, François Rochebrune established a division of Zouaves of Death modelled on the French formation. Its members swore an oath promising never to retreat or surrender – and they kept their word.

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The statue of Jan III Sobieski in Łazienki Park
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A nation without a land

Successive waves of émigrés flowed west from the Polish lands, while transports of exiles were sent east. The latter worked as convicts in mines and clearing the taiga; few ever returned from exile. As forced settlers they managed mines, conducted scientific research, and contributed to the development of Siberian exile communities. One pioneering researcher of the autochthonous peoples of Siberia was Bronisław Piłsudski, brother of Poland’s later Chief of State.

The biggest wave of emigration from Poland broke in France after the 1830 November Uprising. Among the exiles were many of the nation’s elite: philosophers, writers and artists. The uncrowned king of the “Great Emigration” of 1831 was Prince Adam Czartoryski. His palace in Paris (Hôtel Lambert on Ile St-Louis) was the centre of émigré life. Here arguments over Poland were played out and support sought and offered. The distraught émigrés found solace in mysticism; their spiritual leader in Paris was Andrzej Towiański.

One of those who succumbed to Towiański’s influences was the greatest Polish Romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz, who lectured in Slavonic literature at the Sorbonne. His views on the Messianism of the Polish nation (Poland as the “Christ of Nations”) had a significant impact on the Polish literature of the Romantic period; many of the masterpieces of this period were produced abroad. One of these was Mickiewicz’s epic poem Pan Tadeusz, written “on the streets of Paris” with the nostalgia and bitterness of a writer who knew he would never be able to return to his homeland. Others who wrote their works far from Poland were Juliusz Słowacki and Cyprian Norwid. Chopin, too, full of longing for the country of his youth, composed nocturnes overflowing with melancholy and mazurkas inspired by Polish folk music.

Towards the end of the 19th century and early in the 20th, talented young people often left provincial Warsaw of their own volition, to study at western universities. This was how the modest governess Maria Skłodowska found herself in France, later to become the first woman in history to study at the physics and chemistry department at the Sorbonne. She and her husband Pierre Curie discovered the radioactive elements radium and polonium, for which they were awarded the Nobel Prize. She received a second Nobel for isolating pure radium. The actress Helena Modrzejewska left the theatres of Galicia to make the stages of England and the USA her own. Her son, Ralph Modjeski, a gifted construction engineer, built more than 40 bridges across America’s biggest rivers. The French poet Guillaume Apollinaire was also Polish by birth – he was born Apoloniusz Kostrowicki. The famous English writer Joseph Conrad was originally a Pole Józef Korzeniowski. He lived in Kraków and left from there to go to Marseilles, where he began

his adventures with the sea. Edmund Strzelecki climbed Australia’s highest mountain and named it after Kościuszko. Bronislaw Malinowski researched the sexual life of the inhabitants of the Trobriand Islands. Ernest Malinowski built the highest railway line in the world, in Peru.

In this period of history the Poles gave Europe and the world their best sons and daughters. Their homeland did not need them, for they had no homeland. The Polish nation still has one of the highest proportional émigré populations in the world: over one in three Poles lives outside Poland.

Chopin’s Warsaw

A few weeks before the outbreak of the November Uprising, on 2 November 1830, the 20-year-old Fryderyk Chopin left Warsaw to develop his talents abroad. On hearing the news of the fall of Warsaw, he wrote in an anguished letter from Stuttgart: “O God! Are you [there]?! You are, and you take no revenge! – Have you not yet enough of Moscow’s crimes?” Sixty years later, it was a “Moskal” who salvaged the memory of Chopin. The Russian pianist Milly Balakiriev set out to find his birthplace. In Żelazowa Wola he found an overgrown park and the remains of the manorial complex. He raised the alarm in the press and the Warsaw Music Society announced a collection among the Polish community to buy back the manor, but only sufficient donations were collected to erect an obelisk. Balakiriev expressed his outright regret that the Poles had “collected money amongst themselves, while Russian admirers of Chopin were unable to make donations”. He was invited to the unveiling of the obelisk in 1894, however.

Today a themed route has been created through the city of the composer’s youth, punctuated by musical “Chopin benches”, and in the cellars of the Ostrogski Palace there is a multimedia museum devoted to him.

Helena Modrzejewska – a painting of the great actress by Tadeusz Ajałkiewicz

Jan Styka Mickiewicz as a pilgrim

The manor house – or rather its rear wing – in Żelazowa Wola, where Fryderyk Chopin was born
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The manor house – or rather its rear wing – in Żelazowa Wola, where Fryderyk Chopin was born.
The darkest hour is just before dawn

The Iron Chancellor of the German Reich, Otto von Bismarck, made no secret of the fact that he would like to see the Poles “stamped out”. The denationalisation of ethnic Poles in the Prussian partition involved not only Germanisation but also economic persecution. Poles were not entitled to build houses on their own land. One response to this ban was “Drzymała’s wagon” – a house on wheels (a prototype of the caravan?) into which the peasant Michał Drzymała moved with his family.

The Congress Kingdom of Poland, subsumed into Russia, was intensively Russified. Russian was the sole language of instruction in schools; Polish language and literature were only taught conspiratorially, in private homes, while adherents of the Eastern Catholic Church (a formerly Eastern Orthodox Church confessing the pope as its head) in particular were subjected to intense religious persecution.

A vibrant textiles industry developed in the lands of the former Congress Kingdom, stimulating the expansion of its cities and drawing in foreign capital. This is the genesis of the rise of Łódź, where Poles, Russians, Germans and Jews all did business together, a phenomenon illustrated by the Nobel laureate Władysław Reymont in his novel The Promised Land.

