

Travel Journal Volume 1 – Berlin

Saturday, August 10, 2024 – Berlin

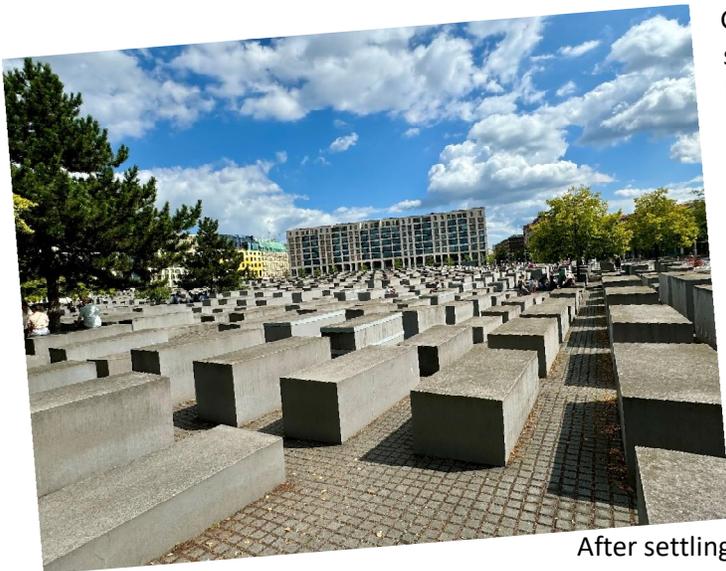
Lori and I arrived this morning in Berlin, the capital and largest city of Germany, and the European Union's most populous city. Those titles now go to Berlin because London, which is larger, isn't in the EU any longer due to Brexit. Our daughter Julia had a few days off, so she was able to jump on our flight and join us for the first part of our trip. That's an advantage of being a flight attendant with nice parents!

After World War II Berlin was split into West Berlin, comprised of the US, British and French districts, and East Berlin, made up of the Soviet Union's districts. Complicating matters, Germany was divided into West Germany and East



Germany along the same lines, and all of Berlin was completely situated within East Germany, effectively making West Berlin an island within East Germany. The city was brought together again after German reunification in 1990. Due to its geographic location and history, Berlin has been called "the heart of Europe." Due to its reputation for its decadent night club scene, maybe it should be nicknamed after a different body part.

We're staying in Potsdamer Platz, an area that was a barren, no-man's land after WWII that's now filled with glass skyscrapers and a square with shops and restaurants. There's also a very small section of the Berlin Wall still standing there (more on that to come).



After settling into our hotel we walked over to the Holocaust Memorial, formally known as the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe. It's a thought-provoking maze constructed with 2,711 gray concrete, tomb-like blocks of various heights.

We then walked over to the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin's most recognizable landmark. It was originally one of eighteen gates into the original walled city and is now the only gate still standing. It's a symbol of unity not only in Germany but also in Europe. The Brandenburg Gate serves as a backdrop for political events, concerts,



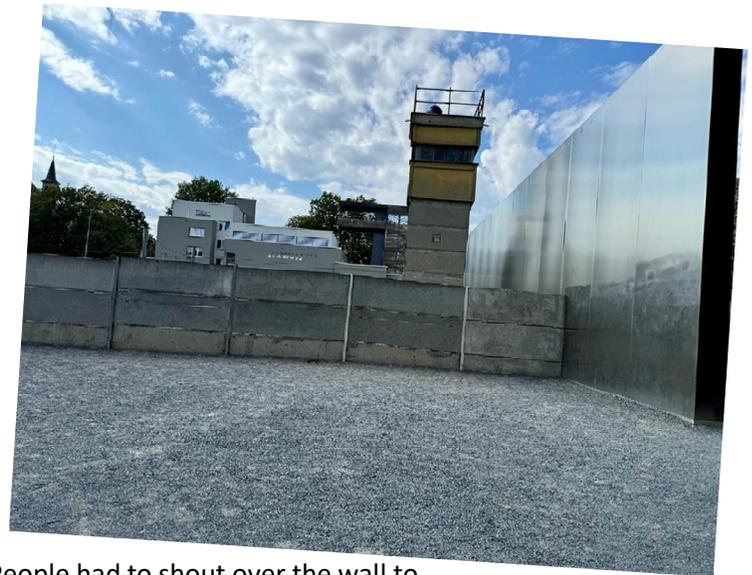


and public gatherings. We saw a small demonstration of people condemning anyone who isn't a vegan, but mostly a huge crowd of tourists. The vegans should have picked better looking people to make their case; after looking at them I had a craving for a bratwurst.

After a short rest we did a bike tour of the city, riding mostly through the Mitte area of the former East Berlin. Though most of it is now gone, we saw pieces of and learned about the infamous Berlin Wall, a concrete wall that was erected in 1961 completely surrounding West Berlin to cut it off from East Berlin and the surrounding East Germany. The wall was constructed by communist East Germany to stop the flow of East Germans seeking freedom by escaping into West Berlin.

The "wall" really consisted of an outer wall within East Berlin constructed a few feet off the border with West Berlin so soldiers could still patrol outside of the wall, and another inner wall.

The area between the walls was the "death strip," a wide area filled with watchtowers, trip-



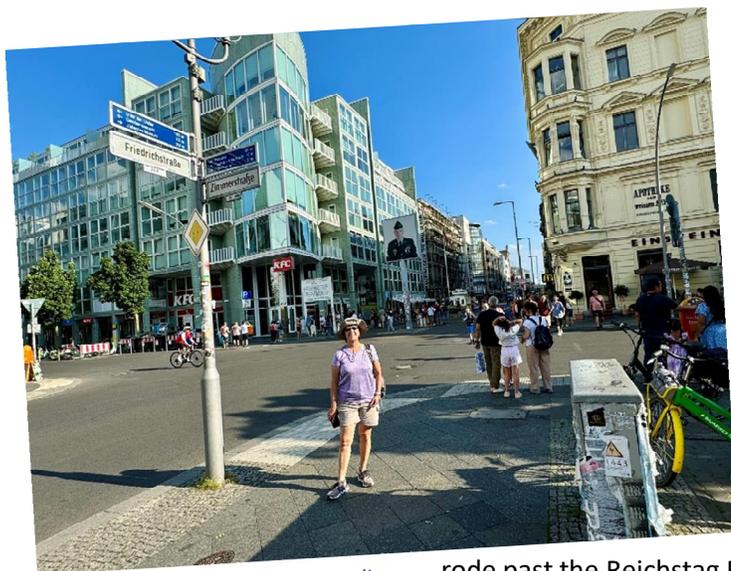
wire machine guns, floodlights, and guard dogs to prevent people from getting into West Berlin. People will do a lot for freedom, and many people died trying to get out of East Germany. Nevertheless, a lot of people still haven't learned that socialism and totalitarianism don't work and that humans want their freedoms. Are you listening, Bernie, Kamala and Donald?

