

Polish Diary

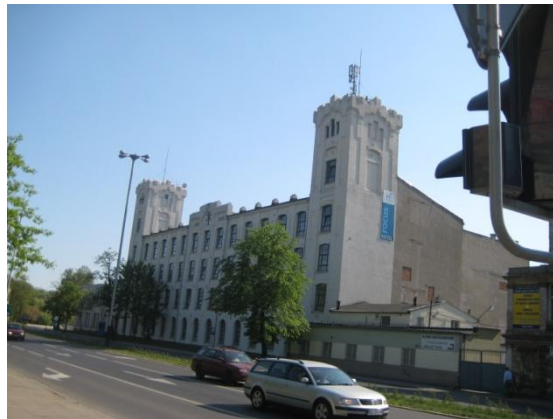
This is an account of a trip to Poland in May 2009 in which I visited the places my family came from, in order to learn about their backgrounds prior to their arrival in the UK

4 May 2009, 6.30am Lodz, Poland

I am sitting in bed writing this before we start the day's work of searching out my father's family and what happened to them here. Anna, my companion and translator is reading out how to get to the Jewish Cemetery (apparently the largest in Europe) and also the Jewish area and information office.

We arrived from Stansted, London, yesterday (Sunday) afternoon having had a fairly straightforward journey from Anna's flat in Stoke Newington (near Clissold Park). We walked to Manor House in the clear sunshine, leaving around 8am (saying goodbye to David) and caught a bus there to Tottenham Hale where we took the Stansted Express to the airport. Although arriving nearly 2½ hours before the flight, time passed quickly through reading newspapers, buying coffee and picking up items from Boots. I also bought a long cardigan.

Arrived in Lodz after an eventless 2 hour flight, mainly packed with Poles returning for the national holiday (on 3 May). We landed about 2.30 local time at a small regional airport, were processed through passport control fairly quickly and picked up our luggage and were out in the sunshine by 3 o'clock. We also caught a taxi quite quickly (fare: 25zl) and arrived at the hotel just after 3pm. Anna had been concerned that the quality of the hotel might not be that good (2 star) as it was a conversion of an old factory building. However, we found ourselves in a building with an elegant external appearance and Swedish-like plain and simple inside but well-designed and clean. Terrific!

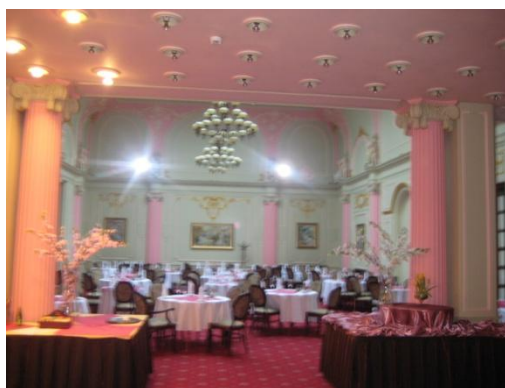


Hotel Focus, Lodz

We unpacked etc and then were out in the sunshine again to check out the town. In the area surrounding the hotel, it was very quiet (everything closed because of the National Holiday) but as we approached the main street in the centre Ulica Piotrkowska, there were more people, promenading in the sunshine and eating ice-cream and drinking coffee. Piotrkowska is, apparently, the longest main thoroughfare in Europe, about 3km long with mostly well-preserved early twentieth century art-nouveau house fronts.



Lodz Art-nouveau house frontage



Hotel Grand interior

Although the surrounding town seemed very run down, the central area was well preserved, with lots of cafés, shops and hotels. We went into the *Hotel Grand* which was a beautifully preserved and decorated art-nouveau building with what looked like its original features. It had outside, in the pavement, the names of the film artists and directors who had stayed there. Back at our hotel, we showered and had a surprisingly good meal. The hotel was fairly empty but had a few people dining alongside us.

We finished our meal about 9.30 and by 10 o'clock I had crashed out, exhausted. Tomorrow we are going to the Jewish Cemetery and main area – in the hope of tracking down evidence of my father's family.

Monday 4 May 2009, 2nd day in Lodz

Thankfully I slept well and was only woken up at around 6.30 by Anna opening the window. The day dawned sunny though not quite as warm as the day before. We went down to breakfast around 8am, after I'd written up my diary, and were out of the hotel by 9am.

