



Fables of Poland

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A gentle breeze blows across my face as I sit in a dinghy, gazing at the placid waters of the Vistula. Yonder on the shore is an ancient castle floating in my view. I am in Krakow in Poland, lost in a medieval world of knights and princes. Here, history is served in little capsules locked inside castles and cathedrals, and the stories are not about world wars and concentration camps, but battles between cobblers and dragons.

My journey into Poland takes me to the old towns in Krakow, Warsaw and Torun. While I steel myself to hear tales of destruction, I am in for a surprise. The towns are lost in a medieval stupor. Horse driven carriages sweep us off our feet. Characters seemingly from the Middle Ages walk up and down the cobbled streets, in their long flowing gowns. Although some of these old towns have been restored after the war, they retain their old world charm. In Krakow, the erstwhile Royal Capital, the Old Town alone is home to several historic sites as they are an ensemble of Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque architecture. In Warsaw, palaces and parks, castles and churches take over the Old Town. And Torun is lost in the fragrance of ginger bread. Each town is unique in its own way and I start my sojourn with Krakow.

Looming in front of me is the 14th century *Wawel Castle*, perched precariously on a mound, also referred to as *Wawel Hill*. Home to the dynasties of several Polish kings, every wall spews forth stories of intrigue and murder. The castle is today a museum, but the Gothic cathedral built initially in the 11th century lives up to its medieval presence. While it was both the coronation site and the mausoleum of the rulers, the crypts contain the tombs of the Polish princes. Dedicated to St Stanislaw, a silver coffin was created in the 17th century after the original one was stolen. My guide tells me about a scheming story that led a murder in the cathedral of an Archbishop. While I get transported to a similar story in T.S. Eliot's masterpiece, I am also told that this was where Pope John Paul II offered his first mass as a priest. Yet, none of these stories surpass the lore I hear about the mythical Wawel dragon.

A cobbler's apprentice is the hero in this story and he is pitted against the dragon who has an eye for virgins. As all the young women in Wawel die at the hands of the dragon, the desperate king, in search of a hero, promises to marry his daughter to the man who could kill it. The story goes that Skuba, the hero, stuffed a lamb with sulphur and left it as a bait below the dragon's lair, who eventually exploded after eating it. We do not know if Skuba married the king's daughter or not, but another version of the legend says that the dragon was killed by Krakus, a prince who founded the city of Krakow. Personally, I prefer the story of Skuba.



In another part of the country, the setting is just the same and is entirely medieval. There is a river and a castle on its banks as well and I am entering the 14th century world of Prussia where knights lived and ruled. The towering red fortress of Malbork, built in the Gothic style, stands in front of me and standing in front of it are the statues of its builders—the Teutonic Knights. The *River Nogat* was probably witness to the destruction of the largest castle of Europe during the Second World War.

Malbork or Marienburg was earlier referred to as the Monastic State of the Teutonic Knights. The three main towers in this fortress take me into the medieval world of knights who lived here and defended their castle besides controlling the amber trade as well. The castle has been restored and as you walk through the turrets, one can see the halls, the paintings, the thrones, the mills, the kitchens, the large wells and well even the restrooms built atop a moat with cabbage leaves serving as toilet paper.

Malbork's history is closely connected to the quaint old town of Torun, known for its legendary gingerbread that dates back to the Middle Ages. It was the Teutonic knights, men of a religious order from Jerusalem, who gave Torun its castle and its old town. The knights were first invited by the Polish princes to wage wars against the Pagan Prussians, but it eventually led to internal strife. The people of Torun rebelled against the knights and captured the castle which lies in ruins today. But there is a touch of magic around the old Gothic town, a *World UNESCO* site and it

is probably one of the reasons that it remained unscathed during Second World War.

I step into the streets of Torun and it does have an effect on me. A chocolate brick tower looks askance at me from an angle. A boring story says that it's a technical mistake, but the imaginary poet has given it a romantic touch. When a love story between a knight and a nun goes awry, the knight builds the structure out of redemption, only to find it leaning like his attachment. Locals, however, say that you can clear your mind of all the guilt by standing below it for just ten seconds.

The fortress, the gates to the city, the medieval walls, the town hall and the Gothic churches, the Baroque granaries, the ancient houses—all of them look as if they're straight out of a picture post card. As I gaze at the top of the cathedral tower, I see a huge bell, weighing seven tons, referred to as *God's Trumpet*.

But the city revolves around one astronomer, who literally lives today in the city—Nicolas Copernicus Thorunensis. Statues and shops, universities and restaurants are all named after this man who observed that it was the Earth that rotated around the static sun. The church where he was baptised, the house where he was raised, are all living symbols of his life in this city. Even the company that sells gingerbread bears his name. And as I leave the town, I see some boys standing below his statue with cups of coffee in their hands, exchanging notes.

There is a certain charm to the old towns of Poland and





Copernicus is not the only man that the Polish are proud of. In the capital of Warsaw, the setting rays of the sun cast a scarlet streak of light in the sky, but the ancient multi-hued monuments look straight out of a fairy tale. And that is where I discover that the royalty live in a little street aptly called the *Royal Route*. As I walk around the *Castle Square*, the towering *Corinthian Column of King Sigismund* stands as a silhouette against the fiery sky. Everything seems to be bathed in colours of the sunset. *The Royal Castle*, home to the Polish royalty, looks upon me in shades of red, while the cobbled streets of the Old Town greet me.

This is not the Warsaw that I read about in history books, the city that is often referred to as Phoenix city, having risen from the ashes of wars. Symbolically, echoing the tragic tale of the city is the bronze statue of the *Mermaid of Warsaw*. The city of Warsaw was believed to be protected by a mermaid who was rescued by a local fisherman, but legends say that the city was left defenceless as the mermaid went to visit her sister in Copenhagen during the war. There is a touch of sadness in my guide's voice and the sun seems to be burying its head behind the clouds. A note of melancholy rises from the city as the story is being narrated. A tune seems to waltz in from nowhere as my guide finishes

the story. I am told that with Warsaw rising literally from the dead, the mermaid is apparently back to her city and is protecting it even today, which is why she is depicted on the coat of arms as well.

But the lilting notes of music still echoes in my ears as I follow it, only to discover that it is being played from stone benches in front of the monuments. They take me on a musical journey on the life of legendary musician, Chopin who pined for his homeland, even after he left Poland for Paris and was never able to return. There is music from every bench—from across the house, *Czapski Palace* where he stayed to the *Vistants' Church* where he played for the first time. Each excerpt of music narrates an episode from his life. At the end of the trail, I stand in front of the *Holy Cross Church* where a tiny urn inside a pillar has a part of Chopin locked inside it—his heart.

It was Chopin's last desire to be buried in his home country, but the political landscape did not allow it. He died unfulfilled in Paris, but his sister smuggled his heart and brought it down to the church. And that is where it lies till date, singing an unheard elegy to the musician. As the bars of music die down, the story ends, the sun sets and I walk back to my hotel in silence. **p**