For almost 30 years the wall divided the city, friends, and family members, and became a symbol of the Cold War. People had to shout over the wall to communicate with loved ones, until even that was outlawed. Then in late 1989, after a series of revolutions in Eastern Bloc countries, the Soviet Union collapsed. Ecstatic crowds climbed the walls and began chipping away with chisels and hammers until they tore most of the wall down. Now mostly there is just a permanent line drawn across Berlin where the wall once stood.

We visited Mauerpark, a narrow strip of land that was part of the death strip along the Berlin Wall. After the fall of the wall, Berlin residents turned it into a park.

We pedaled through Museum Island, an island within the city filled with world-class museums housed in architecturally diverse buildings. The Berlin Cathedral is also located on the island.

We stopped at Checkpoint Charlie, the best-known Berlin Wall crossing point during the Cold War. Now it is a very touristy place with not much to see. We also



Checkpoint Charlie

rode past the Reichstag Building, the meeting place of the German parliament.

After the four-hour bike ride, we had dinner at the oldest beer garden in the city, where I had that bratwurst. It was a busy first day, after which I had no problem falling asleep, even after the double espresso I had in the afternoon which would normally keep me up for three days.

Sunday, August 11, 2024 - Berlin

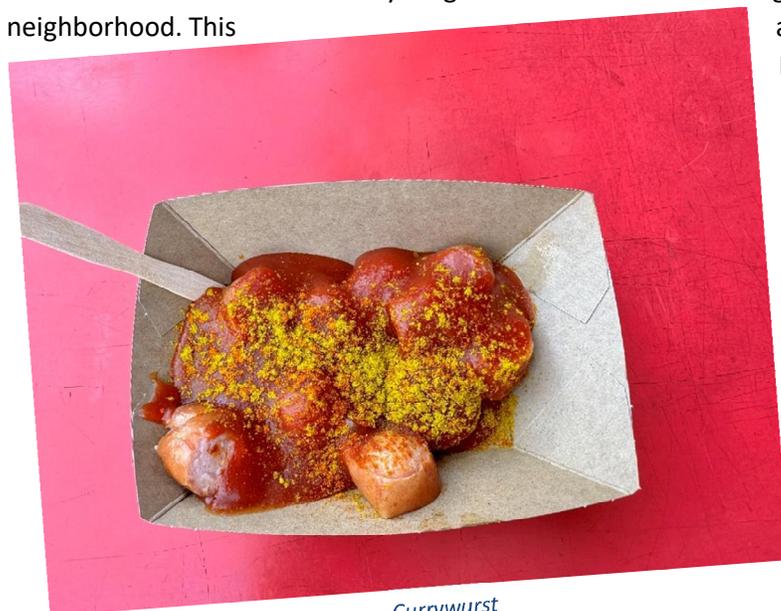
Today we took a walking tour of Berlin. Our guide showed us several historically significant buildings related to Jewish life in Berlin, as well as several memorial monuments commemorating all sorts of bad things that happened to Jews during The Holocaust. We saw the Tranenpalast, the Palace of Tears, which was the main border crossing between East and West Germany from 1962 to 1989. During this time, West Germans were permitted to cross the border into East Germany, and then return to West Germany. East Germans were prohibited from crossing the border into West Germany. The site gets its name from the tearful goodbyes as family and friends said farewell and crossed back into West Germany.



We walked through Die Hackeschen Hof, a collection of nine courtyards of old buildings that have been redeveloped for use as retail stores and restaurants. Also located there is Museum Blindenwerkstatt Otto Weidt, which tells the story of Otto Weidt's Workshop for the Blind. During the Second World War, Otto Weidt employed mainly visually- or hearing-impaired Jews in his small factory which made brushes. It's another Oscar Schindler story in that he was able to save many Jews from being transported to and killed in Nazi concentration camps.

After the tour we went back to Mauerpark, where there's a flea market with musicians and food carts on Sunday afternoons. We didn't eat or stay long because we had to

get to our food tour in the Prenzlauerberg area, once part of East Berlin, has become a hot spot in Berlin. Historic buildings form the backdrop for up-and-coming restaurants and shops. There were lots of people pushing strollers around, none of which were filled with dogs. Unlike in Boca Raton, in Germany the dogs can walk on their own!



Currywurst

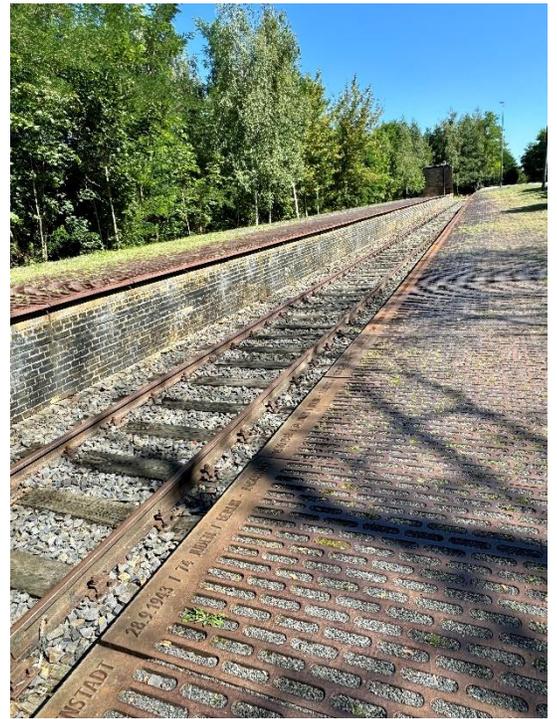
On our food tour we tasted Berlin's staple food, Currywurst, a pork sausage cut into slices and served smothered in curry ketchup and sprinkled with curry powder. Not bad if you like sausage, ketchup and curry. We also had an Italian pastry, Mexican tacos, Turkish doner kebab, and ice cream, all reflecting the various immigrant communities that came to Berlin for work over the last century.