By contrast, Galicia under the Austrian partition was one of the poorest regions of Europe; the existence eeked out by the average Galician peasant was comparable to that of the Irish at the start of the Great Famine. The legend of this region was Ignacy Łukasiewicz, a pharmacist from Lwów who was the first to distil kerosene from crude oil and find and construct a practical application for it: the kerosene lamp. In 1853, on the last day of July, kerosene lamps were used to light a Lwów hospital theatre during an urgent night-time operation. It is this date that is celebrated as the birth of the oil industry. A year later Łukasiewicz and his circle founded the world’s first oil well in Bóbrka in the Low Beskids (it continues to operate as a demonstration well to this day). This was the start of the oil boom in Sub-Carpathia (Podkarpacie).
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World War I crashed across the territory of the former Polish Republic like a steamroller, reducing it to a vast battlefield where the armies of the three partitioning powers clashed. Ironically, in each one of them there were Poles, who were thus forced into fratricidal battles. The Second Republic of Poland was born into the vacuum left by the defeated central powers and Russia, which was consumed by revolution.

The most momentous event of 11 November (the date celebrated in Poland as Independence Day) in 1918 was the capitulation of Germany. In Warsaw the Regency Council handed military power to Józef Piłsudski, who had returned from a German prison in Magdeburg fortress. The German forces were disarmed and withdrew from the territory of the small Regency Kingdom of Poland founded in 1916 by the German and Austrian emperors.

Two months later, on 18 January 1919, the peace conference at Versailles convened. Its task was to rule on the future shape of the states that were now emerging from “non-existence”. Contradictory arguments and reasonings competed for the sympathy of the delegates of the great powers. Poland’s cause found little comprehension. The Czechs garnered more favour, and they tended to win out where their interests clashed with Poland’s. Indeed, the interests of the victorious powers themselves were far from homogenous. France aimed to weaken Germany but was reluctant to snatch too much from Russia, counting on the return of the tsarist system there. Britain preferred not to cripple the Germans in the hope of attaining a balance of power on the continent. Lloyd George said that he would no sooner give Silesia to the Poles than a pocket watch to a monkey. As a result, a Poland already bled by the war had to fight for its own borders, on six fronts. Its western border was established as a result of three uprisings in Silesia and one in Greater Poland. This territorial rivalry with its neighbours caused deep rifts. Poland took Wilno from Lithuania but lost the most richly endowed part of Cieszyn Silesia to Czechoslovakia.

The Curzon line (along the Bug) was proposed as Poland’s eastern border at Versailles in overt contravention of the Poles’ expectations. The situation on the ground in this region was growing highly volatile. Bolshevik Russia had succeeding in stifling the defence of the Ukrainians, who were fighting...
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for a state of their own, and the onslaught was heading for Poland. The Second Republic, with its ruined economy, still hazy administrative structures, and an army cobbled together from soldiers of all three partitioning armies, was in mortal peril. Europe was not yet aware that it, too, was in danger: Lenin’s objective was to invade the Weimar Republic, itself in the grip of revolutionary ferment. The commander of the Russian forces, Gen. Tukhachevsky, made this abundantly clear in his call to arms: “Over the corpse of White Poland lies the road to worldwide conflagration!” When the Bolsheviks stood at the gates of Warsaw, few – aside from the Poles – believed that the city would defend itself. Ambassadors were recalled; only the advisor from the French military mission remained, and the papal nuncio, ready to place a curse on the Bolsheviks. The defence of Warsaw rested on volunteers: artists, students, high school pupils. And they managed to repel the attacks at Radzymin and Ossowo long enough to allow Piłsudski and his troops to move into an outflanking position to the south.

Happily for Europe, “the miracle on the Vistula” occurred – the Bolshevik army did not march “across the corpse of Poland” and did not reach Berlin or Paris. The Battle of Warsaw, on 15 August 1920, ruled one of the world’s most decisive battles ever, was won by the Poles.

At last there was time to rebuild the devastated country, unite the lands reclaimed from the three partitions, lay the foundations for modern industry, and construct a port in Gdynia – all this in conditions of incredible poverty, but with the enthusiasm of the Poles, who at last had their country back. One of the Polish government’s first moves was to implement an education reform. The three different systems were unified, schooling became compulsory for all, and universities were reopened. The interwar period sufficed to produce a new generation ready – as always – to give its life for its country. The northern borders, with Gdańsk as a Free City, were shortly to prove the pretext for another war. For the Poles this came so soon that it was almost tantamount to a single war with a 20-year hiatus.

Fortress Osowiec

Fortress Osowiec is a witness to the fierce battles of World War I; it was defended with immense self-sacrifice by the Russians. The Germans had first used chlorine gas in the Polish lands, at Bolimowo on the Bzura river (January 1915), and again at Ypres in Belgium (April 1915). The third time they used it was here, at Osowiec, on 6 August 1915. Remembering the effect it had wrought in Belgium, the Germans expected the occupation of the fortress to be a formality after the gas attack, but they were confronted by the defenders, wounded and burned, but still alive. Swaying and choking from the fumes that had settled in their lungs, they nevertheless carried on shooting. The Germans believed this to be an attack of the living dead, and they fled in terror, but weighed down by their cumbersome gear they floundered and drowned in the surrounding marshes.

