



**EXPEDITION
TO THE POLES**
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2. Adolf Hitler Square

Here I was in mystical Cracow! Less than fifty yards further on the houses gave way to a huge market square (today I know that it is the biggest market place in Europe). In the middle, visible from afar, was a tall monument with hundreds of pigeons flapping their wings around it. It was a larger-than-life bronze figure of a Romantic hero, gazing into the distance, the shock of unruly hair conveying the wildness of true romanticism. At first I thought - that is Chopin!

I drew closer to the monument. No, it was not Frédéric Chopin.

Here's what the inscription on the pedestal said:

“Adamowi Mickiewiczowi Naród”

Who on earth was that? I asked a young American who was sitting next to the monument reading a travel guide entitled “Let's Go Eastern Europe”. He searched through the index of his book. “Wait a minute... Adam Michnik... wait... Adam Mickiewicz, Polish national poet, 1798-1855... wait... no, I can't find him. There's definitely no guy called Adamowi Mickiewiczowi Narod. Sorry.” We wondered about the similarity of the two names - could this be a cousin of the national poet? In the end we agreed that he must have been some notable mayor of Cracow.

A few minutes later I reached the student hostel “Bratniak” where the twenty-odd participants of our Polish language course were staying. I moved into my room which I was sharing with a north German economics student by the name of Bernd Panzer. He was already on his second Polish course. After I had unpacked my suitcase I suggested we go for a walk in the old town and check out the night life. Bernd was willing and we left the hostel and headed towards the old town.

As we were turning again into the huge market square I suddenly stopped, as if struck by lightning. On one of the medieval houses I saw a rusty old street sign. “Bernd!” I gasped. “Look, up there! Unbelievable!”

The sign hung about three metres from the ground.

On it were the words “Adolf -Hitler-Platz”

“No, it’s not possible!” said Bernd in his laconic way, grinning.

“Bernd, the Poles have forgotten the sign since the end of the occupation in 1944 - for fifty years!”

“Forgotten it, you think?”

“Well, look. It is damn high up. If people do not happen to look up they don’t see it.”

We tested this out. We hung around under the sign for several minutes and watched the faces of the passersby. And indeed, no-one looked up. Slowly we realised what historic mission fate had in store for us. Fifty years after the end of the war it fell to us, two blameless descendants of the occupiers, to remove the last symbols of the Hitler era! Shaken to the core, we strode through the great gate of the Cloth Halls and reached the other side of the market square. We eagerly debated between ourselves how best to draw the world’s attention to it: call in the press, tip off President Lech Wałęsa and Chancellor Helmut Kohl...

Then Bernd suddenly pointed to three black lorries parked in front of the medieval St Mary’s Church, the one with the two different towers.

“Did they forget those too?”

I looked where he was pointing. There were three German Wehrmacht lorries bearing SS number plates. Through the high gothic windows of the church we could see huge floodlights that were lighting the inside of the church. A red-and-white cord barred the way through the main entrance. Someone was making a film! A guard kept moving curious bystanders on and explaining patiently what was happening: Steven Spielberg, no less, was making his new film, “Schindler’s List”. We had arrived precisely on the day his set designers had transformed the square to make it look as it had done fifty years earlier. If

anyone at that moment had prophesied that seven years later I would be touring Poland as a cabaret artiste, I would have looked at him dumbfounded. “What? You mean I, a German, will stand with a microphone and do stand-up comedy in this country? Impossible!”

The next day I got the next shock. My language course began and I learned from my teacher Beata that there had been two terrible misunderstandings on my arrival in Cracow. “Ludwika van Beethovena” was not a feminist who wanted to show men that women could compose the Ninth Symphony. And “Adamowi Mickiewiczowi Naród” was not a former Mayor. I had been fooled by a piece of outrageous malice on the part of the Polish language. In Polish all nouns come in no less than seven forms, or cases, even proper names. The commanding figure on the pedestal was indeed the Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz, rendered, however, in the dative: “TO Adam Mickiewicz”. And Naród meant “the nation”. Nor did the music festival have much to do with feminism. The banner was announcing the Ninth Symphony of the great man, but in the genitive: “the Ninth Symphony OF Ludwig van Beethoven”. (In Polish Ludwig is spelt with a k at the end).

Before we plunge further into the murky depths of the Polish language, I would like quickly to introduce the famous national poet. He is Poland’s Shakespeare! All schoolchildren still have to learn some of his poems by heart. In one school I saw 17-year-old girls sitting dreamily around a cool hip-hopper who was belting out a Mickiewicz poem to accompaniment of his guitar.

3. A portrait of Adam Mickiewicz.

Adam Mickiewicz was born in 1798 in Zaosie, in what is now Bielorussia. He was a member of the gentry, a large class that went by the name of “szlachta” and is thought in the 17th century to have comprised around 10 per cent of all Poles.

When he was 14 he watched as Napoleon’s army set out eastwards amid the cheers of the Poles, to overthrow the hated Tsars. A few months later the defeated remnants of this army staggered back. At 18 he fell in love with a member of the high aristocracy, but she was persuaded by her parents to marry someone of her own rank. At 20 he published his first collections of poems. Mickiewicz, who never got to Warsaw, studied for four years in what is now known as Kaunas and then worked for four years as a village schoolmaster. He joined the Polish underground and was arrested by the Tsar’s secret police and interned for half a year in a monastery. Subsequently he was sent into exile in Russia for five years, but was allowed to travel around at will, among other places through the Crimean peninsula where he wrote his famous Crimean Sonnets.

In 1823 he was allowed to leave for western Europe and in the same year met Goethe in Weimar. He then lived for more than twenty years in Paris, only a few blocks away from Heinrich Heine. He married a Polish woman and they had five children, the youngest died only in 1938. In Paris he wrote his most famous work, the epic poem “Pan Tadeusz” which is set in the year 1812. The prologue, which every Pole knows by heart, begins with the words “Lithuania, my fatherland!” This refers to the Lithuanian part of old Poland. When his wife became mentally ill Mickiewicz consulted the doctor Andrzej Towiański, who was at the same time a mystic and a proponent of Polish “Messianism”. Under his influence Mickiewicz also became a proponent of this doctrine. His message went: oppressed Poland is destined to be the Messiah, the saviour of the peoples. From then on Mickiewicz was honoured by his contemporaries not only as a poet but also as a visionary. For the remaining twenty years of his life he hardly wrote another line. He became ever poorer and scraped together a living with lectures and as a librarian. When the Crimean war broke out between the Ottoman empire and Russia Mickiewicz put an end to his dreary

life as an emigré. He sailed to Constantinople with a Polish legion of volunteers to fight alongside the Turks against the Russians.

In November 1855 he died suddenly, from one day to the next, in a hotel in the Pera district of the city. It was officially assumed that he had contracted cholera, but rumours had it that he had been poisoned by the Russian secret police. More recent speculations point, alas, to a much less sensational cause - the evening before his death Mickiewicz had been invited to a an opulent twelve-course dinner and may have died simply from obstructed bowels. His remains were shipped to France. In 1890 they were transferred the crypt of Wawel Cathedral in Cracow where he was laid to rest alongside the second greatest Polish national poet, Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849).

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