Monday, August 12, 2024 - Berlin



Today was another day of our Berlin tour. We started off for a quick stop at the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church, built in the late 1800's and badly damaged during an air raid in 1943. Unlike many of the buildings that have been rebuilt in Berlin, the remains of this church have been left unaltered as a reminder of the devastation of WWII.

We then continued on to Grunewald train station, where thousands of Jews boarded the trains from Platform 17 that would take them to the death camps. On the platform a memorial contains the dates, the number of people deported, and their final destination for each of the 180+ trains that transported Jews from that



train platform.

Then then proceeded to the Bavarian Quarter, a neighborhood in Berlin that was home to many Jews. Albert Einstein lived there while he was a professor at Berlin University before he moved to America and opened a chain of bagel restaurants. The quarter's open-air art exhibition on lampposts provides information about the restrictions on the daily life of Jews during the Third Reich. The neighbourhood was heavily destroyed in WWII and has since been rebuilt, though the homes today are not as nice as the pre-war houses.

We then walked over the Schonenberg City Hall, known worldwide as the site where John F. Kennedy gave a speech in June 1963 to the inhabitants of West Berlin with the famous words "Ich bin ein Berliner." Inside City Hall we visited the permanent exhibition "We were neighbors", which tells about the fates of murdered Schöneberg Jews.



We

The
of

After a falafel lunch at a restaurant owned by an Israeli, we went to KaDeWe, Germany's best-known department store in downtown Berlin. KaDeWe is seven floors of high-end merchandise and gourmet food. We strolled around the 6th floor, a gourmet food mecca with many small restaurants serving a wide variety of food and selling every other kind of fresh and packaged gourmet food you can think of.

then walked along the East Side Gallery, a one-mile-long stretch of the Berlin wall covered in graffiti and street art.

last stop of the day was at The Topography of Terror, built on the site where the headquarters of the Secret State

Police, the SS, and the Reich Security main office were located during the Third Reich. We were inside the Documentation Center learning about the war crimes of the Third Reich when they announced they were closing at 8pm and we had to leave. That was good, as it forced us to call it a day.

We have one more full day in Berlin tomorrow before flying to Warsaw on Wednesday. Sorry for such a long journal and thanks for reading if you made it this far.

Lori and Stephen

Travel Journal Volume 2 – Berlin and Warsaw

Tuesday, August 13, 2024 - Berlin

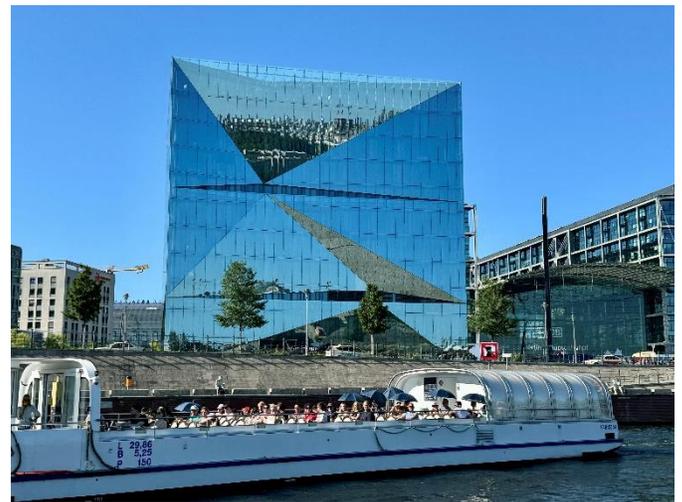
Today we're on our own without any tour guides, but that doesn't mean we'll be taking it easy. We started after breakfast at the Jewish Museum Berlin. This is not a typical museum. The architecture and design of the first exhibits are meant to unbalance you, to make you feel disconcerted. The floors are sloping, the walls are slanted, and everything is stark and industrial. After being more unbalanced than we normally are, we headed into a more traditional museum, with artifacts and information about Jewish history and culture. Being Jewish, we had no problem passing the exam at the end of the museum.



We had lunch at a local brewery's outdoor cafe in Hackescher Markt drinking beer; eating pretzels, sausages and sauerkraut; and listening to music. That may have been the first time we relaxed on this trip, and it felt pretty good. Then we went for coffee drinks at Einstein Kaffee so we could make it through the rest of the afternoon. Einstein must have also started a coffee chain in Berlin before he left Germany in 1932, knowing coffee would be big someday. He's a genius!



We then took a one-hour boat ride on the Spree River which runs through Berlin. We viewed the diverse architecture and Tiergarten, the largest public garden in Europe, from the river. On our walk back to the hotel, we stopped at Gendarmenmarkt, one of the most beautiful squares in Berlin. However, there was a lot of construction going on, so we didn't get to see it in all its glory. The square is home to a



concert hall (the Konzerthaus) and the Französischer Dom. Julia, and I climbed the 236 steps to the top of the dome, which has an outdoor terrace with 360° views over Berlin. After quickly freshening up we had a delicious dinner at a trendy farm-to-table restaurant.

Wednesday, August 14, 2024 - Warsaw, Poland

This morning, we headed to the airport for our flight out of Germany. Our consensus is that we really like modern-day Berlin. It feels like there has been a strong desire to recognize the horrors that originated from there during WWII and atone for them. While those efforts were mostly top-down from the political elite, as Jewish visitors we felt comfortable there and appreciated their efforts.



We arrived in Warsaw, Poland around lunchtime after a quick one-hour flight. Julia, Michael and I were able to obtain Polish citizenships several years ago because my paternal grandfather was from Poland, so we've been wanting to go to Poland for quite some time.

Warsaw is the capital of Poland and its largest city. It has bounced back from the devastation of World War II and has reconstructed its historic city center to look like it did before it was totally destroyed in the war. Now it seems to be a bustling metropolis. We hope to explore the different layers of Warsaw's history, from World War II to its Jewish heritage and communist past.

