

Travel Notes:
Gdańsk

by Rodo

Day 1: *Sunday, 28th of July 2024*

All is well...

SOMETIMES, YOU'VE GOT to eat your own words. About eighteen years ago, I last wrote a travelogue. At the time, I was quite incensed by the – as I felt – abysmal quality of Italian train travel. I have since learned just how much worse things can get. So naturally, I was quite apprehensive when I decided to travel to Gdańsk by train for my three-day trip – but since it was manageable to do so within a day, I thought booking a flight might be a bit over the top and bad for the environment. Plus, all the buses took longer, so I decided to chance it.

To get why I was worried, you've got to understand that German train travel has changed a lot in the last handful of decades. The long and short of it is this: privatisation is bad for things that should be a public good. Infrastructure decays. Trains need people to run. At this point, I'd been commuting via train for a year and a half, and the things I'd witnessed... let's just say that when I left on the morning of the 28th, I was prepared for the worst.

So naturally, this was one of the ten times a year when the regional train I took five times a week was punctual, which did not lull me into a false sense of security. (I knew better than that.) It did, however, leave me enough time to buy something to eat at the station in Bremen and have a small breakfast before lazily making my way to the platform. Once there I was promptly informed that the train I was waiting for would be a couple of minutes late. Keep in mind that for the entire rest of the trip there would be only about fifteen minutes to get from one train to the next, on average. This time I had a little more time, so I wasn't too worried... yet.

The train to Hanover arrived ten minutes late. Once on the train, the passengers were informed that due to a technical defect, the train would not be going to Berlin – as planned – but instead to Dortmund, where it would be repaired. A collective sigh went through all the passengers when they heard that. I wouldn't be the only one who would have to board a different train in Hanover, it seemed. Then, while still on the train, I

received an email that the train from Hanover to Berlin would be a little late as well, so there was no chance of me missing it.

That was before the extra delays to come, of course. I made some new friends on the platform in Hanover while we were all griping about the terrible German train system. Nothing fosters a sense of camaraderie quite like suffering at the whims of failing German infrastructure. Calls were made to inform people about changed plans, some people ate a small snack, and I kept checking my DB app to keep track of the delays and ever-changing reasons thereof. In the end, the train to Berlin arrived 35 minutes late (a combination of the following: construction, a faulty track switch, and a police operation). There was no way in hell I would be arriving in time to catch my bus. Neither would the woman who sat across the aisle one row behind me, who was travelling to Poland to visit family, along with her chatty and cute young son and the best-behaved small dog I have ever met. I spent the better part of this leg of the journey working on a poem, which I love to do on trains – lots of idle brain time and the landscape rushing by tends to inspire me.

A bus, you might be wondering? Yes, I had booked trains. So had the other woman. No, we didn't know why we were supposed to take a bus from Berlin Hauptbahnhof to Frankfurt (Oder). Trains run from the former to the latter as well. All the other travellers were as baffled by the mighty DB Route Planner's decision as we were, especially the ones who had travelled in that direction before. However, you do not argue with the DB Route Planner, one of the few parts of the German railway system that works. At that time, it told us that we would have to stay in the ICE until Berlin Ostbahnhof and board an S-Bahn to a place called Erkner that I had never heard of before. When the time came and we arrived at the station, I, an older woman, and the woman travelling to Poland all hastily scrambled off the platform and then up to the next one, into the S-Bahn, which looked incredibly grungy and elderly, but at least it was on time. It arrived in Erkner on time too, but since there was hardly any time to board the next train, we needed to run. Again. Luggage, child, tiny dog and all.

The next leg of the journey was a regional train to Frankfurt (Oder), where I would be able to make my train – if all went well. Which I was very keen on, considering it was one of those trains that you needed a reservation for. You couldn't just catch the next one, not that I even knew which one that was. In Poland, there would be no DB Route Planner to tell me which one to take, and the language barrier would make things twice as hard.