First we took a tram to the Jewish Cemetery, apparently the largest in Europe. It was very impressive and the big field devoted to the people who died in the ghetto, was very moving.



Entry to Lodz Jewish Cemetery

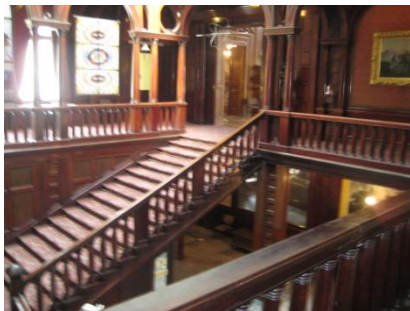


Field of graves of people who died in the ghetto

Also moving were the stone tablets commemorating the deaths of Jewish families on the walls of the cemetery. Very sad!

I bought a book on the Jews in Lodz – half way between a tourist and serious book. However, the cemetery was too big for me to try and find any members of my father's family and we were advised to go to the Jewish Community Centre on Ulica Pomorska (042 6335156, 9-3 weekdays). There I found some names that might be related to my father's family. I was also advised to contact the Lodz archives about finding out more about their origins. From the Jewish Community Centre, we went to a small coffee house and had coffee and ice-cream (for our lunch).

Following this, we went to see the Poznanski Palace, built by a wealthy textile industrialist, alongside his factory complex (now a developed retail park). The Palace is now a museum of Jewish artists, whose works are displayed against the original art-nouveau design of interiors and furniture.



Poznanski Palace interior



Poznanski Palace exterior

We had only about 30 minutes to visit the Palace which was due to close, so we then went to the retail park (another palace, this time to consumerism), had a drink and a rest in a bar, and then feeling weary, we took the tram back, and returned to the hotel. We have decided to 'eat in' tonight as we have an early departure – for the Ukraine, Lviv/Lvov and Brody tomorrow.



Lodz Retail park

Tuesday May 5th, 9.45 pm, on the Polish/Ukraine border

We are on the train at the Polish/Ukraine border just beyond Przemysl. We still have a couple of hours to go before we reach Lvov where we get off and check into our hotel. Tomorrow we hope to spend the day in Brody to see if I can find any information about the Dinger/Hirsch/Moscovitch side of the family.

Today has been mainly spent travelling. It has been much cloudier and cooler than previously but no rain – and most of our time spent on trains. We arose about 5am, and were ready to be picked up at

5.45 by a taxi in time to catch the 6.15 from Lodz to Krakow. We arrived around 11am, and had an early lunch in a local hotel near the station (barszcz and cod stuffed with mushrooms) before catching the sleeper train departing at 1.40 to take us across the border to Lvov in the Ukraine. The scenery throughout has been much the same – mainly birch trees, post-industrial outside Lodz, more rural after Krakow.

The journey is extraordinarily long, due to a delay of 2 hours near to the border to change the wheels of the train to a wider track size and also an adjustment of an hour as we cross the hour line going east. We are hoping to be in Lvov before midnight. At the border soldiers (from the Ukraine) have come on board and checked the details of our passports with their own records.

Thursday 7th May, 9.45 Polish time, at the Ukraine/Polish border

I am writing this as the train is having its wheels changed once more – to a narrower gauge – on our return *from* Ukraine to Poland. Although we were only in the Ukraine for around 30 hours, it was pretty momentous. We arrived in Lvov late on Tuesday evening – just before midnight – though right on time. After haggling with taxi-drivers – Anna claims we were fleeced but I was just grateful to get to the hotel in one piece in a strange country – we arrived at the hotel Dnister, about a mile from the station. and collapsed exhausted into our beds. The hotel is a modern block with a rather ‘grand’ feel to it, clean but with not very good plumbing/air quality. The view from the room on the 6th floor was fabulous – looking across a nearby park and the city.