After dropping our luggage at our hotel, we wandered around Warsaw's Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage site. We then went on a food tour on which we ate all sorts of Polish dishes that I don't know the names of and if I never eat them again, I would be ok with that. I'm glad I tasted them once, but I'm writing this section of the journal from the bathroom, where I've been for quite some time.



Thursday, August 15, 2024 - Warsaw

Warsaw once had the second largest Jewish community on the planet, after New York. That all changed after Hitler's army decimated the city and either killed every Jew they could find or sent them to concentration camps. Our tour today concentrated on Jewish history in Warsaw, which consists mainly of memorials throughout the city.

In 2008, the City of Warsaw, in cooperation with the Jewish Historical Institute, erected 21 markers and a series of plaques inlaid on the ground indicating the borders of the Warsaw ghetto. We saw many of these Ghetto Wall Markers and remnants of the original



ghetto walls which still exist as we walked over 18,000 steps around the area where the ghetto existed. There are also other memorials dedicated to specific people or events. One ghetto memorial, dedicated by Polish Jews in 1946, resembles a manhole cover, recalling the underground's use of the city sewers as hiding places and as escape and smuggling routes. We saw a memorial to Dr. Janusz Korczak (born Henryk Goldszmit), renowned educator and author, who ran an orphanage and then moved it into the ghetto when all the Jews in Warsaw were forced into it.



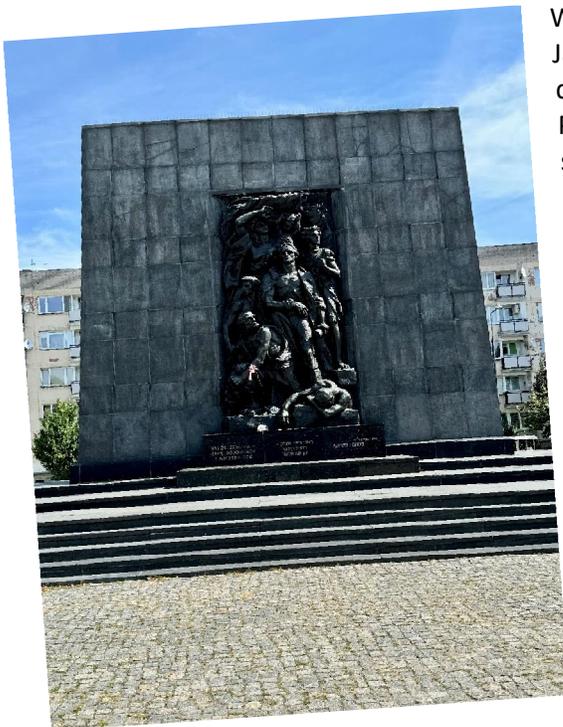
We stopped at the site of the command bunker of ZOB, the Jewish Fighting Organization during the Warsaw Uprising in April 1943. Discovered by the Germans on May 8, 1943, the leaders of the uprising took their own lives. Two monuments honor their memories and mark their common grave.

The Umschlagplatz Monument, erected in 1988 resembling a freight car used to transport Jews to the death camps, stands on the site from which more than 300,000 Jews were deported to the Treblinka extermination camp.

We visited the Jewish Cemetery, established in 1806, one of the largest active Jewish cemeteries in Europe. There are more than 250,000 graves here, including those of rabbis, writers, poets, artists, actors, politicians and community members.



There's a monument to the Ringelblum Archive of the Warsaw Ghetto. These documents describe Jewish life in the ghetto during the war and were buried in hope of being discovered later, which they were.



We also saw the Monument to the Heroes of The Jewish Uprising and The Jan Karski Bench. Karski was a Polish soldier, resistance-fighter, and diplomat during World War II. He acted as a courier in 1940–1943 to the Polish government-in-exile and to Poland's Western Allies about the situation in Poland and about Germany's destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto and its operation of extermination camps that were murdering Jews, Poles, and others.

After our tour we had lunch at a Polish bar mleczny (literally translated as "milk bar"), a Polish cafeteria which during the Communist era provided government-subsidized traditional Polish cuisine at low cost. We had more traditional Polish food, including cold cherry soup and pierogis (Polish dumplings). We then cancelled our dinner reservation for tonight which was at another Polish-food restaurant.

The next outing was to the mall. As we walked around, we saw that 90% of the stores were closed, including the laundromat that we came for, due to the national holiday today, The Assumption of Mary/Armed Forces Day. So, the three of us walked around with a pile of dirty clothes and ended up at a beer garden.

Friday, August 16, 2024

Our walking tour today started in Old Town at Castle Square, which houses the Royal Castle, the column of King Zygmunt III Vasa and St Anne's Church. We walked around Old Town, passing Market Square, then to New Town, an area outside the original city walls. We drove past the Palace of Science and Culture on our way to The Nożyk Synagogue, the only active pre-war synagogue in the city that survived World War II. Our guide was telling us she has been driving a long

time and is a good driver, then promptly drove into a pole when parking the car. So don't brag about your driving no matter how good you think you are.

She then dropped us off at The POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, built on the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto, which documents Jewish life in Poland from the Middle Ages to the present day.

Before dinner we attended a Concert at the Fryderyk Concert Hall to hear the works of the greatest Polish composer, Fryderyk Chopin, performed live by a pianist. Dinner was at a Tex-Mex restaurant. What a bunch of gringos!

Lori and Stephen



Travel Journal Volume 3 – Poland

Saturday, August 17, 2024 - Lublin, Poland

Julia left for home this morning, and Lori and I day-tripped to Lublin, a two-hour drive from Warsaw. Lublin is the ninth-largest city in Poland and has a population of about 350,000.

Our first stop was at Majdanek, the former Nazi concentration and death camp built in October 1941 and liberated by the Soviets in 1944. It's one of the best-preserved camps in Europe and offers a profound experience for understanding the Holocaust. About 80,000 Jews were murdered there.

We then went into Lublin's city center. Two important events in the city's history were the Polish-Lithuanian Union of Krowo in 1385 and the Margolis visit in 1924.

Today, Lublin's restored Old Town is picturesque, with medieval architecture and cobbled streets. Old Town Hall in Market Square, where we had a delicious lunch of traditional Polish food, is surrounded by decorated merchants' homes and winding lanes.



Brama Grodzka, the "City Gate," linked the Old Town of Lublin with the city's now-gone Jewish quarter. The gate is testament to the fact that for a long time Poles and Jews lived side by side in relative harmony.

