



Wroclaw, a largely undiscovered gem of a city in southwestern Poland, defies comparison: there are not many places that may claim to have been, in just 400 years of history, part of five states (Poland, Bohemia, Austria, Prussia, Germany—and Poland again), Catholic, Protestant, and Catholic again. Today the country's fourth-largest and perhaps most vibrant city, it was devastated and burnt by Mongol invaders and also by its German "defenders" in WWII. As Stalin had all of Poland in its entirety "pushed westward" after annexing its eastern third, Wroclaw became the adoptive home to a large and distinguished set of émigrés from now Western-Ukrainian Lwów, the former Lemberg, capital of Austro-Hungarian Galicia. Its university, boasting nine Nobel laureates, returned to true form as one of the finest research institutions in Europe by the time I visited to retrace my roots and study in the footsteps of the Polish School of Logic.

Since Kraków's moniker as "the new Prague" came into being, Wroclaw is quickly becoming "the new Kraków." The city attempts to strike a balance between looking good and keeping it real. Its quality of inter-disciplinary, multi-ethnic, cosmo-European, moderately priced, not-quite-bohemian lifestyle is unrivaled due to excellent culinary, cultural and economic circumstances. It leaves ordinary behind in its relative lack of ballast and requirements of graded day-to-day attention to petty didactic detail. Method and timing of academic work are individual responsibilities, not bureaucratic exigencies. The astounding qualities of traditional local cooked-to-order bar food plonked on the table, based heavily on soups, mushrooms, smoked meat, and artisanal miracles created out of simple cabbage, create a blissful bias for the place after just days of orientation. Packed with medieval and delightful Baroque architecture, beer gardens, cafés and art, the city invited us to explore a world-wide unique subculture of quirky characters: its bronze dwarfs.

On the streets and pedestrian zones of downtown Wroclaw, countless little people lurk in its windows, sidewalks, public places; almost 200 of them have ventured above ground where they met their fate of being frozen in bronze and, certainly, in time. They are literally everywhere. Designed by artist Tomasz Moczek, starting in August 2005, a gang of one-foot dwarf statues seem to be leading a life parallel to that of the human population. They eat, sleep, make cash withdrawals at ATMs, walk, rest, climb lamp posts, read books, fight fires, ride bikes, serve jail time and go about their business otherwise, usually unnoticed by inattentive tourists.

These staues have become an inseparable part of Wroclaw's history. The city's 1980 Orange Alternative protest movement against martial law and Communist authoritarian government staged a peaceful protest that used absurd and nonsensical elements. Starting in 1982, graffiti of dwarfs sprang up everywhere. In their memory, the first "officially respectable dwarf" was commissioned in 2001 by the now democratic city government. I guess nobody figured in the demographics resulting from the rapid rate of procreation of these dwarves.

Having walked down the full length of Świdnicka Street, we found ourselves in the Main Square (Rynek). It is the second largest square in Poland after Kraków, but superior in its local hang-out charm, lack of ostentatious paraphernalia, and the way it hums with real personable Polish gaiety in the warm evenings from May to early October. There, in its center, rises the medieval Town Hall, perhaps the jewel in the crown of Wroclaw architecture. Of course, the dwarfs have their own town hall, a mirror image of the "real" one (but who can tell reality in this twilight of time and space?). This large cobble-stoned square is surrounded by meticulously restored colorful façades of Baroque merchant houses. Perhaps the most famous dwarfs are miniature Hansel and Gretel in the north-west corner. Another "landmark" is the midget Sisyphus, struggling to push a major granite ball just the proverbial inch down the road.

Struck by the sudden desire to survey the Main Square and a wider panorama of the city from above, we ascended the Gothic church towers of St. Mary Magdalene and St. Elizabeth's, although there are no lifts and the staircases are steep. But, as if in reward, they revealed Maria Konopnicka's truth: from up there, all human life seemed dwarfed and the difference between the bronzed and "real people" ceased to be significant.

Another point of interest along the "dwarf road" was the panorama of The Battle of Raclawice, the most important battle of the 1794 Kościuszko Uprising against the Russians. Yes, that Kościuszko. On the way down Kuźnicza Street in the north-east corner of the square, a right turn took us into Kotlarska Street and straight on until a big round building on the right. There, a peculiar gallery displays a single painting: its

walls are covered floor-to-ceiling with a giant canvas by Wojciech Kossak and Jan Styka, in a round shape making the observer feel as if in the middle of the “fog of war.”

Dwarves can be found also near the monument of heliocentric Nicolaus Copernicus, once canon and scholastic at the cathedral school of Wrocław, northwest of the bridge passing over the old city island’s moat.

I was greeted by a panoramic view of Ostrów Tumski Island and the magnificent Gothic Cathedral with its tall copper-clad spires, connected to the old town through a system of small and larger bridges. All of downtown is, for now at least, far from crowded, even at the height of summer, so a walk through Wrocław is unlikely to be spoiled by thronging masses. I let myself be soaked up by the sensuous atmosphere of the mysterious narrow streets, small churches and picturesque bridges. The area is at its best at dusk, when the gas street lamps are on.

Surprising dwarf sightings continued everywhere, particularly when I least expected it. Perhaps these literally sub-urban creatures could strike some as a little reminiscent of Zurich – someone has yet to clarify the difference between a dwarf and a gnome.

With their enormous appeal to young people attentive to their subtle message denouncing a humorless government as absurd, the Polish Solidarity movement gained some powerful support when, on June 1, 1988, known as the “Revolution of the Dwarves,” more than ten thousand people marched through the center of Wrocław wearing orange dwarf hats, distributed toilet paper to denounce the lack of elementary consumer products, and rendered large parts of public life essentially ungovernable in a non-ideological and softly anarchistic way. It is a city of paradoxical events, capable not just of travel back and forth in time, but also deep underground. riding little else than human, youthful, fairy tale imagination. What is reality, if not that which we can imagine?

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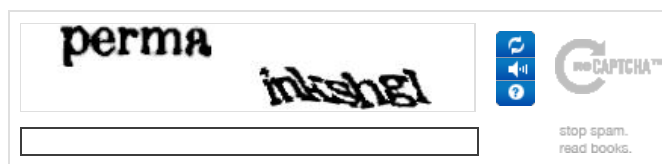
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