As you might expect at this point, the regional train arrived at its destination late as well, but not too late. I got to my train in time, and so did the older woman from the ICE, who had reserved the seat opposite mine, and who was headed to Gdańsk as well – her

family was already there on holiday, and she was supposed to join them. At that point, I was pretty happy. I was on the right train, it would take me to Gdańsk Główny and I no longer cared if it was late. What's a couple of minutes (or hours) when you don't have a connecting train to worry about?

The next couple of hours were... not as good as I had hoped during my initial relief when boarding the train. The two women who had boarded with us talked incessantly when all I wanted was some peace and quiet. The windows were leaking a bit when it rained and I watched the droplets run down the wall. Then there was another thirty-minute delay in Gniezno – due to another police operation. Two other women had joined us as well at some point, so the compartment was at full capacity. That meant we all had to twist ourselves into uncomfortable shapes because while the seats had been designed with people with butts in mind (which might sound like a given but isn't on public transport), the compartment most certainly wasn't designed for people with legs – which all six of us were in possession of.

In the end, the train could not catch up on the delay, even if it had managed to arrive early in Świebodzin beforehand. When I finally arrived, it was past seven o'clock and I'd been on the road, so to speak, for twelve hours. The uncomfortable seats and stress had made my shoulder and neck muscles tense up and all that I wanted was to sleep, so I said goodbye to my fellow traveller from Germany and set out to find my hotel.

At first, I was a bit lost. The underground passageways below the main station in Gdańsk and my tiredness weren't very conducive to orienting myself. I consulted the map from the guidebook that I'd bought, but it wasn't much help either. After a couple of minutes of indecision, I went with my gut. I ended up on a wide street opposite the bus terminal, looking for a sign with a street name that might help me find my way. Instead, I spotted the logo of the hotel far in the distance and was immensely relieved. On my way to the hotel I didn't pay much attention to my surroundings, only vaguely wondering what I was missing as I walked past a blocked-off road guarded by a policewoman. I was just happy that I had finally arrived.

After a couple of confusing interactions with the woman manning the front desk (her English was very fast and accented, there was loud music in the lobby, and my head was throbbing), I trudged up to my room, texted my mother to tell her that I'd arrived safely and more or less fell into bed, hoping that sleep would set me right and that all would be better the next day.

Day 2: *Monday, 29th of July 2024*

Getting Started

ALL WAS NOT better the next day. Shortly after midnight, I still wasn't asleep, and I was in so much pain I was about to walk downstairs and ask for a doctor. It was one of the worst headaches I ever had in my entire life. As a last resort, I took an ibuprofen (with extra caffeine) for the pain and laid back down. And miraculously, I fell asleep.

The next morning, the pain was almost gone, but I still felt sick, tired and exhausted. I had a stuffy nose as well, which meant I was struggling with my allergies on top of the headache and stiff muscles. I wasn't sure whether I was going to be able to do much of anything when I got up. I just had one last hope: breakfast. To be more precise: coffee. I schlepped myself downstairs, asked where the buffet was and got myself a large coffee with it. And then another, for good measure. Half an hour later, as if by magic, I felt like a human being again, and I was able to head out after all. I had three things on my itinerary for the day: get zloty, get my bearings, and acquire some postcards to send back home. I left the hotel around 9 o'clock.

First, I walked back towards the station, looking for either an ATM or a Kantor – a place for exchanging money. I passed by the cosmetic surgery clinic, then the other hotel, and then I reached a bank with an ATM where I withdrew two hundred zloty. The Kantor across the street was still closed. More than that, the entire city seemed to be somewhat sleepy, still. A couple of tourists were milling about, and other people were going to work, but apart from that, not much was happening. It was the perfect time to just walk around for a bit – much calmer and fewer distractions than later on.