Lublin Castle, overlooking the city, mixes 12th century architecture with a 19th century English Neogothic style.

Lublin became famous as a center of Jewish learning and mysticism, in part because its main yeshiva, Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin, built by Rabbi Meir Shapir in 1930, was the largest and most modern center of traditional Jewish study in Europe prior to 1939. It was desecrated by the Nazis in WWII and restored in 2007 by the Warsaw Jewish Community. It's now used by the small Jewish community in Lublin. It was closed for Shabbat when we arrived, but we were able to use its bathroom. Thank God, or at least the rabbi.

Returning to our van at the end of the day, we had a new take on "how many Poles does it take to screw in a light bulb?" Our van was completely boxed in by surrounding cars in the parking lot. When one owner finally returned to move his car, we had to maneuver through the opening left by the departed car. How many Poles does it take to get a car out of a parking spot? It takes five. One driver and four others yelling at him in which direction to go.



Sunday, August 18, 2024 - Łódź

Today we day-tripped from Warsaw to Łódź (pronounced “Wudg” best I can tell). In 2023, Łódź had a population of 655,279, making it Poland's fourth largest city.

Dating back to the 14th century and known for its industrial past, Łódź offers a blend of historical and cultural experiences, including the revitalized factory district and its textile heritage. Łódź also has a significant Jewish history, with a thriving community before World War II that was wiped out in the Holocaust.



We stopped first at the Museum of the History of Łódź Jews at Radegast Station, an historic railway station that was used extensively during The Holocaust. It served as the loading point for transporting Jews from the Łódź Ghetto to the Nazi extermination camps.



Our next stop was Manufaktura, an arts center, shopping mall, and leisure complex converted from the former industrial complex founded by Izrael Poznański in the 19th century. His empire included weaving plants, spinning mills, a bleachery, power plant, finishing plant, dyehouse, warehouses, fire station and a company store. He also built houses, a hospital, a school and a community center and canteen for thousands of his workers. His palatial home is also at the site.

Mostly everything was closed because it's against the law for stores to open on Sunday in Poland. Only restaurants and souvenir shops are allowed to open. However, the donut stand was open. Polish donuts are hands-down the best in the world. I normally don't take photos of food, but for these donuts I made an exception.

They're worth a trip to Poland by themselves.



Next stop: the Central Textile Museum in Łódź, located in the former Geyer White Textile Factory. It is the largest museum in Europe dedicated to textiles and the history of weaving.

We had baked pierogies, aka Argentinian empanadas, for lunch on Piotrkowska Street, the main artery of Łódź, and one of the longest commercial thoroughfares in Europe, with a length of around 4.2 km. Everything has its claim to fame!

We leave Warsaw tomorrow for Gdansk, so stay tuned for more of Poland.

Lori and Stephen



Travel Journal Volume 4 – Poland

Monday, August 19, 2024 – Gdańsk, Poland

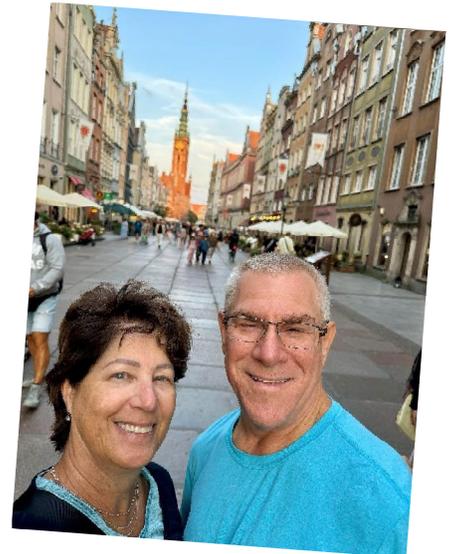
This morning we took a train from Warsaw to Gdańsk, a city situated at the mouth of the Motława River on the Baltic Sea. Gdańsk has been an important shipbuilding and trade port since the Middle Ages and has a rich history. It's not as simple as: Poles and Jews have lived peacefully side-by-side for hundreds of years, then the Nazis came and murdered all the Jews, and now there's no more Jews. For those of you taking my advanced course for extra credit, and not to bore the rest of you, see footnote 1 below for a very condensed history of Gdańsk. For everyone else, refer to the previous sentence.



The weather in Gdańsk today is a cool 70 degrees, which feels great after sweating it out in 88 degrees for the past week. Speaking of the weather, Daniel Gabriel Fahrenheit, inventor of the mercury thermometer and creator of the temperature scale named after him, was born on Gdańsk in 1686.

Our hotel room overlooks Długi Targ, a square in the Main Town of Gdańsk which is an extension of Długa Street with which it creates the Royal Route. That's the ceremonial entryway of monarchs into the city, so obviously we came in that way too.

We had pizza for lunch at a restaurant recommended by our friends Bonnie and Barry Botfeld. They were in Gdańsk recently, and Barry's main priority is finding good food. He didn't disappoint this time. In reality, as long as we weren't served pierogies again we would have been happy. We then finally did our laundry, so if you see us in photos wearing the same clothes from earlier in the trip, don't think we're re-wearing dirty clothes.



Tuesday, August 20, 2024 – Gdańsk, Poland

This morning we did a walking tour of Main Town Gdańsk and got an explanation of all the sites we saw yesterday afternoon on our walk. Basically, most of Gdańsk was reduced to rubble after WWII and rebuilt in the original style, only better. After lunch we took an imitation pirate ship ride up the river, past the Gdańsk Shipyard made famous by Lech Wałęsa and significant for its historical and political associations, to Westerplatte, a peninsula located on the





Baltic Sea. It is famous for the Battle of Westerplatte, which was the first clash between Polish and German forces on September 1, 1939 during the invasion of Poland and thus the beginning and the first battle of World War II.

We went out for one of the best dinners we've have so far in Poland tonight at a fish restaurant. I haven't commented yet on the pricing, but the US dollar is very strong here. Lori and I had a huge bowl of fish soup which we shared as an appetizer, two entrees, a side of cabbage/cole slaw/something like that, and a large bottle of sparkling water, all for \$38, including the tip.

