

POLAND

An aerial photograph of Krakow, Poland, taken at sunset. The sky is a vibrant orange and yellow. In the foreground, the red brick walls of the Old Town are visible, featuring a large, ornate clock face with a sunburst design. In the background, the tall, dark spire of St. Mary's Basilica rises above the city's rooftops. The overall scene is a mix of warm and cool tones, with the orange of the sunset contrasting with the blue and green of the buildings and the clock face.

FROM EAST

TO WEST

BOSZ

POLLAND

FROM EAST

TO WEST



IN THE CENTRE
OF EUROPE ► 6

BETWEEN LANDSCAPE
AND HISTORY ► 9



EAST ► 17





CENTRAL ► 65



WEST ► 145

TABLE OF CONTENTS

IN THE CENTRE OF EUROPE

JERZY BRAJCZYK

POLAND. It is located in the centre of Europe; the geographical midpoint of Europe lies in the centre of Poland. Geography and history have shaped it into quite a regular country, easily fitting a circle, and if you try hard enough, even a square. Delineated by the sea and the mountains in the north and the south, and large rivers in the east and the west. Classic.

There were times when it was a huge European country (once, even the largest), and sometimes, there was no Poland whatsoever. The concept of Poland from sea to sea, a bit exaggerated, reveals ambitions that were not entirely groundless. Today, it is a middle-sized country, which is not so bad. It used to change its borders, as someone calculated, every sixteen years, but now it has not changed them for eighty years. However, some time ago, it changed all of its neighbours – a few decades back there were three, now there are seven.

The core of the continent, but classified by foreigners as eastern or sometimes, mercifully, as central. This is not so bad, because some great figures of European culture thought it was a northern country of ice, where the European Danish people led by Hamlet the father crushed hordes of Poles charging on their sleighs.

Today, one of the most ethnically homogenous countries, once a melting pot of nationalities, also hospitably welcomed by the locals. But there is more: Poland was the co-creator of what was probably Europe's first union plan – and then the completely involuntary participant of some other projects: of Austria-Hungary, Greater Germany and the Russian Empire. As a result, throughout the entire 19th century – so crucial to Europe – Poland compensated for its lack of statehood by means of dreams of independence that imbued its literature, uprisings with little hope of success and peculiar ideas about its Messianic mission.

An interesting country, an interesting nation, an interesting state. For us – definitely; so some consider patriotism to be the highest value, whilst others, somewhat oikophobically, try to distance themselves too much from it. Is it also interesting for others? We would like it to be, because our self-stereotype – both literary and popular – involves outer containment. The father of our literature, and thus of our language, in one of his most famous quotes, implies that our original language is there so that foreign nations, as he says, knew that we have our own real speech rather than an alien one.

Our literature is not very old; in fact, the first Polish sentence was written down by a Czech. But we do have, as the only Slavic language, an unbroken

history of literature that is by no means bad (five Nobel Prizes, if anyone asks). What about culture in general? Truly, there is nothing to be ashamed of. Moreover, we are apparently a proud nation, although, to be honest, everyone else seems to be, too. As a matter of fact, the civilisation referred to as European has come to us, many times, rather than being derived from us. On the other hand, we hold the conviction that we sometimes spread it eastwards, often accompanied by what we consider the only true religion. We used to be a rampart for its defence...

When it comes to religion, Poland is still definitely Catholic, although historically speaking it has been tolerant. Ethnically and religiously complex for centuries, selected as the residing place by a large portion of a nation that is particularly culture-shaping, yet scattered all over the world – something that was not always recognised by others, who criticised Poles for their tendency to pay too much heed to their cultural and ethnic identity.

If we were to assemble the characteristics that externally define a country, a state and a nation, we could say we are, first of all, Slavs, second of all, Catholics, and thirdly – and this has been particularly difficult to eradicate for the past generations – used to some features typical of an ideological concept that has now been abandoned (for years it was not uncommon to perceive us as communists). A mixture that does not bode well for many, and yet...

