

Rupert Parker
*explores a city at the
crossroads of history—
and its brighter present*

As a young stamp collector, I was always puzzled by the ones labelled Danzig as it didn't seem to exist. I later learned that the city known today as Gdansk held that name for less than 20 years, one brief moment in a tumultuous history stretching back over a thousand years.

Exploring its picturesque oldest quarter, the tight network of medieval streets on the River Motława preserve the atmosphere of the Hanseatic settlement as it was at the end of the 18th century. Boats still ply the river, although carrying tourists rather than merchandise these days.

But it's impossible to visit without a sense of more recent history. Once part of West Prussia, Danzig became a free city in 1920 under the protection of the League of Nations until the first shots of the Second World War were fired here, when Hitler annexed the city, with its predominantly German-speaking population.

Bombarded by the Russians at the end of the war, the city reverted to Poland and was renamed Gdansk. Since then, there's been extensive reconstruction, some of which still continues, although the historic Main Town has been completely restored.

For those tracing its war-time history, around six miles downriver on the Baltic lies the peninsula of Westerplatte, where the German battleship Schleswig-Holstein opened fire on the Polish

garrison on September 1, 1939. The garrison managed to hold out for seven days, hoping for support from France and Great Britain which never came. Heavily outnumbered by 3,500 troops on the ground, they surrendered after a loss of 15 Polish lives. Today an imposing 25-metre monument commemorates the fallen,

while the area has been turned into a historical park, complete with burnt out ruins and bunkers.

At the same time, the large brick building of the Polish Post Office in Gdansk's old town came under attack. Some 50 armed postal workers were trapped inside, but after a 17-hour siege, the 34 who were still alive surrendered. Subsequently tortured and executed by firing squad, a stainless steel monument outside remembers their

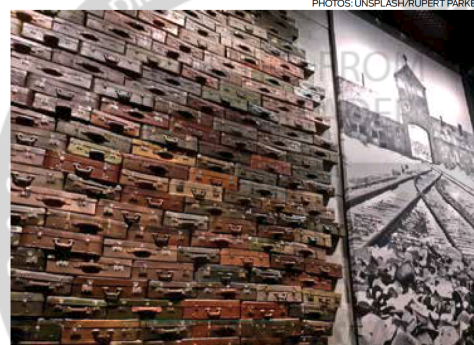
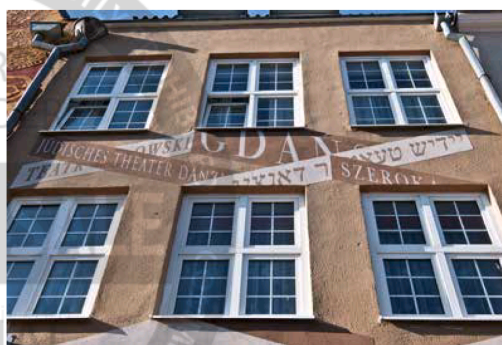


sacrifice with a small museum inside telling the story.

For an overview of events, the huge modern Museum of the Second World War, around 200 metres away, takes you through the history in chronological order. Opened in 2017, its jagged glass and terra-

cotta structure resembles a giant bomb hitting the earth with the main exhibition housed underground in cavernous themed spaces. Among two thousand objects on display, visitors can see American and Soviet tanks, and a wooden German railway car dis-





played in faithfully recreated locations. Particularly moving is a wall of stacked suitcases next to a huge image of the gates of Auschwitz.

These days Gdansk's Jewish community numbers around 100, with an excellent exhibition dedicated to the history of the city's Jews in the New Synagogue, built in 1927 in the district of Wrzeszcz. Damaged slightly during Kristallnacht, it survived the war before being used as a music school during communist times; services now continue once more in the small prayer room.

Historically, the Jewish community in this part of Poland was always relatively small; only after the city was annexed by Prussia in 1793 were Jews allowed to settle here. During the 19th century, the 1,000-strong community tripled in size culminating in the construction of the Great Synagogue, which opened in 1887. With its large dome and two towers, it was one of the city's most distinctive buildings.