Wednesday, August 21, 2024 – Gdańsk, Poland

We slept in this morning, getting some much-needed rest, then visited the Museum of the Second World War in the afternoon. It's a great museum for gaining a broader understanding of WWII in general and in Poland specifically. After seeing the death and destruction caused by war, you realize that humans are really bad people.

We leave Gdańsk tomorrow for Krakow, so I'll pick up again there.

Lori and Stephen



1. In 1361 Gdańsk became a member of the Hanseatic League which influenced its economic, demographic, and urban landscape. It also served as Poland's principal seaport and was the largest city of Poland in the 15th-17th centuries. In 1793, within the Partitions of Poland, when Poland was split between Prussia, Russia and Austria and ceased to exist as a country, the city became part of Prussia, and then a part of the German Empire in 1871 after the unification of Germany. Following World War I and the reconstitution of Poland under the Treaty of Versailles, it was a Free City under the protection of the League of Nations from 1920 to 1939. On September 1, 1939 it was the scene of the first clash of World War II. The contemporary city was shaped by extensive border changes and new settlement after 1945. In the 1980s, Gdańsk was the birthplace of the Solidarity movement, which helped precipitate the collapse of the Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. That's almost seven hundred years of history in one paragraph. It doesn't get any more condensed than that.

Travel Journal Volume 5 – Poland

Thursday, August 22, 2024 – Kraków, Poland

Today we flew from Gdansk, in the north of Poland, to Kraków, in the south. Kraków was once Poland's royal capital, and unlike the rest of the country, came out of World War II with its gorgeous architecture mostly unscathed.

Kraków surrendered to Germany in 1939 without a fight and became the capital of the General Government, a Nazi-governed territory. The Nazis didn't destroy Kraków's infrastructure because they wanted to use it as a supply base for agriculture and light industry.

After settling in we visited Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory, made famous in the 1993 film *Schindler's List*. Oskar Schindler was a German industrialist, humanitarian, and member of the Nazi Party who is credited with saving the lives of 1,200 Jews during the Holocaust by employing them in his factories in occupied Poland. While he was an opportunist initially motivated by profit, he came to show extraordinary initiative, tenacity, courage, and dedication in saving his Jewish employees' lives. The factory building is now a museum about Kraków under Nazi occupation.



We then had dinner and a Klezmer music concert in the heart of Kraków's former Jewish district, Kazimierz, at a well-established restaurant named Klezmer Hois. The inside of the sixteenth-century building reflects pre-war Kazimierz. The music, an instrumental musical tradition of the Ashkenazi Jews of Central and Eastern Europe, was terrific, as was the traditionally prepared food.

Friday, August 23, 2024 – Kraków, Poland

We started the day with a five-hour walking tour of Kraków.



We began in the Old Town, Kraków's historical district which includes the

Rynek, the largest medieval market square in Europe built by Eastern traders on the famous "Silk Route" from Asia to Europe, and a UNESCO World Heritage site. We stopped by the oldest building of the Jagiellonian University, Europe's second oldest university founded 1364 and where in 1488 Copernicus began his studies at and likely formed the basis of his own doctrine on the structure of the known universe. Then to the Wawel Royal Castle on a hill overlooking the city and the river. This castle was the seat of the Polish monarchs until 1596. Then we crossed the river and visited the former Jewish ghetto area, including a newly dedicated monument to 68,000 victims of the Holocaust from Kraków. We also saw a small section of the remains of



the ghetto wall. Then back to the Kazimierz Jewish district, home to some synagogues from the sixteenth century that are still standing.



After the tour we stopped by a café and had some food to hold us over until our food tour tonight. Did I mention how inexpensive the food is here? Our bill came to less than \$20, and I gave our waiter a \$2.50 tip. He was so happy I think he wanted to rename the restaurant “Stephen’s Café.” I love this place!

After a short rest, we had a food tour in lieu of dinner. Let me start off by saying that stopping for some food to “hold us over” earlier was a bad

idea. We ate enough on the food tour for the rest of our trip. We visited four different restaurants that we would never have found on our own. I think we were served every type of Polish food ever invented. We had pierogies (5 different kinds, savory and sweet), bread that’s only allowed to be sold in Kraków (obwarzanek krakowski), cheese that’s only allowed to be sold in Kraków (oscypek), soups (3 different kinds), potato pancakes, goulash, cabbage (stuffed with meat, shredded with meat, and fermented), and dessert, not to mention two different beers and a shot of vodka. It was all good, our tour guide was terrific, and we had a blast!



It was hot today, so naturally we carried water bottles with us. This guy took it a bit too far.

Saturday, August 24,
2024 – Kraków, Poland

Rough day today. We awoke at 6am for a 6:50am pickup for the hour and a half drive to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp complex. Auschwitz was established in 1940 and throughout the five years of its inglorious operation over 1.5 million Jews, Poles, Italians and Frenchman were murdered here. The museum was founded in 1947, combining the area of KL Auschwitz (Auschwitz I) in Oswiecim and the Birkenau camp (Auschwitz II) in Brzezinka. It comprises approximately 150 buildings and 300 ruins. The original roads, fences, watchtowers and railway ramps have been preserved, and the buildings house the collection of original exhibits and documents. At Birkenau, where the vast majority of the killings occurred, most of the structures were either destroyed by the retreating Nazis in an attempt to hide the evidence of their crimes or decayed over time, we saw the sheer size of the operation. There are no words to describe our visit.

We did hear an interesting bit of fashion trivia that we hadn’t heard before: In the 1930s, Hugo Boss produced and supplied military uniforms for the Nazis. After World War II, the company turned its focus to men’s suits.





Sunday, August 25, 2024 – Kraków, Poland

It was a hot and humid day today, so we spent it underground. First, we visited the Wieliczka Salt Mine outside of Krakow. This UNESCO World Heritage Site was an active mine for more than 600 years, from the 13th century until 1996. Inside the mine we saw the shafts and labyrinthine passageways, displays of historic salt-mining technology, underground lakes, chapels and numerous statues carved by miners out of the rock salt. We went over 400 feet underground. It was very cool, literally, about 65 degrees.