The fort, a superb example of the late 19th-century art of fortification, is open to visitors. It is all the more interesting for its situation, in the Biebrza National Park, known for the marshes and flood plains of the Biebrza, which are the nesting grounds for many species of birds.
for a state of their own, and the onslaught was heading for Poland. The Second Republic, with its ruined economy, still hazy administrative structures, and an army cobbled together from soldiers of all three partitioning armies, was in mortal peril. Europe was not yet aware that it, too, was in danger: Lenin’s objective was to invade the Weimar Republic, itself in the grip of revolutionary ferment. The commander of the Russian forces, Gen. Tukhachevsky, made this abundantly clear in his call to arms: “Over the corpse of White Poland lies the road to worldwide conflagration!” When the Bolsheviks stood at the gates of Warsaw, few – aside from the Poles – believed that the city would defend itself. Ambassadors were recalled; only the advisor from the French military mission remained, and the papal nuncio, ready to place a curse on the Bolsheviks. The defence of Warsaw rested on volunteers: artists, students, high school pupils. And they managed to repel the attacks at Radzymin and Ossowo long enough to allow Piłsudski and his troops to move into an outflanking position to the south.

Happily for Europe, “the miracle on the Vistula” occurred – the Bolshevik army did not march “across the corpse of Poland” and did not reach Berlin or Paris. The Battle of Warsaw, on 15 August 1920, ruled one of the world’s most decisive battles ever, was won by the Poles.

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The Nazi-Soviet partition of Poland

As fascist Germany grew in strength, it began to find Poland’s existence irritating. No less irked by the “bastard of Versailles” was Stalin. The greater worry for Europe at large was Hitler. After his occupation of the Rhineland, the Anschluss of Austria, the annexation of Klaipeda (Memel), the partition of Czechoslovakia, and then the annexation of the Sudetenland, it became clear that his appetite was insatiable. In the face of German claims to Gdańsk and a “Baltic corridor”, the governments of France and Britain extended an unconditional guarantee to Poland. London promised that Britain would do everything in its power to repel a German attack, and from Paris came assurances that troops would be deployed behind the Maginot Line.

This firm stance was intended to deter Hitler, but these calculations failed. Ribbentrop was dispatched post-haste to Moscow to sign a bilateral pact with Molotov, and the German army marched on the Polish border, crossing it on 1 September 1939. Two days later the Allies did declare war on Germany, but not one division or aeroplane was sent to Poland. Under the force of the German armoured columns pressing east, the Polish Army went into retreat, holding out against the Germans wherever it could – such as on the Bzura (the biggest battle of the September campaign).

The nail in Poland’s coffin was the Red Army’s invasion of Poland from the east on 17 September. In order not to have to sign their capitulation, the government of the Second Republic escaped to Romania. Some military personnel also took this route to France in order to be able to continue fighting the Germans on all the fronts of the war. Those officers who did not manage to flee the Russians were interned in POW camps, and in April 1940 shot, along with soldiers of the Border Protection Corps and police officers. Mass executions of over 21,000 prisoners of war were staged in Katyn, Mednoye and Kharkov.

This partition of Poland was enacted in line with the secret protocol of the Ribbentrop–Molotov pact. The Germans established concentration camps in their territories; the first transport of Polish prisoners arrived in Auschwitz on 14 June 1940. Poles from the lands occupied by the USSR were sent to the mines of Vorkuta, to Kolyma and to the steppes of Kazakhstan.

Those who were spared recalled the experiences of the previous century and set about constructing a resistance movement: they created conspiratorial hierarchies, a partisan force, and ultimately an underground army. A Polish government in exile, universally recognised on the international arena, operated from London. The Polish airmen who joined the RAF to take part in the air defence of the British Isles were responsible for around 15% of all the planes shot down. In fact, Polish soldiers took part in all of the major campaigns in both Europe and North Africa, to mention but the defence of Tobruk and the conquest of Monte Cassino.

The émigré Polish government became an awkward bedfellow for the Allies when the Germans uncovered the mass graves in Katyn and Gen. Sikorski called for the return of the NKVD’s victims. The Polish cause was abandoned in the name of friendship with Stalin, for which millions of his soldiers paid with their lives. The Poles were shocked to the core when at the Allies’ conference in Yalta their country was pared down and given over to the Soviets.

The greatest tragedy played out on Polish territory during the war,
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The greatest tragedy played out on Polish territory during the war,
Liberation without freedom

The government brought in by the Russians was composed of tried and true comrades. It organised the life of the country in consultation with Moscow, purveying a thin veneer of sovereignty and democracy based on rigged elections. The Poles had no option but to accept the new system and the new borders. Germans were deported from Silesia and Pomerania (in accordance with the Yalta agreements), and in their place transports of Polish repatriates were brought from the lands taken off Poland in the east, along with Ukrainians who were resisting resettlement into now Soviet Ukraine. Forest-based partisan units that were slow to lay down their arms were dealt with rapidly, and the security service tracked down and imprisoned members of the resistance; death sentences were also meted out.

The Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR) had only its name in common with workers. The order to fire on workers was given at the first sign of social dissatisfaction. This bloody showdown took place in Poznań in October 1956, and a second came during strikes on the coast in 1970. When in 1975 workers from plants in Radom and Ursus took to the streets, the “only” sanctions were job losses, arrests and “health trails” – gauntlets of beatings for the stubborn. PATRIOTICALLY-MINDED STUDENTS WERE DEALT WITH BY THE AUTHORITIES IN MARCH 1968, WITH EXPULSIONS FROM UNIVERSITIES, ARRESTS AND ABSURD TRIALS. THIS WAS ALSO THE TIME WHEN VAST NUMBERS OF JEWISH INTELLECTUALS WERE EXPelled FROM THE COUNTRY DURING THE ARTIFICIALLY INSTIGATED “ZIONIST” WITCH HUNT, WHICH WAS INCOMPREHENSIBLE TO MANY POLES.

