

Poland History and Culture by John Derry

With a rich culture centered on its long and peculiar history, Poland has many things to offer whether you're a seasoned traveler or a first time novice. I have had the pleasure of staying in the small town of Kowroz just outside one of the oldest cities in Poland: Torun. Torun's roots date back to the 13th century when its founders were focused on defending their territory, taking care of their families and making their famous gingerbread. Because Torun has such a rich history, many have done all they can to maintain it and teach it to new generations. This sounds much like any town that you would encounter anywhere in the world. However, what sets Torun apart from other cities is that they strive to have a living history. Instead of countless museums filled with halls of artifacts and long paragraphs, Torun itself strives to be a living museum. I had the privilege of visiting one of their living museums where a very eccentric group of people taught me the proper method of making gingerbread. After taking an oath to never reveal the "secret recipe" for making gingerbread, I was taught about the ingredients that comprise their famous treats and was even able to feel and smell of them. Then and only then was I able to help in combining the ingredients to form the special dough. I was then guided to the large table filled with rolling pins and molds seen below. At this point I rolled out my dough, pressed it into a mold and baked it to its final product.



Although Torun is famous for their gingerbread, not all of Poland could survive solely on gingerbread. For this reason, the people of Poland have a long history of being skilled hunters. Featured on the dinner table is everything from wild boar to venison; both of which are often times homemade. It is a long time tradition here to hold what we would commonly call a BBQ. Just as in the United States, they grill meat, invite friends over, and talk about the good times for long periods of time. I have been fortunate enough to experience this twice since I have been staying with my family. Below is a picture of the wonderful food that my family shared with their friends and me.

Although Poland's history is very interesting, there are parts of it that are not so bright. Perhaps the darkest part of Poland's history is during its time under Nazi control. Although Poland is a free country now, remnants of the German communistic leader, Adolf Hitler, still remain. The



most obvious sign of his control are the many concentration camps that still stand to this day. I have had the honor of seeing one of these concentration camps and am amazed by everything that I have seen. The most peculiar aspect of the German concentration camps is that the Polish people are not afraid to talk about them or even take you there to show them to you. I believe that the reason for this is that they are trying to show the world what happened in order to prevent an atrocity like the Holocaust from every occurring again. In order to respect the victims of the Holocaust it is not permitted to take pictures inside the buildings, however it is permissible to take pictures of the outside and thus I snapped this picture of a guard tower.

Many people and groups have influenced Poland and its people. However, not all of it has been negative. One example of that is the influence of western culture, particularly the influence of American culture upon the culture of Poland. As I walk around cities such as Warsaw I am constantly reminded of America's influence on Poland, as it is not uncommon to see a statue of Ronald Reagan in its many parks. Having been in Poland for almost a month now, I have begun to see more subtle signs of western culture such as dress and hairstyles. Just recently, my host father wore his cowboy hat, that he got from his trip to Texas in 2011, while standing next to the BBQ pit.

