

Bayard Taylor
A Glance at Warsaw, 1859

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Before leaving Cracow, we visited the monument to Kosciusko, which is about a mile and a half from the city. It is a simple mound of earth, thrown together by the Poles, in memory of the hero of two hemispheres. They are proud of the renown of Sobieski, but they treasure the name of Kosciusko within their heart of hearts. Probably no man was ever before honored with such a monument. It was not raised by subscription and hired labor, but by the spontaneous work of thousands of hands. Old and young, male and female, the noble and the peasant, carried their loads of earth, until the mound arose to be a beacon to the little Free State of Cracow—so long as that Free State existed. The account of its erection is truly touching, and one cannot look upon it without hoping that it may last to tell the story to distant ages and nations yet unformed.

When the Austrian Government determined to fortify Cracow, the commanding position which this mound occupies could not be overlooked. It is now completely inclosed within a glaring new fortification of brick and earth, which overlooks the valley and the course of the Vistula for many a league. In the very centre of the fort rises the singular tumulus, high overtopping its bastioned walls. A great circular buttress of brick, twenty feet high, has been built around its base and the earth filled in, so that the mound is really strengthened, although it loses much of its picturesqueness by this environment. Its original height must have been about 120 feet, with a base of from 200 to 250 feet in diameter. It is conical and very steep, with a double path encircling it to the top. A number of workmen were employed in smoothing its rough, neglected surface, and coating it with, an even garment of thick garment of turf. This looked like a perilous work, as the least slip would in many places have precipitated them headlong from twenty to thirty feet below. They were only supported on the edges of the turf itself or on small pins driven into the earth.

The panoramic view from the summit is exceedingly beautiful. Cracow lay before us, buried in blooming groves; the Vistula flashed and glittered in many a curve through the green meadows; gently-swelling hills, in the north, melted away into the plains of Poland, while in the south the successive ridges rose higher and higher, dark with forests, until the misty Carpathians crowned them all. Below us was the place of Lobkow, where dwelt Esther, the beautiful Jewess, beloved by Casimir the Great. This love, guilty though it was, procured a home in Poland for the oppressed race, and since that time the country has been their second Judea. In other respects, however, their condution has not improved, for a more vile and filthy race (except the Chinese) cannot disgust the traveller. Thousands of soldiers were skirmishing on the green meadows of the Vistula, and the stream was filled with whole companies of them, bathing.

Cracow is now connected with Warsaw, by railroad, but it was necessary to retrace our way as far as Szczakowa, on the borders of the Little Sahara. After waiting a long hour at this place, we got into another train and in ten minutes crossed the little river Przemsa, the frontier of Russian Poland. On the opposite bank is the station of Granitza, where one is subjected to a detention of three hours, in order that the necessary formalities on entering Russia may be complied with. We first gave up our passports, which were duly examined and visèd, and then

attended to our baggage. The examination was not particularly strict, except that the officer tore up and threw away every particle of newspaper in which anything was wrapped. Our books were also laid aside, and all, with the exception of a German guide-book, retained. We received a receipt for them, and were told that we should hear of them again at the Censor's office in Moscow. They consisted of the History of Cracow, a volume of Household Worlds, Kohl's St. Petersburg, and Henry Carey's Letters to President Buchanan. Murray and a German work I was reading were stowed away in our pockets, and escaped. Although Polish is exclusively spoken at this place, the official understood German, and we found them courteous and obliging. No questions whatever were asked.

The country is one unvarying level from the frontier to Warsaw, a distance of two hundred miles. At first you pass through a region of sand and pine wood, the very counterpart of New Jersey or North Carolina; then broad plains, partially cultivated; then pasture steppes, pinewood, and cultivation again. The villages are scattering clusters of thatched cottages resembling Irish cabins, except that they are neatly whitewashed and have a more tidy appearance. This is rather in contrast to the people, who are very dirty. The common, coarse Slavonic type is here universal—low, square forehead, heavy brows, prominent cheekbones, flattish nose, with broad nostrils and full lips. With the addition of a projecting mouth, many of the faces would be completely Irish. The refined Slavonic face, as one sees it among the Polish gentry, is nevertheless very handsome. The forehead becomes high and arched, the nose straight and regular, and the face shows an approach to the classic oval. This is even more striking in the female than in the male countenance. At Granitza we were charmed by a vision of perfect loveliness, which shone on us from time to time, from the upper window of an adjoining mansion. It was a woman of twenty-two, of ripe and yet tender beauty features exquisitely regular, complexion like a blush rose, large, soft eyes, rather violet than blue, and a rippling crown of magnificent hair, "brown in the shadow and gold in the sun." I confess to watching this beautiful creature for half an hour; through the window blinds. The face of Kosciusko is pure Slavonic, of the peasant type, as is also that of Copernicus, if the portraits of him are correct.