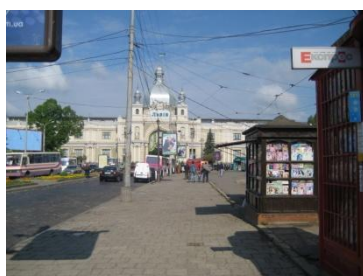


Hotel Dnister, Lvov



Park near hotel

We both had clonked out but were up and ready for breakfast by 8pm. A good spread – buffet with Russian/Poland tinge, e.g. pancakes and porridge – and then to the station to take the train to Brody where my mother’s family lived before they moved to Vienna. The morning was sparkling and the city of Lvov looked clean and pretty, though with lots of potholes in the road and unevenly tiled pavements. The railway station however was beautiful – very art nouveau and with a lovely station café.



Lvov railway station exterior



Lvov railway station interior

We were lucky that the train we wanted was due to go in 15 minutes, otherwise we'd have had to wait for a further 2 hours. We found the platform and got on the train. It was like going back many years – the train carriage was dirty and uncomfortable and the other travellers, a peculiar bunch of (old) women in headscarves, worn-out looking men drinking vodka, a seemingly old and very smelly babushka, and a non-ending parade of vendors and beggars including children.



Inside the carriage of the train to Brody

The train was a local one, and stopped at every small place along the way – sometimes a horse and cart were waiting to collect a passenger – and Anna saw a woman taking two goats for a walk etc. etc. The journey to Brody took two hours and we eventually drew into a rather modern looking station (again with a lovely art nouveau interior and candelabra). The sunshine had disappeared by now – just after midday – and we had only a few hours before we needed to catch the train back to Lvov. We decided to get a taxi to take us to the Jewish cemetery which had been mentioned in one of the guide books as worth seeing. Also I hoped that I might recognise a family name. However what we found – and I have the photos to back me up – is a field full of grave-stones all pointing in one direction, all with quite high and rectangular headstones looming out of the grass. We half expected the Stanley Spencer evocation of the graves opening and the dead awakening. It was eerie and I was quite glad to have someone with me.



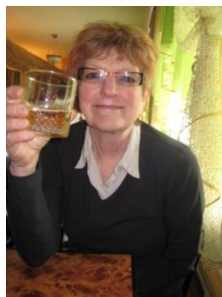
Jewish cemetery, Brody

Brody itself reminded me of the small Russian towns I'd visited in the early 2000s with its roads potholed, buildings neglected and not much evidence of modernity. Anna mentioned though that it seemed very clean i.e. no evidence of litter. The taxi waited while we were in the cemetery and then took us to the derelict synagogue destroyed by the Nazis along with the annihilation of the Jewish population of Brody. We reckoned that the area surrounding the synagogue was probably a Jewish enclave before the war but all the buildings nearby seemed to be modern, i.e. built post-war. Then we paid off the taxi and walked through the town in the direction of the station.



Large synagogue, Brody

By chance we found a café hidden behind a door in a block of shops, and stepped into another world - of Ukrainians lunching – in curtained booths for privacy or at long tables. All kinds of Ukrainian/Polish delicacies were provided – we had fish and potatoes and beetroots and tomatoes – washed down by beer and tea. Other diners, women included, were knocking back slugs of vodka. It was a wonderfully (echt/authentic) experience – and of course, cost very little.



Anna, Gaby and others in the Brody café

Then, we had to get to the station to meet our train; this time a much cleaner and more well-appointed carriage with, it seemed, a better 'class' of people. Perhaps, we speculated, it cost slightly more to travel on this train, but who knows? Back to the hotel at about 6pm, a quick wash and brush up and then out for a meal in town. Lvov was a bit of a surprise. It had some huge what seemed to be elaborate, public buildings – signifying perhaps that it was an important Polish administrative capital for the region, pre-War. We had a so-so meal at a down-town restaurant and were back in the hotel by 9 pm. This was because we were tired after the day's journey to Brody, and also because we needed to be up early to catch the train out of Lvov (departure 7.15am) and therefore needed to pack.

After a reasonable night's sleep, we were out of the hotel at 6.45 (with packed breakfast) and at the station well in time to catch the sleeper to Krakow. At present we are waiting for the wheels to be changed, to continue our journey to Krakow where we will be staying for several days. The story will be continued....