I walked into the street that was still cordoned off for car traffic and it didn't take me long to get an idea of what was going on: on the street, there were a lot of stalls – mostly still closed or in the process of being set up – selling this and that. There was a market of



some sort in town. Of course, it took me at least another hour of aimlessly walking around to spot the sign that told me what exactly was going on. It was St. Dominic's Fair. I had never heard of it and hadn't know it was happening at all, but every year starting in late July, Gdańsk hosts one of the biggest fairs of this kind in Europe. It dwarfed all the Christmas markets I'd been to and was spread out all over the city centre like a kraken crawling through the streets. I didn't truly get a good grip on just how big it was for another day when I'd finally gotten an idea of the city's layout. There were stalls for pretty much

everything: beer, honey, kielbasa, cheeses, nougat, handcrafts of all sorts... it was quite overwhelming, in the best way.

But I had gotten distracted: I still had a mission that morning: first, I needed postcards. And I wanted to exchange some of my euros. I walked past at least another two Kantors that were either still closed or unmanned, meandering through the narrow cobblestone streets and looking at what the stalls had on offer until I eventually ended up at the Motława, the river flowing through Gdańsk and into a branch of the Vistula. I also finally caught a glimpse of Gdańsk's most famous building, the port crane.

Gdańsk, once upon a time, was one of the most important Hanseatic cities in the Baltic. The Hanseatic League – for those of you who don't know – was a sort of medieval trade federation that at one point was powerful enough to win a war against the king of Denmark. For that reason, it boasts some of the most impressive Brick Gothic architecture I've seen, as well as many merchant houses, richly decorated. It was also the reason the crane was constructed, originally (the current building is a post-war reconstruction, as are many buildings in Gdańsk) – its name tells you something about its function. It was used to load and unload ships, as well as mount masts on ships. Its German name ("Krantor") is somewhat more informative. "Crane Gate", since you can walk through it and marvel at the wooden wheels that could move tons. It's not pretty, exactly, but it is a very unique building, one that I find beautiful because of its function, despite being a bit squat and plain.

Near the crane, I finally found a gift shop. One that was open, even. It sold the most cliched tchotchkes imaginable, and also postcards. I bought myself my first souvenir (a magnet with an image of the waterfront, prominently featuring the





crane) and a couple of postcards. The person manning the shop was a bored teenager on her summer job, and she clearly wished the tourists would just go elsewhere – maybe not that great for the shop, but honestly, I could relate. She did at least tell me where I could get my hands on a couple of stamps: near Neptune’s Fountain.

Well, as it turned out, that was a tad more difficult to find than I imagined. After a short break to figure out who would get what card, I wrote a couple of sentences on each. Then I went looking. I found the Neptune statue easily enough – it’s one of Gdansk’s main tourist attractions, Poland’s oldest working fountain and part of the Long Market, alongside a lot of pretty historic buildings, including the Artus Court and numerous other Renaissance buildings. One of those is the Main Town Hall, a beautiful reconstructed building with a carillon in the main tower that rang when I passed by at 11 o’clock. By that time, the tourists were out in full force, which meant I had to walk back and forth a little until I found my target in the adjacent Long Lane, with just as many pretty houses. The stylized posthorn was what tipped me off.

Inside the post office, there was an open room with ancient standing desks and seats in the middle, while the room was lined with counters behind bars. It’s been a while since I’ve seen a post office like that outside of movies, so I probably stared a little too long before finally figuring out where to draw my number and waiting my turn. I didn’t have to wait long,

and despite not quite understanding what the woman on the other side of the counter said, I got three stamps, put them on the postcards and then shoved everything into the red postal box outside, hoping I did everything right.

In the Long Lane, I also finally found a Kantor that was open for business and exchanged a hundred of my euros for zloty, which meant I could finally relax. My tasks for the day were done. It was time to head back to the hotel to relax a little, so I did just that. I walked across the fair again, mentally marked a stall to buy something for a friend later and finally





made a stop at the shopping centre near my hotel, which contained a Danish Netto, which I'd never been to before, but had heard good things about. There, I bought some peanuts and a bottle of Żubrówka (my late grandfather's favourite vodka) to take back home with me.

After getting back to the hotel, I spent three hours napping. My head needed it.

