Warsaw Travel Report

A. Introduction and Statement of Academic Premise

Thanks to the generosity of the University of Leicester, and its commitment to furthering student’s historical understanding through a personal perspective, I was able to travel to Poland between July 13th-18th of this year, where I based myself in it’s capital city, Warsaw. My main motive for taking such a trip was in preparation for my third year dissertation regarding the Jewish Councils of the Ghettos in Eastern Europe; one of my central case studies is Warsaw, thus making such a visit imperative. I was granted £450 for this visit.

I am a firm believer in the fact that visiting a country you are hoping to study in further depth allows you to gain valuable cultural, spiritual and historical experiences. Whilst this may not be central to subsequent academic work, travelling allows us to greatly enhance our historical analysis, developing an awareness of important research issues arising outside of the classroom.

In this report, I will try and give you a taste of my experiences abroad, reflecting upon its central historical importance and, as a secondary theme, its cultural and spiritual enlightenment. As Saint Augustine elaborates: ‘The world is a book and those who do not travel read only one page’.

B. A Personal Account of my Visit to Warsaw

Day I

Having flown into Warsaw on a late-night and uncomfortable journey, I awoke feeling refreshed, and excited at the prospect of beginning my tour around the city – unbeknown to me, it was to become one of the highlights of my travelling career to date.

It would be a disservice not to show you the amazing view from my hotel room across the city landscape, which captured my attention as soon as I walked through the door:

Having woken slightly later than expected, I began my day with a brief tour around the exterior of the palace of culture and science (Above). Originally commissioned by Stalin as a ‘gift from the Soviet people’, the two-hundred and thirty-one metre structure actually takes its inspiration from the capitalist world, but was specifically designed to include influences from all of Poland’s architectural styles. It has historically been considered no more than a symbol of Russian hegemony, and thus receives no more than a glance from the local populace!
After this, I then decided to take the Jewish walking tour of the inner-city, which had been widely recommended to me prior to my visit. I grabbed the leaflet from the tourist information office behind the Palace, and set off on my ‘hike’...

The first stop on my tour was the Nożyk Synagogue. Through prior reading, I had discovered that this was the only Warsaw synagogue to survive the ravages of war, being fully restored between 1977 and 1983, and used by Warsaw’s Jewish community to date.

During my visit, I was required to observe traditional Jewish customs, and wore the Jewish headdress, called a Kippah, throughout my time there. I attended a talk by a local Jewish activist in the synagogue, and learnt quite a lot about the contemporary history of the Jewish community in Warsaw. Of particular interest was a discussion of the high levels of discrimination that Warsaw’s Jews still suffer, and how the community is attempting to combat this.

It was perhaps this particular visit that constituted the greatest spiritual moment of my trip, given my Polish-Jewish family heritage. It transformed the suffering that I knew my relatives endured into a real spiritual entity. Before moving on, I took some silent time to reflect upon these thoughts on the pews in the synagogue.

I then travelled to the footbridge of memory, which is a contemporary sculpture that is constructed in place of the small wooden bridge over ul. Chłodna, whose purpose was to connect two parts of the Warsaw ghetto. To commemorate that spot is one of Warsaw’s newest memorials: a pair of metal poles connected via optical fibres which, after the sun sets, project the shape of the footbridge over the road via light. Such a memorial is a poignant reminder of the Nazi tyranny that ravaged the city, with the light portraying the eternity of the perished spirits.
After a slightly lengthier walk, and a delightful lunch of spicy coriander and shrimp soup, I followed the trail to the surviving pieces of the ghetto wall: the last structural display of Warsaw’s Nazi occupation. Enclosed by communist-esque high rise flats, which aroused claustrophobic feelings, observing the wall’s was very eerie – that I was staring point-blank at bricks that had enclosed so much suffering and pain was mind-blowing. As I took a moment to consider my thoughts, I paid my respects by placing a stone on the small memorial and left, so sober yet inspired.

After a long day of walking and sightseeing, I sampled dinner at a Galician Restaurant before heading to the roof of the Palace of Culture and Science to gaze over Warsaw’s landscape at night. Being the tallest building in Warsaw itself, the panoramic views were impressive; further enhanced given the clear night. I then ‘hit the hay’ in keen anticipation for my next day.

