

LIFE IN WARSAW

(Specially Written for "The Listener" by Cecil W. Lusty)

WARSAW, whose heroic siege has won world-wide admiration, is not a great European show place like Paris or Rome. It is, however, a fascinating capital of contrasts and a most interesting city to live in.

There is Warsaw's architecture — fourteenth century Stare Miasto or old town, underworld of mysterious tortuous lanes running down to the Vistula; and Nowy Miasto or new town with modernistic structures up to sixteen storeys. There is its incongruous traffic — electric tram and old-world droshky; shining limousine and mule-drawn long wooden carts. There are the city's people—women in furs and silks cheek by jowl with ragged barefoot peasants.

Cheap Living

Life in Warsaw is relatively inexpensive. It is considerably more economical than Paris and—apart from the Balkans—than most of Europe's capitals. Essential foodstuffs, in both open-air markets and shops, are cheap; rents for small self-contained suburban flats are reasonable, around 25/- weekly. Warsaw, however, like New Zealand, has its housing problem, having risen Phoenix-like on the ashes of the Great War. Clothes and manufactures are dear.

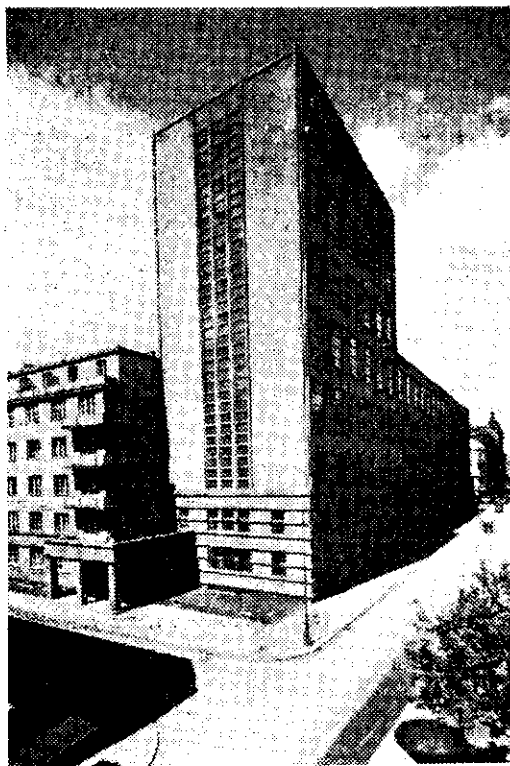
As paying guests in a modern labour-saving home of a Polish family of comfortable means, in the residential part of the suburb of Praga, across the Vistula, my wife and I paid 75 zlotys, say, £3/10/- weekly. This covered full board (washing and laundry excepted), telephone, and part services of a maid. The maid, Juliet, a buxom country wench, received about 7/6 weekly, but she had a good home and mistress, and enjoyed various "perks." Her small wage thus represented considerable purchasing power. Our hosts lived well, and the cost of residence in more humble homes would, of course, be appreciably lower.

The tariff for bed at a good tourist grade, but not exclusive, city hotel, was about 5/- or 6/- a night, meals being à la carte or table d'hôte, as preferred. A bath at the same hotel, however, cost about 4/-. After a wearisome train trek across Western Europe, my wife willingly paid the luxury price, but I preferred to keep my travel dust and the "four bob!" I do not wish to suggest that baths in Warsaw are poles apart; in modern

homes and flats special attention is given bathroom fittings, and showers are necessities rather than luxuries.

Transport

Tram, bus, and taxi fares were much on a par with those in New Zealand. Also, for a threepenny tram fare one could, as in pre-Reich Vienna, travel round the city, provided each transfer was made in the same direction. I have travelled in Polish-built trains over



A section of modern, pre-war Warsaw, showing the Post and Telegraph Offices

much of Poland, also to Moscow and Prague, and I found these very comfortable. An ingenious arrangement in the first-class carriages whereby the seats are converted into upper and lower berths obviates the need and expense of sleepers. The bulk of the Polish people travel third-class and by night.

Connoisseurs of Food and Wine

Your Pole is a connoisseur of good food and wine, and I have mouth-watering memories of Mayoralty and other banquets. Breakfast and lunch—the latter is omitted by many Poles—are simple and light, perhaps lemon-flavoured tea or coffee and buttered rolls or sandwiches. Dinner, served about 3.30 p.m., is more elaborate. The Poles have an inviting variety of soups, such as beetroot, fruit, cabbage, and vermicelli.

Roasts are uncommon, meat being served in rissoles or meat cakes; or it is minced and wrapped in cabbage leaves.

Poultry and small game are great favourites. Vendors bring live poultry to the doorstep and, after the housewife has made her selection, neatly despatch the bird, thus ensuring fresh supplies and protecting themselves again surplus perishable stock. In the more well-to-do homes, vodka is liberally drunk with the afternoon meal. Meanwhile, in the courtyards of the houses, itinerant musicians supply music and song until patience and artistry are rewarded with small coins.

Afternoon Siesta

The reason for the 3.30 p.m. dinner is that the professional Pole, having "skipped" lunch, has finished work for the day, and there is a fairly general "siesta," extending to many shops, until about 5 p.m. Further business may then be transacted, and a long Continental night will be devoted to recreation in theatre or cabaret.

The Besetting Sin

The besetting sin of the Pole, in western eyes, is his unpunctuality, procrastination, and indecisiveness. Should my Polish partner, who lived with his family a few blocks away, arrange for me to call at ten a.m., I would know, from irritating experience, that he would not be ready until eleven or noon. Even in the universities, professors had a recognised "academic quarter of an hour" grace for lecture time.

An idealist and individualist, the Pole does not like to be hurried. The cafe is his Rialto for business and gossip. There, over coffee or wine, politics are discussed, business transacted, and newspaper "copy" written.

No Team Spirit

A people without a country for so many centuries, the Poles, in my experience, found it difficult to cultivate the team spirit, to think and act collectively. Yet they have achieved much, as seen in their railway and other public utilities, all created since 1918; in the fine entirely Polish-constructed port of Gdynia, and in their educational and cultural institutions.

Above all, there is their unchallengeable tenacity and courage, as exemplified throughout history, and, most graphically, in their unyielding fight to-day against overwhelming odds.