Friday 8th May, 7am, Krakow, Poland

I am writing this in bed in the Hotel Polski, a small but comfortable hotel by the old city wall in the centre of Krakow. Our train journey back yesterday was smooth, and though long, much more bearable than the journey out. First of all, it was sunny all the way and second, we did not have to travel an extra four hours (from Lodz to Krakow). Also we had a different 'eye' and therefore were able to 'see' more when looking out of the window; for example, the relative greater poverty of

Ukraine, horses and carts as transport, a person with a flag at every level crossing etc. On crossing the border (into Poland) the houses seemed more modern, and there were no horses and carts or people with flags at level crossings. Also noticeable in both countries was the importance of the railways, the many lines and many pieces of rolling stock, the impressive stations (such as Brody) even though the surrounding town/village may seem neglected and poor.



Brody station outside and in

We had the same steward for our sleeper carriage as on the way out, a rather dapper and well groomed man who had already asked us to take a box of Leggo (?) across the border from Poland to Ukraine (for his grandchildren so he said).



Ukrainian scene taken from train

In Krakow, we quickly found our hotel, dumped our bags and headed out to sit in the sunshine in a café in the big square Rynek Glowny, and then went back to the station to book our return journey from Krakow to Lodz on Saturday, in order to catch our flight out on Sunday. Because it is our birthday on Saturday and we want to have a birthday lunch in Krakow, we booked on a later train which goes first to Warsaw and then across to Lodz.



Hotel Polski, Krakow

Having picked up the tickets, we went back to the hotel to unpack and brush up, and then set out to have dinner. We decided on Jama Michalika, a café in Florianska Road which had been a meeting place for the Young Poland Art Movement at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries. It is a superb art nouveau preserved establishment, dark and luxurious looking – but not at all expensive. I had barszcz and bigos, an *echt* Polish stew of meat and cabbage and Anna had something similar, and together with 2 glasses of wine and a coffee each the bill came to 96 zlotys (app. £20) for both of us. Back to the hotel just round the corner, and to sleep quickly as we were tired from the exertions of the day. I feel now that this is the enjoyable part of the trip as opposed to the more gruelling earlier ‘work’ part. Anna knows Krakow quite well so I am hoping to see some interesting things.

Saturday 9th May, 7am, Krakow, Poland (our birthday)

I had a good night’s sleep and now, at last, it is my 65th birthday. I can’t believe I’m that old – but of course I’ve been around a long time and seen a lot of things. Yesterday was slightly different from the previous days – it was devoted to tourism, buying a present, and visiting friends of Anna. The main focus of the day was a visit to Kazimierz, an old Jewish town now part of Krakow, in the afternoon. We were taken there by some friends of Anna; Jolanta (a university professor in Krakow) her English-born husband Ryszard and their daughter Joanna. The day dawned bright and very warm, and after a leisurely breakfast, Anna and I set out to get a real sense of the city, to visit a few churches and sights of interest, to buy presents (including a pair of shoes for me and a necklace for Anna as presents to ourselves), and to sit in a cafe in the sunshine and enjoy the nice weather. We went over to Anna’s friends who live just off the main square at 12.30, had tea and a chat, and then went off with them to the Jewish quarter. The visit was mainly taken up with visiting a small synagogue (the only one presently in use) and its graveyard, and what was called the Large Synagogue, a reconstructed building and museum.



The small synagogue and graveyard, Krakow

There I purchased a couple of books, a Klesmer CD for David and a scroll with Yiddish lettering (bought for me by Joanna). We ate carp and gefilte fish in a nearby Jewish restaurant, before walking back to the city (we had taken a taxi out).



Restaurants in Kazimierz, Jewish quarter of Krakow

By this time, about 5pm, it was still hot, so Anna and I repaired to the hotel for a shower and change of clothes, and then we went back to Jola and Ryszard's home for 'supper' – cold meats, fish, salad, followed by cake and ice-cream, all washed down by gallons of tea.



**Anna, Jola and Joanna
and the spread for tea**



Joanna, Gaby and Jola

We were back home by around 10pm and I began to pack for our departure tomorrow. It seems as if I might need to buy an extra hand-baggage bag, due to the fact that I have bought so much stuff – including quite heavy books and a pair of shoes.

Sunday 10th May, 7am, Lodz, Poland (last day of trip)

We are now back in the Hotel Focus in Lodz from which we started the trip a week ago. The sun is shining now but Anna thinks it's going to be dull. We are due to get a flight out at 3pm so have the morning in Lodz. However, it's Sunday so not much will be open, Anna thinks. The hotel is full of poker players who have gathered here for the Polish Poker championship.