And yet in spite of all this, Poland was often termed “the merriest barrack in the socialist camp”. It never lost touch with the rest of Europe; Radio Free Europe was a boon. Foreign press titles made their way into the country, and in spite of sanctions Polish émigré titles were also smuggled in, above all Kultura, published in Paris by Jerzy Giedroyć. Polish women somehow managed to keep abreast of world fashions even though there was nothing in the shops worth wearing. Young people were crazy about The Beatles. Polish jazzmen were some of the world’s best, and they organised the prestigious Jazz Jamboree, while print artists developed the Polish poster school.

First secretary Edward Gierek brought an interlude of loan-funded prosperity. During his time in office passport policy was also relaxed, and for the miserable 100 dollars they were officially allowed to purchase, Poles could travel the world and see just how the West was “festering” (as the official propaganda had it). This improvement in the standard of living did not last long, however, and the credit lines were truncated when the inefficient socialist economy collapsed.

The 1980 strikes began in the centre of the country and moved up to the coast. The Gdańsk shipyards came to a standstill under the charismatic workers’ leader Lech Wałęsa. They were joined by representatives of the intelligentsia, who formed an advisory body led by Tadeusz Mazowiecki. Priests celebrated masses at the shipyard gates for the workers. The most dangerous fact of all, however, was that the Poles now had “their” pope – John Paul II – who was prepared to move not only heaven but also earth in their defence. It was no accident that a year previously, during his first pilgrimage to his homeland, he had spoken to his compatriots of freedom…
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When the strikes spread throughout the country the authorities had to compromise. A government representative went to the shipyards to sign the August Agreements with Wałęsa in exchange for a halt to the action. The most important of these postulates were the right to establish free trade unions, the right to strike, freedom of expression, and an end to repressions. At the founding conference of the new trade union NSZZ Solidarność (Solidarity), Lech Wałęsa, an electrician from the Gdańsk shipyards, was elected chairman of the works committee. In its “Message to the working people of Eastern Europe” the congress called on them to fight for the freedom to form unions.

This was too much for the Kremlin. Brezhnev’s doctrine of no retreat from the road to communism was still in force. Moscow began to pressurise Warsaw to put a stop to this carnival of freedom as soon as possible. Comrades from the Warsaw Pact clamoured to offer their “brotherly assistance” in fear that this “plague” might spread across the Polish border. But by then some 10 million Poles were members of Solidarity! This was a force to be reckoned with. Europe looked on intently.

Martial Law, announced by Gen. Jaruzelski on 13 December 1981, brought fatalities. Thousands were interned (including Wałęsa), and disheartenment grew. The only bastion of free speech was the Church, but mysterious fatal “accidents” began to befall the clergy. The Poles were shaken by the death of Fr Jerzy Popiełuszko, who had been wont to deliver fiery sermons in the Church of St Stanislaw Kostka in Warsaw. The fact that he had been brutally beaten and drowned by the Security Service could no longer be concealed. As soon as consent was granted, John Paul II visited his homeland to offer spiritual support to his people.

Solidarity had not been forgotten abroad. Lech Wałęsa was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize; as he was not released to attend the ceremony, his wife Danuta went to Oslo. All kinds of organisations sent material aid to Poland. Words and gestures of support from intellectuals, artists and stars of stage and screen gave the Poles heart. Ronald Reagan employed the full gamut of pressures on the authorities of the People’s Republic of Poland (the PRL). But not until Gorbachev came to power in the USSR and the Polish economy collapsed entirely did the party agree to talks with the opposition.

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Famous Poles

If we embark on a journey in the footsteps of Poland’s brightest and best – scientists, artists, writers, reformers – among the most important staging posts on our route will be the landscapes of Mazovia as enraptured in the compositions of Chopin, and Olsztyn Castle, where the instruments made by Copernicus himself give us a measure of his astronomical greatness. We must stop off at the Wadowice home of pilgrim for peace John Paul II, and pay a visit to Wilanów Palace and the chambers of Jan III Sobieski, who was known throughout 17th-century Europe as “the Lion of Lechistan”. We should also visit Zakopane, to come face to face with the work of Witkacy, the original artist acclaimed by French art critics as “le génie multiple de Pologne” (“the Polish multiple genius”), and then surrender beneath the Krakow sky to the vapours of the poetry concocted by the city’s Nobel laureates, Wisława Szymborska and Czesław Miłosz.

This chapter takes us to the native towns and villages of our composers, virtuosi, scientists, legendary thespians, and military leaders who in these lands, frequently referred to as “the bastion of Europe”, have halted invaders headed West – from the Tatar hordes to the 1920 Soviet onslaught. This is a story of those who throughout the millennial history of our society, so strongly linked with Western Europe, have helped make history, not only in their own country. It is to the wisdom of these, our greater and better compatriots, that we Poles owe the restoration of our sovereignty and the survival of our national identity through all the perils of 123 years of bondage, the occupation of our territory through both world wars, and the 45 post-war years in the USSR’s sphere of influence.
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Set in extensive parkland, the baroque Palace in Wilanów is a reminder of a period in Poland’s history that is valued by all of Christian Europe: when King Jan III Sobieski (1629–1696) halted the Turks’ westward expansion with resounding military victories against the Turkish army at Vienna and Parkany. If successful, the potential consequences of the Turkish campaign might have been immeasurable for the future of our continent. Wilanów Palace was the summer residence of “the Lion of Lechistan”, as Western historians of his own times dubbed this king. Sobieski was not just a warrior: he cherished his family life, and even in the fervour of wartime wrote letters to his beloved wife Marysieńka…