Then we went to the Rynek



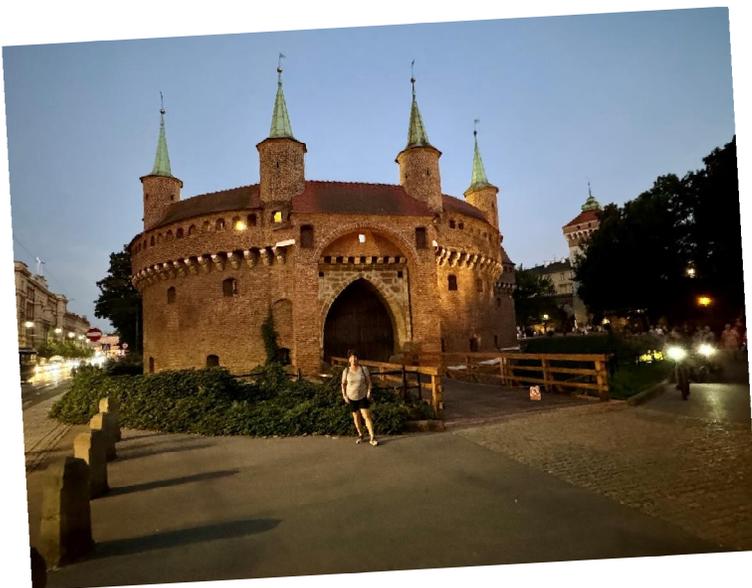
Underground Museum of Kraków, situated below the market square of the city, with lots of exhibits about the city's medieval history, and walks through actual foundations of the old Cloth Hall market which were recently excavated.

We leave Kraków and all of Poland tomorrow. Overall, we were pleasantly surprised by the level of development of Poland. Since the end of communism in 1990, the country has improved its infrastructure and seems to have a positive national attitude. The tourist facilities are in great shape; there's an endless supply of places to visit; the people, while not the most beautiful people on earth, are nice; there's a thousand years of

relatable history to explore; the dollar is strong; and the donuts are delicious. If you're looking for a place to travel to before everyone in the world discovers it, consider Poland. It's a sleeper, but will surely wake up soon, especially as my travel journals are translated into more languages.

Next stop: Romania.

Lori and Stephen



Travel Journal Volume 6 – Romania

Monday, August 26, 2024 - Bucharest, Romania

Today we flew from Krakow to Bucharest, Romania, where it's a blistering 95 degrees. Romania entered World War II in June 1941 on the Axis side, fighting against the Soviet Union. Then in August 1944, it switched sides and joined the Allies against Germany. That is called picking the better of two bad choices, much like our own political system today. Following the war and subsequent occupation by the Soviet Army, Romania became a socialist republic and a member of the Warsaw Pact; that is, a Soviet satellite under communism.

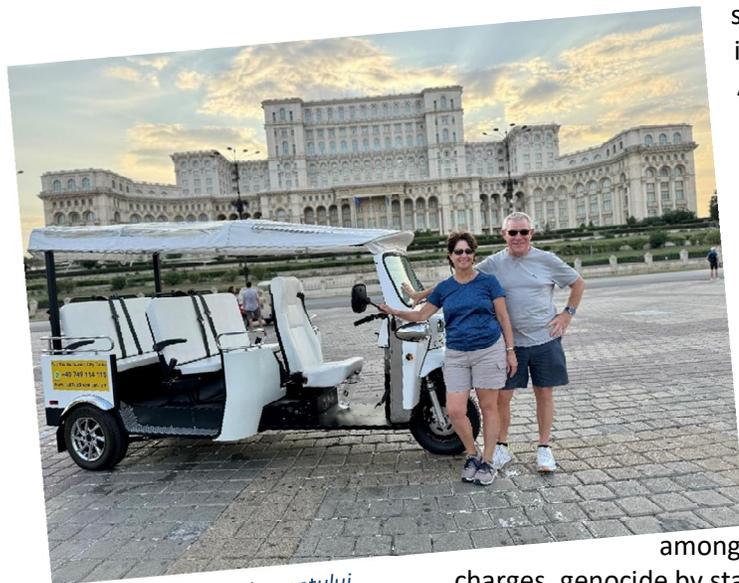
In 1965 the megalomaniac Nicolae Ceaușescu came to power. In the 1980s, in order to repay foreign debt, Ceaușescu imposed austerity



Romanian Athenaeum

steps that impoverished the population and decimated the economy. At the same time, he greatly extended the authority of his Securitate secret police and imposed a severe cult of personality, which led to a dramatic decrease in the dictator's popularity. This ultimately culminated in his overthrow in the violent Romanian Revolution of December 1989 that brought an end to communist rule.

After a speedy trial, Ceaușescu and his wife were executed by firing squad on December 25, 1989, having been found guilty of,



Palatul Parlamentului

among other charges, genocide by starvation of his own countrymen.

After the 1989 Revolution and the end of the Cold War, Romania began a transition away from communism and towards democracy and a market economy. Notice that every country, having lived under socialism or communism, always rejects it given the choice. The country developed closer ties with Western Europe and the United States, joining NATO in 2004 and becoming a full member of the EU on January 1, 2007.

Bucharest is the country's capital and commercial center. Although buildings in the historic city center were heavily damaged or destroyed by war, earthquakes, and Ceaușescu's program of systematization, many survived and have been renovated. Others are still not repaired from a major earthquake in 1977 or have not been reclaimed by their original owners before being nationalized by the communists and are now abandoned and neglected.



Arch of Triumph

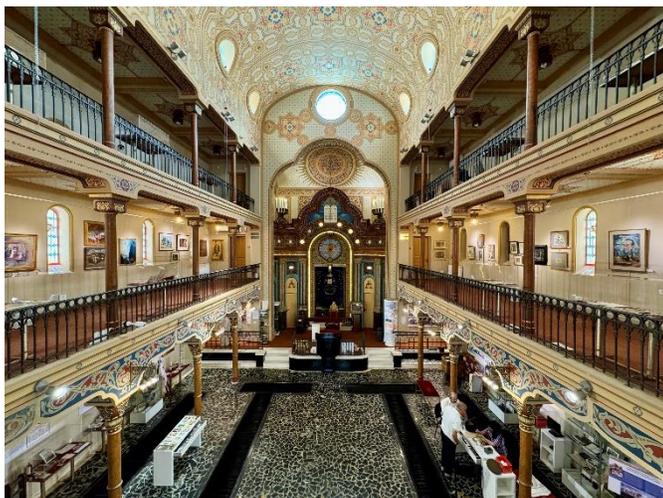


CEC Palace

Our Tuk Tuk tour this afternoon took us through all parts of the city, passing by many beautiful buildings reminiscent of Paris architecture. We stopped at the massive, communist-era Palatul Parlamentului (Parliament) government building, which has 1,100 rooms, and is the second largest administrative building in the world after the US Pentagon. It now houses government offices, a concert hall and a balcony from which Michael Jackson spoke during his visit to Romania, after which he probably molested scores of young Romanian boys. We also passed by the Romanian Athenaeum, the city's most prestigious concert hall; Bucharest's Old Town; and the beautiful CEC Palace, the headquarters of CEC Bank. It was so hot that when we stopped at the Arch of Triumph, which commemorates Romania's victory in the First World War and the coronation of King Ferdinand I and his wife Marie, we were literally

the only ones at this major tourist site.