To be sure, the first thing I did when heading back out was to get another coffee. The option closest to the hotel was a Starbucks, and I ordered an Iced Cold Brew coffee. Tall. I got a plastic cup with the aforementioned beverage, even if the name on it was "Doitia", which in true Starbucks tradition is very much not my name, and not even close to the Polish version of it.

Properly caffeinated, I set off in search of a place to eat. Both the guidebook and the internet were raving about a pierogi/mandu restaurant, but since I hadn't fully oriented myself, it took a while to get there. I paused near the Great Mill at a statue of Johannes Hevelius, with a gorgeous astronomy mural covering a building, took a photo, put down the camera—

—and it just broke. The lens just fell off. I spent a quarter of an hour trying to piece things back together, but a little plastic ring that was supposed to anchor the lens to the rest of the camera had fractured, and there was no way to repair it myself. At some point, perhaps years earlier, it must have gotten damaged, and then time did the rest. As I was fiddling with the lens, another tourist came up to me and handed me his phone so that I could take a picture of him and his girlfriend with the fair's logo in the background. Shortly afterwards, I gave up and resigned myself to using my smartphone for the remainder of the trip.

The dumpling restaurant turned out to be a bust as well. I was quite obviously not the only one who had heard about how great it was, considering the line outside stretched way past the restaurant itself. I'd have to find a different place to eat.

And so I walked across the fair, most of all in search of the specific stall where I had spotted something that I wanted to gift to a friend. It took two passes, but eventually, I



found the Steampunk jewellery stall and waited patiently until a family was done purchasing one item for everyone. I bought my gift and set off to explore some more.

After some aimless wandering, I ended up in St. Mary's Basilica, a large, Brick Gothic behemoth of a church that dominates the centre of the city. The inside does not look quite as massive as the outside, with white walls and arches creating a sense of airiness. The floor and walls are covered with grave plates – many of them in German – and art sponsored by wealthy patrons from hundreds of years ago. I was especially amused to note that a version of my name showed up a lot.

When I exited the basilica, I finally found a place to eat: the Indian restaurant next door. Maybe not the most authentic choice, but beggars can't be choosers and my dietary restrictions can complicate things a lot. I ate Vindaloo Paneer, which I loved. Then I took another stroll through Mariacka Street, this time taking more time to look at it than I had in the morning. Its characteristic feature – besides the pretty townhouses and the amber jewellery displays – is perrons, with steps leading both up and down to the many, many jewellery stores.

It was at this point that I decided I'd done enough for the day. My feet were starting to hurt (I barely have any callouses, so I knew it was blisters), and I'd done what I wanted. I limped back towards the hotel, and on the way, I finally got a good look at the train station – I'd been so glad to see the back of it the day before, I hadn't even bothered to turn around. It's a beautiful (restored) 19th-century building reminiscent of the medieval Brick Gothic and renaissance architecture found in the city, with white highlights added to the sides. Truly, one of the most beautiful train stations I've ever seen!

But that was it for the day. I spent the rest of it watching Netflix and resting my feet; they'd suffered enough the next day.



Day 3: *Tuesday, 30th of July 2024*

Something New(ish)

I WOKE UP at a quarter to six. Again. I had done so the day before as well, and I was wondering why. It wasn't the bells – those didn't start until later and they tended to ring for every full hour, not in between. I vaguely remembered things being like that at home as well, when I was younger, but at some point, things had changed, and church bells no longer cut my day into neat little pieces. They still ring, but I no longer hear them these days. I took my time with breakfast (I tried the crepe-like things filled with fresh cheese this time) and getting ready, girding my damaged toes with half of one of the two packages of blister band-aids that I'd brought. In the end, I left a little late.

For this day, I wanted to try something a little different. I'd come to Gdańsk for the medieval architecture, but I didn't feel like braving the crowds of the market that morning. So I went in the opposite direction. I found my target pretty much immediately, although to be fair, it is hard to miss since it looks like the giant, rusty hull of a ship (one of the rare examples of modern architecture that I actually like) that lies in the shipyard like a beached whale: The European Solidarity Center.