The only place of any interest which we passed was Czenstochan, celebrated for a miracle-working image of the Madonna. It is a pretty little town, partly built upon a hill which is at least fifty feet high. The station-houses on the road are similar to those in Germany, except that in the refreshment-room one sees, instead of multitudinous *seidls* of beer, the Russian *samovar*, and tumblers of hot tea, in which float slices of lemon. There are long delays at each station, which make the journey tedious, notwithstanding the speed of the trains, when in motion, is very good. Several thunder-storms passed over us, cooling the air and laying the frightful dust; night came on, and it was past midnight before we reached Warsaw. We were like a couple of lost sheep in the crowd, all of whom were hurrying to get to their beds, for the only language heard was Polish, and the officials shook their heads when I addressed them, in French or German. Finally, by imitating the majority, we got rid of our passports, had our trunks examined again, and reached the Hotel d'Europe before daybreak.

The forenoon was devoted to preparations for our further journey. Fortunately, the diligence which was to leave for Moscow the next evening was vacant, and we at once engaged places. The passport was a more serious affair, as our own would avail us no further, but we must take out Russian ones instead. The Jew valet-de-place whispered to me, as we entered the office: "Speak French." The Poles hate the Germans much worse than they do their Russian conquerors, and although many of them understand the language, it is considered that of business,

while French is the fashionable tongue. The officer asked a few questions—what was our object in coming to Russia—whether we had any acquaintances in the country—whether we had ever been there before—whether we were engaged in any business, etc, and then sent us with a checked certificate into another room, where the same questions were repeated and a document made out, which we were requested to sign. Our conductor slipped a ruble note between the two papers, and handed them to a third official, who adroitly removed the bribe and completed the necessary forms. These were up to the Governor of Warsaw, praying him to grant us passports to Moscow. On calling at Governor's office, a secretary informed us that they would be ready the next day, but added, as we were leaving: "You had better pay for them now." Hereupon the valet handed over the money adding a ruble above the proper amount, and then observed to me: "Now you are sure of getting them in time." True enough, they were furnished at the appointed hour. The entire outlay about four rubles.

It was a sweltering day, the thermometer 90° in the shade, and we could do nothing more than lounge, through some of the principal streets. Warsaw is indeed a spacious, stately city, but I had heard it overpraised, and was a little disappointed; It resembles Berlin more than any other European capital, but is less monotonously laid out, and more gay and animated in its aspects. At the time of my visit (June 14th), owing to the annual races, there was a large influx of visitors from the country, and the streets were thronged with a motley multitude. The numerous public squares—fifteen in all, I think—picturesquely irregular, form an agreeable feature of the city. The palaces of the Polish nobles, massive and desolate, remind one of Florence, but without the Palladian grace of the latter. But few of them are inhabited by the original families. Some of them appropriated to civil and military uses, and in one of them I resided during my stay. The churches of St. John and the Holy Cross, and the Lutheran church, are rather large and lofty than imposing, but rise finely above the level of buildings, and furnish landmarks to the city. Decidedly the most impressive picture in Warsaw is that from the edge of the river bank, where the Zamek—the ancient citadel and palace of the Polish kings—rises with its towers and long walls on your left, while under you lies the older part of the city, with its narrow streets and ancient houses, crowded between the Vistula and the foot of the hill.

In the afternoon we took an omnibus to the race-course, which is about two miles distant. The whole city was wending thither, and there could not have been less than forty or fifty thousand persons on the ground. It was a thoroughly Polish crowd, there being but few Russians or Germans present. Peasants from the country, with sunbrowned faces, and long, light hair, with round Chinese caps and petticoat trowsers; mechanics and petty tradesmen of either honestly coarse or, shabby-genteel appearance; Jews, with long greased locks hanging from their temples, lank, unctuous, and far-smelling figures; Cossacks, with their long lances, heavy caps of black sheepskin, and breasts covered with cartridge pockets; prosperous burghers, sleek and proper, and, straight as the figure-columns in their ledgers; noblemen, poor and with a melancholy air of fallen greatness, or rich and flaunting in careless freedom of secured position. Besides, there were itinerant peddlers, by the hundreds, selling oranges, sweet meats, cigars done up in sealed packages, which offered an agreeable hazard in buying them, beer, and even water, large stone jugs. The crowd formed a compact inclosure nearly around the whole course of two miles. Outside of it extended a wide belt of carriages, hacks, omnibuses, and rough country carts, and as the soil was six inches deep in fine dust, the continual arrivals of vehicles raised such clouds that at times a man could scarcely see his nearest neighbor.