**Day II**

Day II began with a lengthy tram ride to the Warsaw Uprising Museum. For those that are not aware, the Ghetto Uprising was a major World War II operation by the Polish underground resistance, to liberate Warsaw from German occupation. The uprising was timed to coincide with the retreat of the German forces from Poland ahead of the Soviet advance, although it failed and was crushed. Despite this, the uprising is deeply embedded in Polish historical memory, and it’s its multi-ethnic participants are today still regarded as heroes by Warsaw’s community.

The museum was impressive – I spent almost four hours in the building, intrigued and enthralled by the variety of exhibitions, charting the experience of Warsaw and its inhabitants.
throughout the Nazi occupation and uprising. One of the highlights of the experience was the interactive exhibition on Warsaw’s architecture, involving a panoramic ‘flight’ across the ruins of post-uprising Warsaw – It was terrifying, shocking and intriguing in equal measure!

Purely in terms of my dissertation, the museum really helped to contextualize my study, giving me a clear background both to everyday Jewish life in the ghetto, the role of the Judenrat in ensuring inhabitants survival, the uprising, and alternative forms of Jewish leadership in the ghetto. Below are some images of the exhibitions that really grabbed my attention and contributed to the historical and spiritual value of the visit.

Having been shocked and saddened by some of the exhibitions in the museum, I felt physically and mentally depleted. As a result, I took the opportunity in the afternoon to venture to the Warsaw National Stadium, to take a tour of its interior and exterior.

One of my keen passions outside of academia is football, and so this was a pleasant, relaxing and informative experience – I was actually really surprised at how central football has been to polish cultural history, even when it sat squarely behind the Iron Curtain!
After my tour, it was time for dinner, and so I ventured to a Turkish street restaurant, before sampling a hand-made ice cream shop highly recommended to me by a fellow traveller – it still makes me hungry looking at it now (for anyone interested, it was Lion Bar, peanut butter and Oreo all mixed into one – Yum!).

Having had a busy day to reflect upon, I took an early night in keen anticipation for the next day of this empowering trip...

Day III

Day III began early, when I ventured to the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The museum, located just outside the central reaches of Warsaw, has recently been recognised as the 2016 European Museum of the Year by the European Museum Forum – it certainly lived up to its expectations!

The museum is incredibly comprehensive, and through expert use of primary and secondary sources, charts the History of Polish Jews from their first migration to the region to the present day. The comprehensive nature of such exhibitions was both culturally and academically rewarding, as I became more aware of the context of Jewish populations in Poland, encompassing their religious customs, societal structure and their economic role in the region. Perhaps one of the most intriguing links to rise out of the plethora of exhibitions was that anti-Semitism was nothing new in Polish-Jewish history – a fact that confirmed my observations in the Synagogue!

Purely in terms of the historical importance of such a visit to my dissertation, perhaps the most powerful part of the museum was the sector dedicated to the study of the Jewish Council’s, with particular reference to Czerniaków and Warsaw. It confirmed the historical premise of my dissertation, and provided some primary material that I will be able to use in its writing.

With an emphasis on Warsaw’s council, the exhibition was expertly crafted. It first charted the role of the German administrative apparatus in the mechanised destruction of ghetto inhabitants, and the approach it took to humiliate and subjugate Warsaw’s Jews. After this context was set, the exhibition moved on to examine the role that the Judenrat played in forming survival strategies to ensure the survival of ghetto inhabitants. Through emphasising the importance of primary sources left by its functionaries, and utilising these as such, the exhibition reflected a plethora of opinions on the survival strategies of the council, including
detailed descriptions of certain acts such as smuggling, education and cultural life within the ghetto walls.

After spending a considerable amount of the day in the museum, I emerged to blazing sunshine and decided to observe two of Warsaw’s most important monuments – The Monument to the Ghetto Heroes and the Warsaw Uprising Monument.

The first, dedicated to the ‘Ghetto Heroes’ and on the below left, is located directly outside the doors to POLIN. Erected in 1948, the monument commemorates the first Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of 1943, and the stone used in its construction had actually been brought to Warsaw by the Nazis and was to be used in architectural projects planned for a new Warsaw by Hitler's architect, Albert Speer. It is thus a very powerful and moving memorial to those who suffered in the city under Nazi Tyranny, and a continual sign of the heroic resistance that the Poles conducted.

I then took a walk towards the Old Town and surveyed the Warsaw uprising monument, on the below right, which was very busy and packed with international observers. It was equally as powerful and moving, with its structure reflecting the heroic resistance of the Poles in the city, whilst also reflecting the tragedy of its defeat upon the civilian population.
On my way to dinner that evening, I also stumbled across the Tomb to the Unknown Soldier, which is dedicated to the unknown soldiers who have given their lives for Poland. The Tomb is constantly lit by an eternal flame and guarded 356 days of the year.