If the name leads you to believe it to be all about the warm fuzziness of being part of the EU – it's not. Solidarity, in this case, refers to something a bit more specific than standing together with your fellow men, although that is why it's called that in a roundabout way. In German, we tend to use the Polish name: *Solidarność* – the most famous union of the world, and part of the resistance against communism in Poland. It began more or less where the museum is located: in the Lenin Shipyard at Gdańsk.



Despite setting out late, I was still a tad too early for the museum to open, so I sat down in the shade of a monument dedicated to workers who died in an unsuccessful uprising in 1970 before walking around the area for a bit – this part of Gdańsk also contained some historical buildings, but on the whole, it was far more industrial and functional than the area around the basilica.

When it opened, I bought myself a ticket and went into the permanent exhibition. If you have been to a museum dedicated to modern history, you might have seen something similar before. To me, it resembled the Zeitgenössische Forum in Leipzig (dedicated to the GDR years in the city), but with a somewhat narrower focus. Many exhibits were more “hands on” than in traditional museums, with a lot of video and audio documenting the rise and fall (and rise) of the union, and that was sometimes used to chilling effect, for example with a police transport car in the middle of a room, or music written during the protests playing.

Walking past the rows of photos of people who had fought for a better future what felt like a lifetime (mine, to be precise) ago, it was a bit alienating to think that all these people whose photos I kept seeing were around my parents’ generation, or maybe a little older. A little boy seemed to have a similar problem when it came to envisioning the march of time. He stood in front of a row of portraits and loudly proclaimed “All these people are dead!” in English, with the kind of surety only small children possess. His father tried to argue, but he was getting nowhere. When I stood in the same place, I was especially amused to note that the person whose photo had been right in front of the boy was still very much alive: Lech Wałęsa – one of the few persons featured in the exhibition who I already knew of, a former president of Poland and one of the leaders of Solidarność.



At the end of the exhibition, there’s a giant wall where people can write a message on a piece of paper and hang it with the others, in the form of a Solidarność logo (probably the coolest logo a union has ever had). I did so, although I couldn’t think of anything profound (but then again, neither could many of the others that I read), then headed to the gift shop, where I bought

myself a slightly tacky Solidarność mug that would look right at home next to my Keep Calm And Carry On one, then left to rest my feet a little at the hotel.

When I left the hotel again in the afternoon, I didn't have a plan, so I spontaneously decided to walk back towards the city centre via a different route. I walked east, hoping to find the Motława, but ended up a little lost. I did find the very shiny monument to the fallen postmen at the beginning of World War II, then walked further, struggling with a combination of allergies, the heat and the humidity. I could practically smell the brackish water in the air by then and did find the Motława soon after.

I had considered maybe taking a tour to the Westerplatte (where there's another monument to the defenders in WWII) but decided against it. I just didn't feel like it. Instead, I walked across a different section of St. Dominic's Fair. It was the culinary one, with lots of national and international cuisines offering street food. I ended up at a stall that read something like "Kuchnia ukraińska", which I gathered to mean "Ukrainian food". It offered something called "czeburek", and there was a vegetarian option (mushrooms and cheese), so I decided to chance it. *Czeburek* turned out to be a giant, deep-fried turnover and very delicious, despite the simplicity. I ate it sitting on a meadow next to a merry-go-round that I was definitely too old for, even though I wished I wasn't. The children seemed to be having a lot of fun.

After eating I lazily walked back towards the hotel, taking a long detour for shopping. There were, of course, stalls that I gave a pass. Churros unfortunately aren't something I can eat, even if I'd wanted to for ages and this was my first time seeing them offered anywhere. The stall selling compasses was beautiful, but I couldn't justify the purchase of one. None of the soaps at the soap stalls smelled quite right, and I didn't need a souvenir to remember the Polish postal service. The clothes weren't quite my style either, although I was tempted by the Kashubian embroidery. I did buy some other things, though:

1. A ring made of (green) amber and silver, because I just couldn't visit one of the centres of the amber industry and leave without any. It was hard to pick one from all the many, many, many different trinkets on offer.