Nowadays, Poland is considered – quite commonly, both by us and outside our borders – as a beautiful country. We have quite the architecture – to be honest, not all that stands has been built by Polish hands, but considering what the foreign hands had destroyed, we still have a lot to be proud of. And lately, we have been creating architectural masterpieces.

And nature? Nature is the strong suit of Poland, but volumes have already been written about it. Similarly to the nature of many other countries – after all, nature is amazing.

“Our Poland is beautiful, fertile and not too small. Many lands, nations, capitals and wonders across it all” – such was a heartfelt account of one German raised to be Polish, when there was no Polish state. And some time later, our national poet wrote to children: “A sister and a brother travel hand in hand, wondering at the beauty of the land.”

Truly – beautiful. And ever more so. And although we no longer have to be taught love for our homeland at school, or perhaps precisely because of that, we are convinced of it. We have reason to be happy and even rejoice.



BETWEEN LANDSCAPE AND HISTORY

MARK BRZEZINSKI

In 1990, when I came to Poland for the first time with my father, Zbigniew Brzeziński, it seemed to me that I was entering a country where my two homelands merge. I had been distantly familiar with Poland since childhood. It existed in the tales told by my dad, born in 1928 in pre-war Warsaw, of which only traces and shreds of memories remained in the 1990s. The country from the family stories was the country of imagination, built from memory and longing, also mine – believe me when I tell you it is weird to long for a place you have never been to. I saw this country for the first time in 1990, when I landed at Okęcie as a young man.

That first encounter might have discouraged me: dull cities, communist buildings, empty – as I believed – stores, roads dating back to prehistoric times. After decades of functioning behind the Iron Curtain, Poland was just regaining freedom and taking the first hesitant step towards great change. Everything was different than I imagined – rough, chaotic – and yet this “different” charmed me at first sight. And from the first sight I knew Poland was not a country to reveal itself all at once or shine with wealth. You have to visit it again and again to get to know at least a little bit of its incredible diversity, dense history and ability to combine the old with the new.

So I did – I came back to Poland in 1991 on a Fulbright Scholarship, and travelled around the country, to large cities and small towns. Over the years, I watched the country change and evolve: new airports, scientific centres, museums, theatres, concert halls and universities were built; historical monuments were restored to their previous glory and old city centres – to their beauty; motorways and modern skyscrapers appeared. The metamorphosis of Poland in the last nearly forty years has been more than impressive. But what's left unchanged is also fascinating.

You can still find peace by the Masurian lakes. Your breath is still taken away by the meadows of the Bieszczady Mountains, the ancient Białowieża Forest and the remarkable mosaic of cultures in Podlasie. Small towns continue to exist, with their market squares remembering the times of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; there are also villages where the rhythm of life is dictated by the seasons. The Tatra Mountains, the sandy beaches of the Baltic Sea and the forests that hide many secrets remain the same. All this – the mosaic of landscapes and history, the diversity of the country stretching between the eastern border of the European Union, the Oder River and the Baltic Sea – is presented in the artbook you are holding in your hands.