Yesterday (in Krakow) proved an enjoyable and leisurely day. It was quite dull early in the morning and even rained for a short while but by mid-morning the sun was shining and the day stayed sunny and clear from then on. We had to be out of our hotel by 11am, so we decided to pack after

breakfast and leave our luggage in the hotel. We went off early and wandered around Krakow, before having coffee in the centre. Then we went into St Mary's Church to see the marvellous Vit Stvoss altar. I took lots of pictures.



Vit Stvoss altar, St Mary's Church, Krakow

This was followed by a very leisurely lunch at a restaurant we had spotted previously called something like the Orient Express. It had an inner courtyard and promised simple Polish food – we had soup (goulash and beetroot respectively) and main meal (pierogi , i.e. Polish dumplings and fish with bacon and grits respectively) washed down by a bottle of semi-sweet (we couldn't get dry) Cava. Wonderful! My shout as a thank-you to Anna for doing the major planning for the trip!



Anna and Gaby on their birthday

Then we wandered back to the hotel, picked up our luggage and took a taxi to the station. We were also given a small present each by the hotel – a manicure set – because it was our birthday. Also, of course, we had many calls and texts from our loved ones at home wishing us a happy birthday. Our train journey to Lodz was in two parts; first an express train from Krakow to Warsaw and then a similar train from Warsaw to Lodz.

We left Krakow at 4.10pm and back in Hotel Focus by 9pm. We then crashed out pretty quickly, after a bowl of soup and cup of tea respectively; and so ended my 65th birthday.

Sunday 10th May, 10.45pm, London

I am writing this in bed at Anna's house in Stoke Newington, London. I have re-packed in preparation for my departure home tomorrow, while Anna is chatting to her son Joel who has dropped round for a short visit. The day passed as planned. After breakfast this morning (in Lodz), Anna and I checked out from the hotel but left our luggage which we picked up before catching the taxi to the airport.



Anna checking out baggage at hotel, Lodz, Poland

We decided to spend the morning – or at least from 11am-12 noon at a textile museum housed in a defunct textile factory. We walked to the museum in the sunshine (as we had some time to spare) having our last ice-cream in Poland en route. The museum proved fascinating – weaving machinery on the ground floor, crochet and modern textiles on the 1st, a children's exhibition on the 2nd, and some massive art works on the 3rd. However the real jewel was in a second building, beautifully converted into an exhibition centre where we found modern and traditional rugs of all patterns and hues. Truly stunning! By then we were quite late so we part walked and part took a taxi back to the hotel and thereon, to the airport.

The flight was fine, though we ate rather too much chocolate while waiting – I promise to revert to a stricter diet when I'm home! We arrived at Stansted at 4.30pm, and caught the train to Tottenham Hale and thereon, the Tube to Finsbury Park and the 106 bus to Anna's home. Unfortunately we were much delayed by crowds from an Arsenal football match. I popped out to get some provisions for supper, and then we relaxed and watched some TV before turning in.

I feel very tired now but pleased to be back in the UK and looking forward to getting home and seeing David tomorrow.

Monday 11th May, on train from King's Cross to Stirling, nearing Peterborough

I have finished my sandwiches and done the *Guardian* (quick) crossword and I'm only 35 minutes out of King's Cross. I thought that I should keep the diary going until I arrive home and also have some space to write because I have a double seat to myself until Peterborough. I slept very well last night, no doubt exhausted not only by the journey back yesterday but due to the general relief that our rather packed trip had gone so well. Anna came into the bedroom at around 7am with a cup of tea – what service – though I'd woken up around 6am and already had the radio on. Anna was on the phone, so I had a good shower, and washed and dried my hair – and breakfasted on porridge and toast and tea (plus a chocolate plum as a souvenir of Poland). I finished packing and managed to squeeze all I'd bought into my rucksack and wheelee suitcase (which I'd left at Anna's). I was out of the house, in the sunshine, by 10 o'clock, and had a leisurely walk up to Manor House and thereon by tube to King's Cross. I was quite early as the train departed at noon, but I needed to renew my senior railcard so wanted to reserve enough time to do that. Have now arrived at Peterborough so will stop.