

BY LIZ GILL

There's much more to Gdansk than Solidarity

MENTION Gdansk to most people and what springs to mind is Solidarity, the trade union movement which became a fight for freedom and a trigger for the sequence of events that eventually led to the downfall of communism.

So an important place, historically and politically, but perhaps not a first choice as a tourist destination.

That image had led me to expect an unexceptional industrial landscape with not much going on.

What I found was a simply lovely small city full of beautiful buildings, bursting with art and culture, packed with bars and cafes and restaurant; buzzing, bustling and, a big attraction, very walkable.

The Old Town is where Gdansk began around a thousand years ago but the Main City as it is known is where it reached its Golden Age in the 16th to 18th centuries and which is now the main attraction.

You can start with a stroll along the lively waterfront of the Motława, the river which connects Poland to the Baltic and made Gdansk its biggest port, and look up at the giant wooden crane, the largest in the Mediaeval world and a reminder of the wealth created by the trade in grain and timber.

Go in through the arch of the Green Gate and cross the Dług Targ or Long Market, the heart of the city, lined with grand, lavishly decorated and multi coloured houses and places of business and administration.

The splendid Fountain of Neptune, god of the sea and enduring symbol of the city, is in the centre and the town hall with its 80m high carillon tower is at the end.

Ninety per cent of Gdansk was destroyed during the Second World War, primarily by the Russians in 1945 so what you see are reproductions or re-imaginings done with remarkable speed at the end of the war and completed by 1951.

The key was free labour. Under Communist rule everyone had to

Executioner's daughter forced to behead the prisoner she fell in love with

do 'social works' on top of their day jobs; our guide Alex says his parents remember finishing school and then going to carry bricks on building sites.

Further walking will take you past the Great Armoury, the merchants guild Artus Court, the Golden Gate, the Upland Gate and the Executioners House and old prison.

Alex points to a headless statue high on its wall and tells us the story, probably, he says, an urban myth, of the executioner's daughter who fell in love with a prisoner and helped him escape, bringing disgrace and a death sentence on her father.

With no other executioner around she had to behead him herself.

We did not have time to climb the 408 steps of St Mary's Basilica, instead making our way back down the adjoining Mariacka street with its cobbled stones, complete row of terraces with gar-goyled porches where women who weren't allowed out of the house unescorted could sit and watch the



MIRROR IMAGE: The city of Gdansk is reflected in the Motława River

world go by, and a cluster of shops and stalls selling amber, the famous 'Baltic gold'.

Later, we learn more about this 40 million-year-old fossilised conifer resin in the Amber Museum with high tech displays on its chemistry, history and importance in commerce.

So in demand was it that the 'amber route' ran from the Baltic to Rome. Not only was it a highly prized material for artefacts and jewellery but it was also used medicinally.

As recently as the 20th century cigarette holders were made from it in the belief it counteracted some of the toxins in tobacco.

After much drooling and earlier guidance from Alex about only buying from guaranteed suppliers I settle on a pair of earrings as a sweet souvenir of the visit.

The history of Gdansk or Danzig as it's also been known, is immensely complex, even by East European standards. It has been ruled over by Teutonic Knights, Prussians, Germans, Polish kings, a Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and latterly, until the free election of 1989, by Soviet-backed Communists.

It has also had periods of autonomy as a free city state. And intertwined with these eras has been its Jewish population.

Originally banned, separated or restricted, it was then welcomed by the Prussians and subsequently rose to be key contributors to the city's commercial, artistic, scientific and political life.

At its peak the community numbered around 10,000, with Jewish families providing doctors, lawyers, architects. There was a Jewish theatre and numerous publications in Yiddish, German, Russian and Polish.

The monumental Great Synagogue was opened in 1887 in a ceremony attended by civic dignitaries, military officers and church representatives.

Little more than half a century later the Nazis forced its sale and it was pulled down in May, 1939.

By then the majority of Gdansk's Jews had left, including more than 100 on three Kindertransports to Britain.

By 1941, there were only 600 in the community and most perished in the Holocaust. At the end of the war there were only 22 Jewish survivors.

Nothing of the Great Synagogue remains but there is a fine bronze maquette with inscriptions in Hebrew, German and English outside the new Shakespeare Theatre which now stands on the site and a line delineating its footprint.

The theatre, a £18m project with Prince Charles as its patron is worth a visit. Its controversial black brick bulk houses an elegant birch and white marble interior, a stage that can be configured in three ways and a retractable roof that opens in three minutes.

The only synagogue in Gdansk now is the 1927 Orthodox congregation in the district of Wrzeszcz where we meet its chairman

Michel Samet.

The synagogue exists, he says, not just for worship — there are currently around 100 members — but to welcome visitors and tell the story of the city's Jews.

For this, there is a permanent exhibition which, although only one room in size, covers an immense amount, not just in words, English as well as Polish, but through photographs, documents, letters, religious objects and everyday ones, thus telling not just the milestones but the ordinary life of the community.

In the foyer is a large photograph of Pawel Adamowicz, the mayor who was assassinated in 2019, a great friend to the community, says Michel.

In the evening we go to the Jewish cemetery in the Chelm area which was restored with funds from groups in London and New York.

There has been no burial there since the early 20th century and many of the headstones are illegible but it is a serene spot covered in wild flowers, guarded by huge

trees and full of birdsong.

On the railings hangs a notice: "May the Almighty bless all those who participate in the holy task of restoring and preserving the final resting place of ancestors."

The cemetery in Sopot, the sea-side resort, half an hour's drive away, is a sadder affair: the land is protected legally but uncared for.

The town itself though, where many Jewish merchants built holiday homes, is an appealing place with wide sandy beaches, a 511m wooden pier, the longest in Europe and a grand hotel which in the 20s had a casino to rival Monte Carlo's.

One wall is covered in pictures of the politicians and celebrities who have stayed there with one noticeable gap: Putin's has been removed.

The main street is called Monte Cassino after the crucial Second World War battle in which the Free Polish Forces played a major part. There is a much closer reminder of the war though in Westerplatte on the edge of Gdansk where at 4.47 in the morning of September 1, 1939 the German battleship the *Schleswig-Holstein* opened fire on the garrison there and officially started the war.

Back in the city we visit the Museum of WW II, a powerful and sometimes harrowing account of the conflict. It is divided into three sections, the build up, the war itself and the consequences: each of which could easily take up an hour to explore.

Wall is covered with pictures of celebrities with one gap – Putin's has been removed

In between all these places of interest, we have relaxed with delicious food and drink including such dishes as halibut with asparagus, cold soups, various kinds of herring, traditional dumplings given a modern twist with different fillings and excellent local beer.

We end our visit, perhaps fittingly, at the shipyards of Solidarity, still the word associated internationally with the city of Gdansk.

Gate No 2 on which the 21 demands for freedom were hung and through which Lech Walesa was carried in triumph are still there but behind them these days is a massive rust coloured building its shape echoing that of a ship under construction.

This is the European Solidarity Centre which tells the story that changed the world.

It is strongly told and moving and at the end you are invited to write a message on a red or white card to hang on the wall which spells out on a white background the red name of Solidarnosc.



BEAUTY AND THE EAST: Gdansk Old Town's beautiful and colourful buildings

■ There are regular direct flights to Gdansk from Manchester

■ More information at visitgdansk.com