In 1677 Jan III Sobieski bought an estate just outside Warsaw and in just two years the royal architect, Augustyn Locci, built a large residence in the traditional Polish manor house style. Shortly afterwards a gallery wing was added to the main building, and then an upper storey, with a vast banquet hall and corner towers. The ornamentation of the palace was executed by the famous artists resident at the royal court: the sculptural decoration of the façade was by Andreas Schlüter, and the paintings by Michel Angelo Palloni, Claude Callot and Jerzy E. Szymonowicz-Siemiginowski. Also in the 17th century the palace grounds were laid out in the traditional French baroque split-level geometric style, with tree-lined avenues; this is the oldest extant feature of the palace grounds today. Beyond this is an irregular English garden, which was designed in the mid-18th century by Szymon Bogumił Zug of Saxony, a classicist architect and landscape gardener much sought after in the Poland of his day. To the south the colours and fragrances of the 19th-century Italian neo-Renaissance rose garden form an alluring retreat.

The park stretches over an area of 43 hectares and provides a stunning foil for the palace itself. Dotted amid the mature trees are 19th-century features such as the neo-Gothic mock castle, designed as a pumping station and now the starting point for trips out onto the lake in a period canopied boat. There is also a Chinese bower as well as statues of antique gods and decorative vases. The arcaded Roman bridge giving access to the island leads to a monument resembling an ancient tomb. This memorial commemorates the victorious battle fought by the Napoleonic forces against the Russians in 1809 in Raszyn, near Warsaw.

In the years 1730–1733 the palace was the residence of the king of Poland and Saxony, Augustus II, the Strong, and subsequently, until 1945, the seat of several aristocratic families: the Sieniawskis, the Czartoryskis, the Lubomirskis, the Potockis and the Branickis. In 1805 the archaeologist and collector Stanislaw Kostka Potocki opened one of Poland’s first public museums in the palace. In spite of the number of alterations made by some of the most famous architects of successive periods, the palace has retained its baroque character with strong overtones of Versailles. At present Wilanów Palace is a museum. A striking feature outside the main entrance is the neo-Gothic tomb commissioned by Aleksander Stanislaw Potocki as a mausoleum for his parents, Stanislaw Kostka Potocki and Aleksandra Potocka. Constructed in the
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years 1834–1836 to a design by the architect Enrico (Henryk) Marconi, the edifice is guarded by sculpted lions bearing the coats of arms of two of the families who owned Wilanów – the Lubomirskis and the Potockis.

On the ground floor of the main residence several features of the decoration and furnishings from the times of King Jan III Sobieski and his consort Marie Casimire have been preserved. The walls of the queen’s antechamber are clad in baroque fabrics, and the bed in the king’s bedchamber has a striking canopy made from Turkish fabrics taken by the king at the Battle of Vienna. The Polish Portrait Gallery includes coffin portraits, the Etruscan Room features works from the Potockis’ collections of ancient pottery, while the Grand Crimson Room, with its long table, is still used to host high-level official receptions. Among the central features of the south wing is the Empire suite of Duchess Izabela Lubomirska, comprising a bathroom and her apartment, while the classicist Grand Vestibule, designed by Szymon Bogumil Zug, boasts a baroque allegory of the four elements.

Wilanów Poster Museum

In 1968 the palace manège and carriage house were converted into the Wilanów Poster Museum. One of the world’s largest collections of artistic posters, it numbers more than 30,000 Polish posters and around 25,000 foreign works. The oldest pieces by Polish artists date from 1892. Of particular interest are the posters by ethnically Slovak New Yorker Andy Warhol, those by the Lithuanian poster artist, painter and draughtsman Stasys Eidrigevicius, and those by the classic Polish poster artists Jan Młodożeniec, Jan Lenica and Waldemar Świerzy. The museum stages displays of contemporary works from all over the world, including, since 1994, the world’s oldest poster competition and show, the International Poster Biennial (which takes place in even years), and the Polish Poster Salon (in odd years).

Biscuits in the Orangery

The 18th-century Orangery is home to the exhibition Decorative arts and crafts from the historical collections in Wilanów, which adds a further dimension to the main palace collections. It features 430 items collected by the various owners of Wilanów and originating from some of the best workshops and manufactories of the 16th–19th centuries: Saxon glass from Polish manufactories, ceramics, Poland’s biggest collection of biscuits (porcelains fired but not glazed), gold, clocks, and other silverware, including pieces imported from the Far East.
years 1834–1836 to a design by the architect Enrico (Henryk) Marconi, the edifice is guarded by sculpted lions bearing the coats of arms of two of the families who owned Wilanów – the Lubomirskis and the Potockis.

On the ground floor of the main residence several features of the decoration and furnishings from the times of King Jan III Sobieski and his consort Marie Casimire have been preserved. The walls of the queen’s antechamber are clad in baroque fabrics, and the bed in the king’s bedchamber has a striking canopy made from Turkish fabrics taken by the king at the Battle of Vienna. The **Polish Portrait Gallery** includes coffin portraits, the **Etruscan Room** features works from the Potockis’ collections of ancient pottery, while the **Grand Crimson Room**, with its long table, is still used to host high-level official receptions. Among the central features of the south wing is the **Empire suite of Duchess Izabela Lubomirska**, comprising a bathroom and her apartment, while the classicist **Grand Vestibule**, designed by Szymon Bogumił Zug, boasts a baroque allegory of the four elements.

