

# MEMORIES OF POLAND

## *Folklore And History Of A Ravaged Country*

*Specially written for "The Listener" by Cecil W. Lusty*

[No. 2]

**A**LL the medieval towns of Poland are visions of mellowed grey stone castles and churches, steeped in legend and romance, but Cracow, the ancient capital, woos me with peculiar force. Warsaw, Poznan, Torun, Wilno, and Lwow, all have their individual appeal, but it is Cracow that somehow brings to me the spirit of Poland. The avalanche of desecrating invasion poured past Cracow in the present war, but Cracow, while its proud head is bowed before a temporary conqueror, fortunately appears to have escaped the ruin and desolation that has been the fate of much of Poland.

### **The "Broken Note"**

Listen to that abruptly interrupted trumpet note sounded every hour from the tower of St. Mary's Cathedral. It is the "hejnal"—the broken note—broadcast by all Polish radio stations—commemorating that deathless trumpeter of 1241 who, even as a Tartar arrow pierced his throat, sounded the alarm. The "hejnal" is part of a medieval hymn in honour of the Virgin.

Once a year a "Tartar" chieftain "rides" a wooden horse through the city. This custom, the "Laikonik," celebrated with the utmost enthusiasm, records a Cracow victory and is one of the many historical observances in Cracow. In no country have I known the people, old and young, to be so instilled with folklore as in Poland.

Then stroll through Cracow and reconstruct history in the shadows of the Barbican, that circular fort in Arab style introduced by Crusaders returning from the Holy Land, or tarry awhile under the frowning battlements of the Wawel castle and cathedral, where the lances of mailed knights once splintered in the lists, and in whose hallowed crypts are the tombs of Poland's ancient kings.

### **Poland's Pantheon**

The Wawel is Poland's Acropolis and Pantheon, and shows you the wealth of Poland's history and lore. In the Wawel you can descend to the Vistula-lapped cavern where Krakus slew the dragon. For Krakus it was who, after killing the dragon, so speaks legend,

built a castle on the rock, and thus the ancient capital of Krakow or Crakow was created.

### **Another Helen of Troy**

Daughter of Krakus was Wanda, who, lest her Helen-of-Troy beauty should bring fire and sword, drowned herself in the Vistula.



*CLARION CALL—The trumpeter in the tower of St. Mary's Cathedral, Cracow, sounds the "hejnal," a custom dating back to 1241. The call was broadcast by all Polish stations*

To-day you can see near the city two high ancient mounds over the tombs of Krakus and Wanda. A third mound, constructed in the nineteenth century, commemorates Kosciuszko, while a fourth, erected a few years ago as a monument to Pilsudski, provides a definite link with New Zealand, as urns of earth came from Poles throughout the world, including some from New Zealand and Australia.

### **Pilsudski Memorial**

The Pilsudski earth beacon is over three hundred feet in radius and one hundred and twenty feet high. The construction of the mound—begun in August, 1934, the twen-

tieth anniversary of Poland's entrance into the Great War—was largely carried out by voluntary working bees. State official and lowly peasant, soldier and civilian, adult and child, all did a share. I myself have laboriously trundled wheelbarrows of earth up the hill of Sowiniec where the beacon is situated.

It was from Cracow that Pilsudski and his now famous Legionnaires struck their first blow, in 1914, for Polish independence. By the last mail I had from Warsaw, dated August 1, I received a new issue of Polish stamps depicting this epic bid by Pilsudski for Poland's freedom. The new stamps were issued to raise funds for national defence.

### **How Warsaw Became the Capital**

Warsaw became the capital in the sixteenth century when Sigismund III., who followed the Transylvanian prince, Stephen Batory, as King of Poland, moved there after a fire, resulting from his attempts to transmute iron into gold, had destroyed much of the Wawel.

Cracow is also famous for its Jagellonian University, founded in 1364 by King Casimir. With the exception of the Prague University, Cracow possessed the only university in Central Europe at that time. Copernicus and other noted Polish sons studied at this university. Near Cracow, too, is the well-known Wieliczka salt mine, claimed to be the largest in the world, where underground chapels reveal, in carvings and inscriptions, more of the romance of Cracow.

### **Polish Holiday**

While in Cracow I took the opportunity to spend a few days in the Polish holiday and winter sports resorts in the Carpathian mountains, where fierce fighting has now taken place. I missed the "torpedo," as the Cracowians call the rail-car to Zakopane, and travelled from Cracow in a goods train, full of peasants in colourful national costume, to the Tatra mountains. Here is the home of the "Gorale" highlanders, descendants of Robin Hood-like chieftains, who plundered the rich and gave to the poor. Their exploits are the inspiration for many Polish operas and ballets.

The news of the fighting in the Carpathians recalled to me many memories of these simple living, almost mystic, peoples of the Tatras. But I like best to think of a winding mountain track with little crucifixes affixed to trees where men and women, tillers of the honest Polish soil, kneel in prayer. This is the soul of Poland.

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