2. Three incredibly tacky Christmas tree ornaments. There was just one stall selling them, and they were all so terribly kitschy that I just couldn't pass up the chance to buy some. I'm something of an aficionado, and my mother still shakes her head when I pull out the Christmas pickle (because she isn't one for silly American traditions). I overpaid because I may have communicated that the change was supposed to be a tip (or the guy pretended that's what happened), but I wasn't too fussed.

3. In a Żabka, I bought myself a bottle of one of my favourite soft drinks, which can be hard to get in Germany, and only as an import: Pepsi Max Mango. There were a lot of soft drinks there, as you'd imagine. Żabka is a convenience store chain, and there's one of them on seemingly every corner in Gdańsk.

Finally, I exchanged some more money at a Kantor – I'd gone through so much, the rest wouldn't suffice for one more day. And then I went back – the weather was a bit too much, it was too late to start much of anything, my blisters were starting to hurt quite a bit, and I was covered in a very unpleasant sheen of sweat and sun cream that I was desperate to wash off.

Day 4: *Wednesday, 31th of July 2024*

A Walk and Another Museum

I WOKE UP with a headache. Again. Resigned to my fate, I resorted to my tried and true cure of two coffees at breakfast. I did not think to apply the blister band-aids before going down to the buffet, and it showed. I was walking as if on glass, and it took me a while to get from A to B.

When I left (again, later than I had wanted to), it was to check out the early modern fortifications at the southern end of the old city, which I hadn't been to before. Walking there took me half an hour, so at some point I wondered if I might have gotten lost along the way. I passed the National Museum and the White Tower, then finally consulted my map in a tiny park – which told me I shouldn't have bothered since I was almost there.

The two bastions aren't much to look at if you're interested in architecture. Mostly because there isn't any left, barring a couple of decaying walls here and there poking out from the grass and dirt, as well as the stone lock. What is left amounts to two hills, which at that time of year were covered in wildflowers and flowering grass, which meant I had to pause quite a bit while climbing them to catch my semi-asthmatic breath. And then there is the moat.

If you've seen an early modern bastion fort or the remnants thereof, you can probably imagine what it all looked like: a vague star shape, rimmed with narrow canals. After the Bastion of Gertrude, I passed through the Lowland Gate (home to quite a few swallows) and climbed the Bastion of the Aurochs, which was quite empty except for one guy doing his morning callisthenics and another picking up trash. From there, I got a good look at the stone lock and the larger part



of the moat. A plaque told me that there were cormorants, and when I walked away, I caught sight of a distinctive black silhouette on top of some flotsam in the distance. I'd never seen one in the wild before, even if my mother assures me that they're quite common.

On my way back, I passed through a couple of residential neighbourhoods, a mix of some that are currently in the process of being revitalized (as per the large billboards put up), while others were pretty recent, nice city blocks that look quite comfortable. In one place, I walked past a couple grilling meat over an open fire next to an empty swing, a lot of tiny dogs were running around without supervision, and during my frequent breaks due to my allergies, I took pleasure in watching jackdaws scavenge for food.

Finally, I reached Granary Island, named so for obvious reasons, although the granaries were mostly destroyed in the war and the island is now covered in modern buildings, full of restaurants that look trendy to my untrained eye.

And of course, I went through St. Dominic's Fair again. This time, I picked what I'd like to call the woo section: crystals, zodiac-themed jewellery, incense and the like. I bought myself something – because it's incredibly tempting, the more you walk past the stalls. It was a very un-woo snowflake cookie stamp.

(I also bought myself another Pepsi Max Mango, from yet another Żabka.)

For that afternoon – my last one – I chose to visit the Amber Museum since the Bay of Gdańsk is the place in the world where you can find amber in unparalleled abundance. It was located quite close to my hotel, within the Grand Mill – a building that used to be, well, a great mill. It stayed in use as one more or less until its destruction in the war and has served several purposes after getting reconstructed. The building itself looked incredibly cool – so cool I'd already photographed it several times on the first day before I even knew what it was. The inside is a modern construction, with the damaged foundations being visible through a glass-covered hole in the floor. The Amber Museum moved to the Grand Mill only recently.