### Wilanów Poster Museum

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![The tomb of the Potockis outside Wilanów Palace](image)
This description of Frédéric Chopin (1810–1849) was penned by one of Poland’s most outstanding poets, Cyprian Kamil Norwid. As children, the two lived in apartments in the same house, the Krasiński Palace on Krakowskie Przedmieście Street in Warsaw. But the atmosphere of the composer’s music is not only to be found in this palace, with its “Chopin salon”; in Żelazowa Wola, outside Warsaw, is the manor house where Chopin was born, set in a picturesque park on the banks of the river Utrata. Already between the wars it was a favourite destination of music lovers from all over the world. Many visitors even today confess that this place, steeped in the spirit of Romanticism, awakens in them a desire to know more about the genius of the composer, who is known and loved literally all over the world.
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“Chopin, by his talent a citizen of the world”
West of Warsaw, in a landscaped park on the edge of the Kampinos National Park, the single-storey manor house so familiar from photographs still stands today, shrouded in vines. The house in Żelazowa Wola where the composer of so many nocturnes, mazurkas and polonaises was born has recently undergone a major renovation, and the improvements to the surrounding park will take several years more. This classicist building with its pair of columns was actually the rear wing of the manor owned by Count Skarbek and his family, which was destroyed in World War I. It was home to Mikołaj Chopin, a Frenchman by birth who taught French at the manor, and his wife Tekla Justyna Krzyżanowska. The records in the local church state that Fryderyk Chopin was born in the rear wing on 22 February 1810. That same September, Chopin’s parents, with baby Frycek and his slightly older sister Ludwika, moved to Warsaw and settled into their new apartment on the second floor of the Saxon Palace on Krakowskie Przedmieście.

The manor in Żelazowa Wola, where Fryderyk spent several summers, had an interesting history. In the mid-19th century the estate passed into the hands of Adam Towiański, the son of the philosopher and mystic Andrzej Towiański, who had a significant influence on the work of the Polish national bard, Adam Mickiewicz, in Paris. Towiański Junior had plans to commemorate Chopin’s birthplace, but lacked funds. In 1879 he sold the property to Aleksander Pawłowski, who used the rear wing as a storehouse; in 1917 part of the manor burned down. Only after Poland regained its property to Aleksander Pawłowski, who used the rear wing as a storehouse; in 1917 part of the manor burned down. Only after Poland regained its independence was a Society of Friends of Chopin’s House founded, which in 1928 opened a museum in Żelazowa Wola. Unfortunately many precious mementoes, including Fryderyk’s favourite Pleyel piano, were irrecoverably lost during World War II.

After the war ended, the museum set itself the objective of creating in Żelazowa Wola a place that would recapture the atmosphere of the house in the Romantic age. The exhibits that went on display included period furniture, copies of portraits of the artist and his family, and photographs of Fryderyk, among them one taken by L.A. Bisson, one of the first photographers in Paris. A Steinway concert grand took the place of the lost Pleyel, and the composer’s original manuscripts were represented by facsimile copies.

In 2010 all this was replaced with an entirely new display designed by Bolesław Stelmach. Ascetic, heightening the sterile effect of the white-painted rooms, it is entirely devoid of any period ‘props’. Only in the salon is there a symbolic grand piano, along with some portraits, sheet music, and letters. The main factor in creating the atmosphere of the artist’s home is his music, which reaches us from the room in which he was born. A film about the world of Fryderyk’s youth, and an audioguide, conjure up an image of the young composer on a summer visit to Żelazowa Wola. It was then that he came to love the plain rippling with golden corn and the weeping willows growing along the country lanes. And this is why Chopin’s biographers claim the close bond between his work and the Mazovian landscape, which remained an inspiration to the artist throughout his adult life, though his music was composed in Nohant and Paris.

Much of the charm of Żelazowa Wola is created by the extensive landscaped park with its discreetly concealed illumination and sound system, its water features, and wooden bridges across the Utrata. During a summer stroll through the park you can stop and listen to a concert of music by Chopin as interpreted by pianists from all over the world. Standing amid the thousands of different types of trees and shrubs, many of which were donated after the war by people from across Poland, are several monuments to Chopin. Of particular note is the 1894 obelisk with medallion portrait of the composer, designed by Franciszek Zochowski, as well as the stone bust and a sculpture of Chopin’s head. There are inviting gravelled paths to wander along, punctuated at intervals by benches and bowers.

Any lover of Chopin’s music must also see Warsaw, where Chopin spent half his life. Of landmarks connected with the composer, among those that can still be seen today are the Church of the Visitacionists (Wizytek), the Belweder Palace, the Kazimierzowski Palace, the Royal Baths Park (Łazienki), the Saxon Gardens (Ogród Saski), and the Kazimierzowski Park that Fryderyk called the Botanical Gardens. The Krasiński Palace and the Staszic Palace were rebuilt after the damage wrought by World War II, but all the other buildings Chopin would have known were destroyed completely. In the salon in the Krasiński Palace at 5 Krakowskie Przedmieście Street where Fryderyk’s parents rented their apartment in the south wing, there is a museum. Over the years new points have been added to the “Chopin trail” in Warsaw, and today it would be hard to imagine the capital without the Art Nouveau monument in the Royal Baths and the nearby band shell, where recitals are held, or without the building of the National Philharmonic, where the International Chopin Competitions are held every five years.