▼ Elk by night



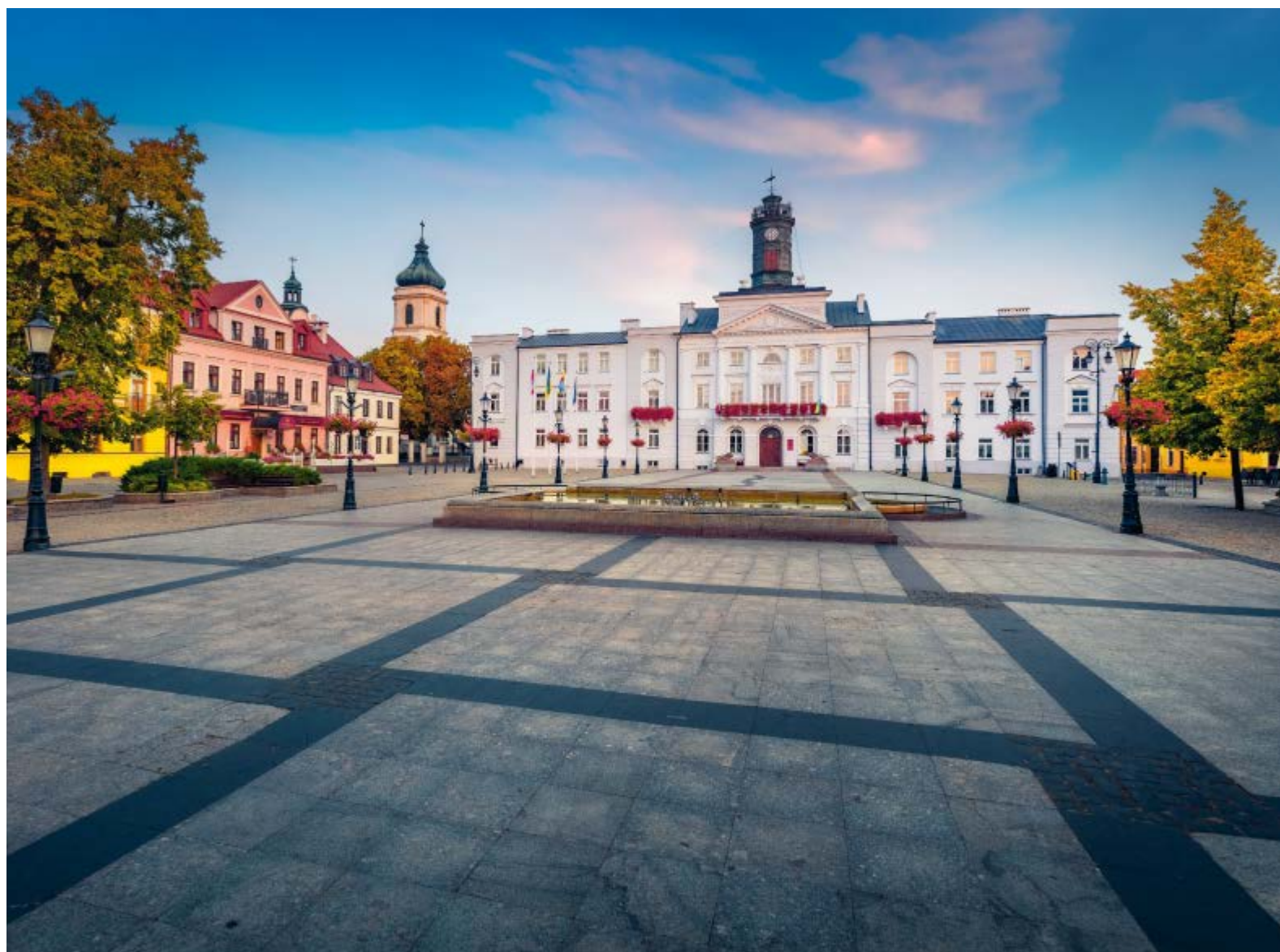
▼ A bird's eye view of Sandomierz, with the market square in the foreground



▼ Baranów Sandomierski Castle



▼ Town hall in the Old Market Square in Płock



▼ Mysławice Palace in the Royal Baths Park



▼ Royal Baths Park – a view of the Palace on the Isle





▼ Wawel Royal Castle



▼ “Vistula Niagara” on the Wisetka River – artificial dam



▼ Chapel of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Jaszczurówka, Zakopane





▼ Książ Castle in Wałbrzych



▼ Palace of Marianne Orange-Nassau in Kamieniec Ząbkowicki



▼ Panorama of Kłodzko



▼ Franciscan monastery complex in Kłodzko





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FROM EAST TO WEST

An interesting country, an interesting nation, an interesting state.

Jerzy Bralczyk

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Mark Brzezinski