It's not a large museum, by any means, but I liked it well enough. The first storey is dedicated to the science of amber. As such, it explains its origin as tree resin and showcases lumps of amber in its natural form – which can be quite huge. One was almost the size of a person's head. It also explained the source of the colours (not the tree species, as you might





assume, but rather impurities), which can range from, well, *amber*, as well as brown, red, black, green, white and even blue. There's also something called "copal", which is ancient resin as well, but younger and not quite fossilized yet.

The first storey was also the place where I found my favourite exhibit: a smallish piece of amber, containing a rather unusual

inclusion: a tiny lizard, smaller than the dragonfly in the piece next to it, but looking incredibly life-like. A plaque nearby explained why the lizard would not help establish a pocket version of Jurassic Park: during the fossilization process, the inclusion is turned into nothing more than a husk of sorts – all liquid gets extracted from the inclusion.

As I walked on, the exhibits focussed on how humans acquired amber (by fishing, as it turns out, since amber floats; and more recently through mining), and what it was used for besides jewellery – namely incense and various medicinal uses. You too can cure your hysteria with pellets containing ground amber!

The second storey is dedicated to cultural artefacts made from amber. There's modern art and jewellery, but also a lot more historical pieces, considering amber has been used by humans for millennia. There were recent-ish cigarette holders and pipes, boxes inlaid with amber panels, an intricate pin under a magnifying glass, small madonnas, and a chess set that once belonged to some duke or earl from Scotland who had been exiled following the Jacobite revolutions. And of course, there was a corner dedicated to speculation about the Amber Room.

Once I was done looking at the exhibits, I visited the gift shop, but while the pieces there were really beautiful, they were also very much out of my price range, so I left without even more shiny jewels.

When I left the museum, it was 16:30 and I was getting hungry. I went with Indian food again, this time going to the restaurant in the shopping mall near the hotel. It was good, if not as good as in the other restaurant (it was one of those restaurants that offered a range of Asian food of questionable authenticity), before setting off again to say goodbye to the city with one last stroll. I walked out and passed by a statue of Vladimir I, Grand Prince of Kyiv and saint credited with converting the Kyivan Rus'. It stands in front of a church dedicated to the Greek-Ukrainian branch of Catholicism. I'd walked past before, and there always seemed to be a mass happening.

On this last walk, I finally found the World War II Museum. It looked similar to the European Solidarity Centre, although I thought the style didn't work in this context. I didn't have the time to explore it now anyway.

When my feet got tired, I ended up sitting on a bench in front of the monument dedicated to the postal workers murdered in the war, where I chilled for a while, watching people walk past. I was fonder on the monument once I got a closer look at it, and the red and white flowers at the base were a nice touch. But all good things have to end, and it was time to go back to the hotel, to get ready for the next day. I had a lot of souvenirs to pack, after all.

Day 5: *Thursday, 1st of August 2024*

... That Ends Well

I HADN'T LOOKED forward to the trip back, and that had more or less ruined my sleep and left me with neck muscles so tense it was affecting my balance and making me dizzy. In that state, I swayed down to the buffet and had a hearty breakfast, considering I didn't know if there would be something for me to buy on the way (spoiler: there wouldn't be). Then I left the hotel at 9:40, without paying the city tax – the hotel didn't collect it, even though it had said so on the registration.

My first hurdle was trying to figure out which platform my train would leave from. At the station, I was introduced to the Polish system of numbering platforms and tracks: there's one platform that was numbered, and on that platform, there were two tracks on either side. I'm used to the platform having no number, while the tracks do. I found the platform, but since my train was ten minutes late, I got to see it being reassigned from one track to another a handful of times.