Another interesting and significant site is the Gniński-Ostrogski Palace, built in the years 1681–1685 to plans by Tylman of Gameren. In 1859, after suitable alterations were made, it became the home of the Warsaw Music Conservatoire. After World War II the palace was rebuilt according to the original plans as the seat of the Fryderyk Chopin Society and the Chopin Museum. At present the building at Tamka Street (entrance at 1 Okólnik Street), freshly renovated in time for the 200th anniversary of the composer’s birth, is home to a modern Chopin Museum. Also in the immediate vicinity is the new Chopin Centre, which houses the Frédéric Chopin Institute, a library, a music library, a conference suite, and a tourist centre.
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On display in the museum are mementoes from Chopin’s life: letters, portraits and autographs, as well as the piano on which he composed over the last two years of his life. Recent acquisitions to the collection of 7,000 exhibits include the manuscripts of *Tarantella*, op. 43, and *Etude in F minor*, from the collection *Trois nouvelles études* as well as an album belonging to Baroness d’Este. Use is also made of the latest in electronic audiovisual equipment to transport the visitor to other places close to Fryderyk’s heart. We can view the yellowed pages of letters written by the composer and listen to recordings of them read by actors. As we view Chopin’s original piano, we are immersed in the atmosphere of a Parisian salon, and we can even hear the sounds floating up from the street outside – conversations, and the cries of a newspaper boy and a street trader. The renovated cellars, where, legend has it, a golden duck lived, have been converted into a concert auditorium.

The church in Brochów

Some 8 km from Żelazowa Wola is the village of Brochów. It was here, in the **Church of St Roch**, that Chopin’s parents were married, and on 23 April 1810 had their son Fryderyk christened. The 16th-century church is unusual in itself: it is a defensive structure. The brick building is fortified with tall towers to either side and a third, lower one at the sanctuary end. It is also surrounded by a defensive wall and a moat.
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If, dear reader, you crave the touch of history and would see this famous Polish author about his quotidian tasks, go to Oblęgorek! Though Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916), a Nobel laureate, spent most of his adult life in Warsaw, his city was razed to the ground during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944, and nothing remains of his apartments there. But in Oblęgorek, a village 18 km north of Kielce, his manor stands untouched, bursting with family mementoes. Inside, it barely seems as though almost a century has passed since the last visit of the writer whose novel *Quo vadis?* brought the ancient world alive to his contemporaries all over the world…

Oblęgorek played such an important role in Sienkiewicz’s life that his biographers have identified it as one of the keys to understanding the heroes of his Trilogy, the work known and loved by generations of Poles. Millions of Poles learned their history from Sienkiewicz’s novels, much as they had from the poems and epics of the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz, who spent his adult life living and lecturing in Slavic literature in Paris. To paraphrase the title of Sienkiewicz’s novel *Quo vadis?*, we could say that an understanding of the essence of this fascinating book brings us closer to answering the timeless questions about where we have come from and where we are headed.

So let us pause for a moment in the home of this writer and explorer, who was as happy in the vast expanses of Africa as in the steppes and the urban jungles of America of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The manor in Oblęgorek was a present to Henryk Sienkiewicz from the Polish people in 1900, to mark 25 years of his work as a writer. We know that, like many generations of Sarmatians before him, he preferred country life, and had planned to settle there permanently. It was only the prose of day-to-day life – the inconvenience of travelling between Oblęgorek and Warsaw, and problems keeping the rambling house heated in the cold winter months – that prevented it from being anything more than his summer residence. Two years after receiving the Nobel prize for literature for his novel *Quo vadis?* in 1905, he eventually moved into the neo-Gothic mansion with its ornamental turrets and fine round tower.

The stage-managed spectacle that was Sienkiewicz’s first visit to Oblęgorek took place in the spring of 1902. He and his family travelled from Warsaw to Kielce by train, and took a carriage the rest of the way, over the muddy roads. He was welcomed like a king. The peasants from the local villages strewed the road with flowers. Others met him at the house dressed in traditional costumes to afford the famous writer and new owner the traditional Polish welcome with bread and salt. The property itself, a gift from the nation, was an impressive size. There were 515 morgs – around 303 ha – of land: woodland, meadows and orchards. It had been purchased for Sienkiewicz, hailed as the man who uplifted the Poles’ aching hearts in the darkest hour of the partitions, from a clerk, Mieczysław Halik, for what at the time was the considerable sum of more than 51,000 roubles, amassed by a jubilee committee through a nationwide collection. It is no wonder, then, that it delighted not only the writer, but also his wife and children.

Sienkiewicz’s manor house in Oblęgorek
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Marie Skłodowska-Curie (1867–1934), like Frédéric Chopin before her, spent her childhood and youth in Warsaw and then moved to Paris, where she studied and subsequently lectured at the Sorbonne. There, too, she and her husband Pierre Curie made ground-breaking discoveries in the field of radioactivity, a science that has changed the world for good and ill. After her husband’s death, Skłodowska-Curie worked alone, and for this work she was awarded a second Nobel Prize, this time in the realm of physics. Unlike Chopin, however, who never returned to Warsaw, Skłodowska, born 57 years after him, came back many times, and it was she who brought about the founding of the Radium Institute and a Radiological Studio within the Warsaw Scientific Society.

St Anne’s Church (św. Anny) and the Old Town in Warsaw
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When in the 1960s the grotesque theatre of the absurd began its triumphant cavalcade across Europe, it soon came to the fore that one of its precursors was an artist from Poland – Witkacy, properly Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939). But it was only the wider discovery of his paintings, and among them his portraits, at an exhibition in Brussels in 1982, that brought a breakthrough in a broader European reception of the oeuvre of this original and very fertile artist. The critics in the francophone press wrote of Witkacy as “génie multiple de Pologne” (“the Polish multiple genius”). To discover the works of this painter, playwright and father of theatre of the absurd, the place to go is Zakopane, a town set against the background of the Tatra mountains.