We had dinner at Caru' cu bere, a restaurant originally opened in 1899 and operated by the founding family until the communist state nationalized it in 1949. When the Socialist Republic of Romania was overthrown in 1989, the heirs of the family began efforts to regain their ownership, and in 1999 it was returned to them. Romanian food involves a lot of meat, so I had to go off my strict vegan diet while here.



Templul Unirea Sfântă synagogue

We visited the Great Synagogue, which was raised in 1845 by the Polish-Jewish community in Bucharest. It was restored in 1945 after WWII, and now houses the Holocaust Memorial Museum. Then we went to the former Templul Unirea Sfântă synagogue, which survived World War II, and is now The Jewish Museum in Bucharest.

We also visited the State Jewish Theater, a theater specializing in Jewish-related plays. We spoke with its production manager and heard his passion for the operation for over an hour and a half.

Tuesday, August 27, 2024 - Bucharest

Today we had a walking tour in Bucharest's original Jewish section. We visited three synagogues, only one of which, the Choral Temple built between 1864 and 1866, is still active for the roughly 2,000 Jews that live in Bucharest. The leader of the congregation, if you can call it that since only a few people ever show up for prayer service, gave us a history of the building and community.



Choral Temple



Peles Palace

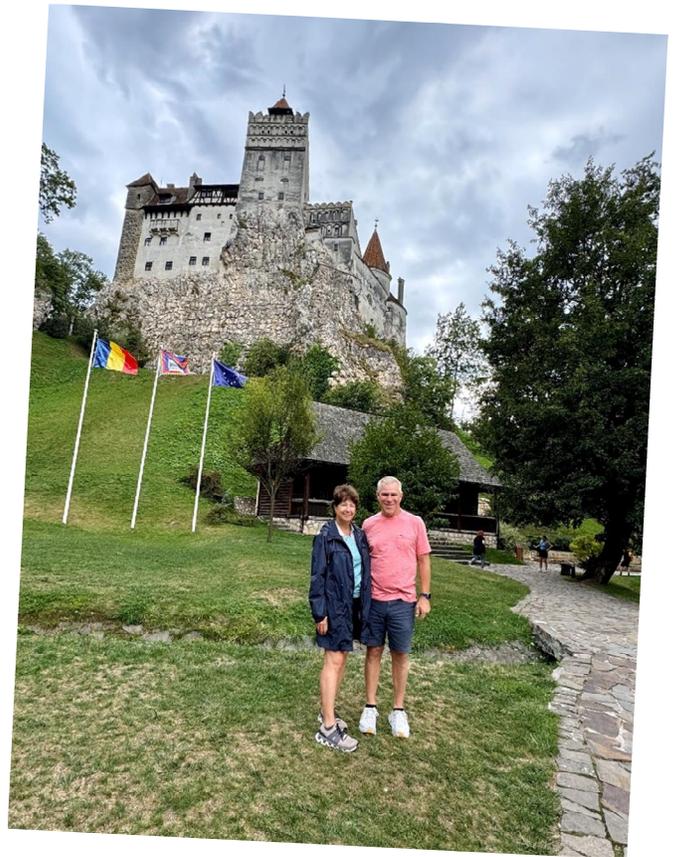
Mountains to Transylvania, a region merged into Romania after World War I. First, we visited Peles Palace, the former summer residence of the kings of Romania. Then to Braşov, known for its medieval Saxon walls and bastions, and the towering Gothic-style Black Church, named for the smoke damage from a fire at the end of the eighteenth century.

The last stop was Bran Castle, aka Dracula's Castle, which in reality has nothing to do with the fictional figure in Bram Stoker's novel "Dracula" or the breakfast cereal "Count Chocula." Nevertheless, it makes for great marketing as it is visited by every tourist that comes to Romania. It was built by the Saxons in 1377.

In the evening, we had a Food and Culture Tour. We didn't make the same mistake as our food tour in Krakow, so we showed up hungry. Nevertheless, we overate all sorts of Romanian food, including Sarmale, pouches of minced meat, rice and vegetables wrapped in sauerkraut leaves.

Wednesday, August 28, 2024 - Transylvania

We had a long day today. We were picked up at 7:30 am and didn't get back to our hotel until after 8:30 pm. We drove from Bucharest over the Carpathian



Thursday, August 29, 2024 - *Bran Castle*
Bucharest

Today we visited the Ceausescu Mansion, which served as the private residence of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu and their children from 1965 to 1989. Because it was protected during the Romanian revolution, it remains almost exactly as the family left it. The kitsch mansion features a golden bathroom and makes you wonder why the Romanian people didn't revolt earlier.



We leave Romania to fly home tomorrow. We enjoyed our time here learning about the country's unfortunate history but seeing the optimism in the people we met.



In concluding our trip, I've created the "Toilet Paper Economic Development Model." Simply stated, the economic development of a country is directly proportional to the quality of its toilet paper. Berlin had a soft tissue that was comfortable to wipe with, indicating a developed country with a strong economy. Poland's TP was a little rougher, but not uncomfortable, like a very fine sandpaper, indicating a developing economy well on its way to improvement. Romanian TP is like a medium/fine grit sandpaper, indicating an economy farther down the ladder, fighting its way up. When visiting countries at this level and below, wipe at your own risk. I commend using your own wipes rather than relying on the tissue provided.

Thanks for following along with us on our travels.

Lori and Stephen