My train to Szczecin ended up being overbooked. Just my luck, since the seat reservation system had been down when I booked my travel. For the first hour and a half, I had to stand next to the luggage rack while the train started on its scenic route through the Pomeranian landscape, which is frankly very similar to the one back home. One difference was that a sort of violet flower whose name I don't know was quite a bit more abundant here, making some of the fields look rather picturesque, especially since there were also a lot of storks (at least ten in one field!) and cranes about. My fellow passengers, meanwhile, were a curious bunch. A couple of teenagers looked like they were headed to Woodstock, circa 1968, while one woman had a lengthy argument with an insurance agent in English. For some reason, almost all my fellow passengers got out at a minuscule speck of a place in the middle of nowhere, as far as I could tell. Something was afoot, even if I didn't know

what. Much later, a colleague back home mentioned a famous music festival, which may or may not have been the reason for the village station being curiously popular.

As for the delay: the train caught up some, but then it grew again, and so I had no idea whether I would make my connecting bus. Yes, a bus. Again. In this case, I had to take the *Schienenersatzverkehr*, one of those lovely bureaucratic German words that means “bus that runs in place of a train when it can’t for some reason”. When the train doors opened in Szczecin, I almost sprinted out, as much as my backpack would allow me. I left the station and saw a bunch of bus stops under construction, but no buses. I very nearly panicked and hurried back inside, then back out again, and to my luck, I saw a bus leaving. The actual bus station was behind the one under construction, following a sharp drop, so I’d only seen the tops of the buses at first, without knowing what they were. I ran as fast as my giant backpack allowed and managed to catch my bus by a hair’s breadth.

The bus ride was my favourite part of the day. I didn’t take off my backpack and leaned back against the window with it, which was comfy, and also ended up being something of a massage. It wasn’t overly full, which came as a relief after the crowded train. There was no WLAN (despite being advertised on a screen), but I didn’t care. I watched the Uckermark and its sunflower fields brush past and allowed myself to relax. I didn’t even care that a woman changed her baby’s diaper next to my row of seats, nor that the police checked our IDs at the border (uneventful, except the baby did not have valid documents, so the parents got a warning). To my surprise, the bus was punctual (unlike most trains). Maybe I should take the bus more often.

Of course, once I’d reached Angermünde, I had to take a train again. It was late (because it didn’t get to finish its previous round trip on time). Not by a lot, but a little. The people occupying the row opposite me were having a mini work conference (a presentation, something to do with wind energy), and so we drove towards Berlin at a leisurely pace. Until the police stopped us dead in Berlin – Gesundbrunnen, that is. They walked through the entire train before any passengers were allowed to leave, and it took ages.

I checked the app and chose an alternative route back home. Then the frequent email updates informed me that I would be late for that one as well, so I chose an alternative to my alternative. In the end, I had to run again at Berlin’s main station, the most confusing train station I’ve ever seen, mostly because the platforms aren’t just spread horizontally, but also across three vertical levels (there might be more, but I just had to go up.)

I reached the platform for the alternative to my alternative, but it was nowhere to be found. What I did find on the opposite track was the original alternative. It hadn’t left yet because the train driver was late (he was on a different train). So I thought to myself:

What the hell, I'll just get on. It worked out alright. During this leg of the journey, I started watching the Netflix movie I had downloaded for just this purpose (*Godzilla Minus One*) and it kept me entertained for most of the rest of the way. We were late to Hanover, but still in time for my connecting train (but too late for buying food – the food service on the train was out of order, of course). Then we left late because a passenger was blocking the door until the annoyed driver scolded him.

We were late in Bremen too, naturally. I don't think I've been on a train that didn't get stopped approaching from the south in a while. They just stop shortly before the station, every time. I was the one who annoyed the train driver this time, by accidentally hitting the "talk to the driver" button with my giant backpack, but I was pretty happy to finally be within reach of home. It was almost 10 o'clock.

I caught the last train. I shouldn't have, because we arrived too late. But the train I had to catch was late too, and so I managed to reach home with a delay of two to three minutes and a couple of new grey hairs. And a very empty belly, but that was quickly remedied.

In conclusion: train travel in Germany is not for the faint of heart, even if things do turn out alright in the end.

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