Witkacy was the son of Stanisław Witkiewicz, a painter, art critic and creator of the “Zakopane style” in architecture. Before he settled in Zakopane, he joined Bronisław Malinowski’s ethnographic expedition to Australia in 1914. He also fought during World War I as an officer in the select Pavlov Regiment of the tsar’s army. In 1918 he returned to Poland, which was newly restored to sovereignty after the years of partition, and lived in his home town in the shadow of the majestic Giewont peak. Though he alternated his time in Zakopane with spells in Warsaw, the spa town in the Tatras suited him ideally as a place to work. He painted hundreds of portraits and wrote most of his literary pieces here, had many friends, was a frequent guest at parties, and put on his plays at the Formist Theatre in the Morskie Oko Hotel.

Witkacy became the director, set designer and soul of that theatre. And though their adventure lasted just three seasons, in each of which he only had time to put on a few plays, those times remained in the public memory for years afterwards. His audiences had a tendency to take the words spoken on the stage too literally; even during the première of his first performance they became vehemently divided. In his book Witkacy w teatrze międzywojennym (Witkacy in theatre between the wars) Janusz Degler recalls a letter from Witkacy to Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, another writer: “The roars of ‘The author!’ were drowned out by roars of ‘Scandal!’ and ‘Off!’ Some people misheard and instead of ‘kuro’ heard… differently [‘kuro’ sounds similar to a strong Polish expletive].”

“Witkacy was an infinitely curious experimenter” wrote the co-founder of the Formist Theatre, Rafał Malczewski, in his own book, Pępek świata (Omphalos). “Witkacy’s theatre was amateur in the true sense of the word. His actors were dentists and painters, state weather forecasters, i.e. civil servants from the State meteorological Institute, green-eyed girls. The most important were those who spoke Polish with difficulty, with an English, Belarusian or Russian accent…” The unrivalled star of them all was an English painter, Miss Winifred Cooper, who had distinctively Native American features. When, as the Phantom in Witkacy’s play Country house, she declaimed, with a deadpan face and an excruciating English accent, her line “I contracted cancer of the liver”, peals of laughter would break out. She had come to Zakopane with her consumptive fiancé; the fiancé died, but she stayed on, having bought a villa in the village of Harenda outside Zakopane, which she later sold to the poet Jan Kasprowicz.

A stroll through the streets of Zakopane can still bring back a sense of the interwar atmosphere from the times when Witkacy was surprising his audiences with work so original that to many it was incomprehensible. In the Morskie Oko Hotel on Krupówki, the town’s main promenade, there is now a café. The houses where the artist lived and worked have survived: the Witkiewiczówka on a gentle rise called Antałówka, and the Tatry Villa on Chramcówki Street, where he opened his Portrait Firm. Olma Villa on Zamoyski Street is also still there; in Witkacy’s time this was owned by a dentist, Tadeusz Birula-Białynicki, who threw parties for his artist friend at which Witkacy would spend his time painting, using the guests as his models. On many occasions he also had dental treatment from Birula-Białynicki, paying him for the work on his teeth in kind, with portraits.
When in the 1960s the grotesque theatre of the absurd began its triumphant cavalcade across Europe, it soon came to the fore that one of its precursors was an artist from Poland – Witkacy, properly Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885–1939). But it was only the wider discovery of his paintings, and among them his portraits, at an exhibition in Brussels in 1982, that brought a breakthrough in a broader European reception of the oeuvre of this original and very fertile artist. The critics in the francophone press wrote of Witkacy as “génie multiple de Pologne” (“the Polish multiple genius”). To discover the works of this painter, playwright and father of theatre of the absurd, the place to go is Zakopane, a town set against the background of the Tatra mountains.

Witkacy was the son of Stanisław Witkiewicz, a painter, art critic and creator of the “Zakopane style” in architecture. Before he settled in Zakopane, he joined Bronisław Malinowski’s ethnographic expedition to Australia in 1914. He also fought during World War I as an officer in the select Pavlov Regiment of the tsar’s army. In 1918 he returned to Poland, which was newly restored to sovereignty after the years of partition, and lived in his home town in the shadow of the majestic Giewont peak. Though he alternated his time in Zakopane with spells in Warsaw, the spa town in the Tatras suited him ideally as a place to work. He painted hundreds of portraits and wrote most of his literary pieces here, had many friends, was a frequent guest at parties, and put on his plays at the Formist Theatre in the Morskie Oko Hotel.

Witkacy became the director, set designer and soul of that theatre. And though their adventure lasted just three seasons, in each of which he only had time to put on a few plays, those times remained in the public memory for years afterwards. His audiences had a tendency to take the words spoken on the stage too literally; even during the première of his first performance they became vehemently divided. In his book Witkacy w teatrze międzywojennym (Witkacy in theatre between the wars) Janusz Degler recalls a letter from Witkacy to Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, another writer: “The roars of ‘The author!’ were drowned out by roars of ‘Scandal!’ and ‘Off!’ Some people misheard and instead of ‘kuro’ heard… differently [‘kuro’ sounds similar to a strong Polish expletive].”

“Witkacy was an infinitely curious experimenter” wrote the co-founder of the Formist Theatre, Rafał Malczewski, in his own book, Pępek świata (Omphalos). “Witkacy’s theatre was amateur in the true sense of the word. His actors were dentists and painters, state weather forecasters, i.e. civil servants from the State meteorological Institute, green-eyed girls. The most important were those who spoke Polish with difficulty, with an English, Belarusian or Russian accent…” The unrivalled star of them all was an English painter, Miss Winifred Cooper, who had distinctively Native American features. When, as the Phantom in Witkacy’s play Country house, she declaimed, with a deadpan face and an excruciating English accent, her line “I contracted cancer of the liver”, peals of laughter would break out. She had come to Zakopane with her consumptive fiancé; the fiancé died, but she stayed on, having bought a villa in the village of Harenda outside Zakopane, which she later sold to the poet Jan Kasprowicz.

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