By 1933, the community numbered around 10,000, with thousands of Jewish refugees from Russia and Poland passing through Danzig, attracted by the lack of visa restrictions — between 1920 and 1925 alone, some 60,000 are thought to have arrived, bound for the USA or Canada. But while the city's Jewish inhabitants were protected somewhat by its League of Nations status, conditions soon worsened when the Nazis were elected and by 1938, only around 5,000 remained.

Kristallnacht saw mass arrests and destruction of property, including synagogues — and while

the Great Synagogue survived, thanks to the efforts of a group of Jewish veterans, it was later sold to the Nazi authorities in 1939 to fund further emigration.

To encourage additional departures, the community was allowed to take some of its treasures with it — its archives are now in Jerusalem, art in New York, its library in Vilnius, organs in Krakow and candle-holders in Warsaw. Later that year, four Kindertransports managed to leave for the UK carrying 124 children but the city's remaining Jewish inhabitants, around 1,700 people, were deported to the Polish ghettos and on to camps including Theresienstadt.

A bronze monument to the Kindertransport — designed by architect and sculptor, Frank Meisler, himself one of the children saved — stands outside the railway station. The Great Synagogue itself was destroyed in May 1939: a bronze model now displayed where the entrance once stood, while its original footprint is picked out on the cobblestones.

The new Shakespeare Theatre has been built on the site, a nod to another part of the city's Jewish history — nearby is a house used as a Jewish theatre from 1900 to 1938, with a memorial plaque to Hillel Zweig inside, one of its top actors.

There are plans by the community to restore the Jewish Cemetery in the suburb of Chelm as well: one of the oldest in Poland and badly damaged after the Second World War, surviving grave-stones have inscriptions in Polish, German, Russian and Hebrew. A smaller cemetery in nearby Sopot, opened in 1913, is also the final

The pretty riverfront old town of Gdansk hides a darker history, recounted in the Museum of the Second World War (below & above right) and Polish Post Office (right), while the model of the Great Synagogue, Sopot Cemetery and Jewish Theatre (above, left to right) recall the city's Jewish heritage



resting place of many illustrious local Jewish families.

The city had another key role in history, heralding the collapse of communism when the Solidarity movement, led by Lech Walesa, closed the Lenin shipyard in 1980 with strikes which spread all over the country. Walesa, awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1983 and later elected president of Poland, still works inside the shipyard — not in the docks but in the mammoth European Solidarity Centre which opened in 2014. It tells the story of Solidarity and the other opposition movements of Communist Eastern Europe, with over two thousand exhibits including creative displays of film and photos.

On the outside, the museum is encased in rusted metal cladding, echoing the scale and size of the ships that used to be built here, with steel plates lining the corridors inside. A military truck parked in front of twisted barricades is a reminder of the struggles.

These days the shipyards themselves are quiet but the famous Gate #2 still stands, preserved exactly as it was in 1980, with a list of workers' demands chalked up on a piece of plywood. Next to it stands the Monument to the fallen Shipyard Workers 1970, an impressive 42-metre, 13-tonne steel sculpture commemorating the 42 workers who died in an earlier protest. Despite this heavy weight of his-

tory, Gdansk today has shrugged off much of its turbulent past for happier times, and the Main Town and the banks of the river are crammed with bars and restaurants.

The pedestrianised Long Market, the main thoroughfare of the city lined with colourful pastel buildings, bustles with tourists and locals alike — stroll from the Golden Gate at one end, a reconstruction of the 17th century original, to the Motława river early in the morning to avoid the crowds and soak it all in.

Half-way along, the 14th century Town Hall has also been painstakingly reconstructed to house the city's history museum, with great views from its 83-metre high tower, while an imposing 15th century crane still looms above the river on the waterfront.

With street art to be found in some of the lanes of the old town, decorative gargoyles along Mariacka Street, and a string of tempting cafes and shops around every corner, this vibrant side of the city is far removed from the darker chapters of its history.

So if, like me, you had a vision of a grey industrial city informed by TV news reports from the 1980s, it's time to discover Gdansk first hand. I couldn't have been more wrong.

GETTING THERE

Flights to Gdansk cost from around £25 from Stansted, Luton, Birmingham and Newcastle with Wizz Air and Ryanair. For more information about Gdansk, go to visitgdansk.com and poland.travel