After such a busy day, I took an early night in preparation for my final full day in this buzzing metropolis...

Day IV

My final full day in Warsaw was characterised by poor weather – drizzly rain had rolled in and I departed my hotel laden with my waterproofs. It was the day I had decided to venture to the Jewish Historical Institute; an internationally renowned research centre for Polish-Jewish history and culture. Unfortunately for me, the centre was closed for renovation. It was safe to say I was extremely frustrated, and so decided to venture back to the old town to sample some more of Warsaw’s vibrant culture and architecture, to soothe the frustration I had just endured.

After taking Lunch in the Old Town, I remembered seeing an advertisement for the Neon museum of Warsaw on my many tram rides throughout the city. This visit was to become one of the more quirky highlights of my trip. Nestled in a quaint industrial estate on the far outskirts of Warsaw, the Neon museum is dedicated to the salvage of communist-era Neon signs. Its visual vibrancy is the obvious attraction, but through observing the accompanying historical information, I was surprised to discover that these signs were central to the cultural history of Communist Warsaw.

During the post-Stalin years these neon’s were seen as symbols of economic success and the strive towards a more open and culturally relaxed society. After the Soviet Union collapsed,
however, Neon suffered, and a scant disregard for anything connected to that era meant that many buildings were demolished and these signs were simply tossed into skips or left in states of disrepair. I hope you agree that they are truly mesmerising, and a great symbol of Polish culture. Feeling so strongly for the cause, I left a small personal donation before leaving to take a tram back to the centre of Warsaw.

That evening, I went back to Old Town for dinner, and then with some personal spending money I decided to toast my final night and went into a pub that my course mates at Leicester had recommended. After an extremely busy and sobering week, I was glad for the international company I encountered, striking valuable conversations with American, Brazilian, Swedish, Korean and Slovakian tourists. It is this experience that perhaps best represented how powerful travelling is as a cultural experience. As I emerged (*ahem* or stumbled) from the pub at closing time, I ventured back to my hotel to get a good night’s sleep before my final day of exploration!

Day V

Having woken up with a slightly sore head, I decided to make the most of my final day in Warsaw – my transfer back to the airport was at 3pm, leaving me with a few hours before checking out of my hotel.

I decided to fill this gap by visiting the Royal Castle of Warsaw, a museum which charts the regal and political history of Poland. More a palace than a castle, the building was reconstructed from a pile of rubble at incredible cost between 1971 and 1984; it had been razed to the ground by the Nazis. Dating back to the 14th century, the castle has been the residence of Polish kings, President and then the Seat of Parliament. It is an incredible architectural feat, and one that was a great way to finish my trip to such a wonderful city!
I then boarded my transfer back to the airport, and flew home on a heavily delayed flight, leaving me absolutely ‘cream-crackered’ by the time I landed in East-Midlands, but imbued by a historical, cultural and spiritual experience that will not be forgotten for a long time to come!

Conclusions

I would once again like to thank the University of Leicester for enabling me to travel to Warsaw. The overall experience of visiting Warsaw has given me a fascinating personal insight into the city’s historical, cultural and spiritual experience of Nazi occupation, and has only acted to further fuel my academic interest in the study of its Ghetto.

Whilst initially quite nervous at the prospect of travelling alone for the first time, I would now be prepared to say that it is the best way to travel! Being alone allows you to form your own itinerary, meaning you are not restricted by anyone else’s wishes, allowing you to seize the full potential and benefits of your visit!

In terms of the city itself, the people of Warsaw are welcoming, the food and beer is scrumptious, and the museums are so well designed and thoroughly interesting. What I found most interesting, however, was the remnants of Communism in the city – if you look one way down a street, modernity beckons, with high rise buildings and plush hotels. However, if you look the other way, high-rise apartment blocks continue to dominate. It is precisely this hybrid nature of Warsaw that makes it such an intriguing city.

So, if you are ever lucky enough to get the chance to visit, I would recommend Warsaw in a heartbeat. It is a vibrant, colourful and interesting city that will be sure to welcome you and capture you in its grasp, as it did me. As such, I am venturing back to Poland in December, funded by my part-time work over the summer – come fly with me, if you like!
### C. Account of Expenditure

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