We held out with difficulty long enough to see the first race, which was to have taken place at five, but, with oriental punctuality, commenced at half-past six. The horses, although of mixed English blood, fell considerably below the English standard. There were eight in all, but the race was not exciting, as a fine bay animal, ridden by an English jockey, took the lead at the start, and kept it to the end. During the second heat a Polish jockey was thrown from his horse breaking his neck instantly. What more interested me than the speed of the horses, was the beauty of the Polish women of the better class. During two years in Europe, I did not see so great a number of handsome faces, as I there saw in an hour. It would be difficult to furnish a larger proportion from the acknowledged loveliness of Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Louisville. These maids of Warsaw are not only radiant blondes, whose eyes and hair remind you of corn flowers among ripe grain, but also dark-eyed beauties, with faces of a full Southern oval, lips round and delicate as those of an Amorette, and pure golden transparency of completion. The connoisseur of woman's beauty can nowhere better compare these two rival styles, nor have so great a difficulty in deciding between them.

We made our way back to the city in a blinding cloud of dust, between a double row of clamorous beggars. They were wonderfully picturesque creatures, where some repulsive deformity was not exposed. There were the hoary heads of saints, which seemed to have come direct from Italian canvas, sun boys from Murillo, and skinny hags drawn by the hand of Michael Angelo. Over, the noiseless bed of dust rushed the country carts filled with peasants drunk enough to be jolly, the funny little horses going in a frolicsome, irregular gallop, as if they too had taken a drop too much. Now and then some overladen pedestrian, beating a zigzag course against the gale, would fall and disappear in a cloud, like a bursting shell. I saw but one specimen of the picturesque Polish costume—a servant girl in red petticoat and boots, and the trim jacket we all know in the Cracovienne. The poorer women, generally, were shabby and slovenly imitations of the rich.

Wandering along the streets, with throats full of dust; were attracted to the sign of "Piwo Bawarski" (Bavarian beer). Entering a court littered with the refuse of the kitchen, we discovered a sort of German restaurant, of suspicious cleanliness. The proprietor who served us an insipid beverage—a slander on the admirable brewage of Munich—soon learned that we were strangers. "But how did you happen to find my place" he asked. "All the other beer-saloons in the city are dirty, low places: mine is the only noble establishment." He was very desirous of importing a negro girl from America, for a barmaid. "I should have all the nobility of the city here," said he. "She would be a great curiosity. There is that woman Pastrana, with the hair all over her face—she has made a great fortune, they say. There are not many of the kind and I could not afford it, but if I could get one black, with a woolly head; I should make more money in a day than I now do in a month." He wished to engage me to send him such an attraction, but I respectfully declined.

At this place we fell in with a Polish pianist, a virtuoso in pictures and old furniture. He took us to his room, a charming artistic and antiquarian den. Among other things a few undoubted originals—a small Rembrandt, a Gerard Dow, a very fine Matsys, two Bourguignons, and a landscape which appeared to be an early work of Claude. He wanted to sell these, of course at a good price, and likewise commissioned me to furnish him with a purchaser in America. The man fondled his treasures with a genuine attachment and delight, and I am sure that nothing but necessity induced him to part with them.

I wanted to visit Villanow, the residence of John Sobieski. Do you remember the passage in dear old Miss Porter's "Thaddeus of Warsaw," where the hero contemplates the moon? "How often have I walked with my departed mother upon the ramparts of Villanow, and gazed upon that resplendent orb. "Vilianow!" exclaimed the Countess; "surely that is the residence of Sobieski, and you must be his heroic grandson, Thaddeus Sobieski!" "—or something quite like it. But the lying Jew valet declared that it was a journey of eight hours, and I have discovered, when too late, that it might be accomplished in three. The pianist, however, accompanied us to Lazinski, the park and palace of Stanislaus Augustus, on the banks of the Vistula. The building stands in the midst of an artificial lake, which is inclosed in a framework of forests. The white statues which stud the banks gleam in strong relief against the dark green background. "There is nothing so beautiful as this in existence," proudly asserted the pianist, "and yet I see the place is deserted. There is no taste in Warsaw; nobody comes here." In the palace there is a picture gallery; all copies, with the exception of portraits of Stanislaus Augustus, the nobles of his court, and his many mistresses. As we descended the steps, we met the son of Kotzebue, the dramatist. He is now an officer (a General, I believe) in the Russian service, more than sixty years old, and of a very ill-favored physiognomy.

So far as I may judge (and my opportunities, I must confess were slight), the Poles are gradually acquiescing in the rule of Russia. The course pursued by the present Emperor has already given him much popularity among them, and the plan of the regeneration of Poland is indefinitely postponed. Those with whom I conversed admit, if reluctantly, in some instances, that Alexander I has made many changes for the better. "The best thing he has done for us," said an intelligent Pole, "is the abolition of espionage. Warsaw is now full of former spies, whose business is at an end, and it must be confessed that they are no longer necessary" The feeling of nationality survives, however, long after a nation is dead and The Jews in Poland call themselves Jews, and the Poles in Russia will call themselves Poles, centuries hence.