

Poles Are Vocal Critics—But Foreign Visitors Beware

Only Regime Escapes Gibes

By PETER DESBARATS
(Third of a Series)

The day after my arrival in Warsaw, I found myself chatting with an official of the foreign affairs ministry.

"How do you find Poland?" he asked.

I made the mistake of thinking for a moment. I thought about the Polish tourist authorities who had no record of my hotel reservations, confirmed weeks before. I thought about the official rate of exchange, 24 zlotys for one U.S. dollar, and the people in the street who badgered me with offers of 70 zlotys per dollar. I thought about the taxis that weren't taxis at all but private cars driven by people trying to make a little illegal income. They were easier to find than taxis but you were never quite sure which cars were "taxiing" and which weren't.

"It's a pretty confusing country," I said.

"Maybe it's you who are confused," he replied acidly.

For a short time after that, I was careful about voicing criticism. It soon became clear that there are two things which one does not denigrate in Poland: Polish national character and, even more important, Polish women. All Poles are friendly, courageous, ingenious and delightful companions. (To be quite honest, most of them are.) All Polish women are radiantly beautiful. (Also, in general, true.)

There is an even stronger reason, however, for visitors to Poland finding that criticism is superfluous. The Poles take care of it themselves. They knock everything. They groan about crowded housing. They bewail the allegedly non-existent moral standards of Polish youth. They rant and rave about the bureaucracy of the "system." They curse their throat-incinerating cigars. They howl about the sloppy service in restaurants. They complain about the poor quality of most consumer goods, particularly clothing. They make jokes about female Russian cosmonauts.

They simply don't leave the visitor much room for attack. At the end of many conversations, I found myself vigorously defending life in Poland while my Polish friends struggled desperately to convince me that life behind the Iron Curtain was hell.

Up to a point . . .

Soviet Shadow

Whenever we reached the "system" itself, there was an abrupt pause. It was all right to attack aspects of the system but when you got right down to essentials, there was a certain fact which loomed large. The Soviet Union was only a few hundred miles away. Was there any point in talking about the possibility of another way of doing things?

One can no more imagine Poland slipping out of the Soviet bloc today than one can picture Canada joining it. Canada has to live with the United States and Poland has to live with Russia.

It is pointless to speculate about other possibilities. Too much time and effort already has been wasted in North America talking about the "liberation" of countries behind the Iron Curtain. It is an oversimplified approach—and in saying this, I am not budging one inch from allegiance to the ideals of self-determination and democratic freedom for all peoples.

The Polish people, virtually all of them, would like nothing better than to be liberated from the political and economic domination of the Soviet Union. In view of their history, it is presumptuous to preach to them about the benefits of national independence. They fully appreciate the difficulties posed by their close association with Russia and are quite willing to discuss them, even with a Western journalist.

But the modern Pole has to go one step beyond the simple "liberation" ideal. He asks himself if Poland could possibly exist today as an independent nation. Poland attempted to do this between 1918 and 1939 and the result was catastrophic. The outcome was not independence but subjection, first to Germany, later to Russia.

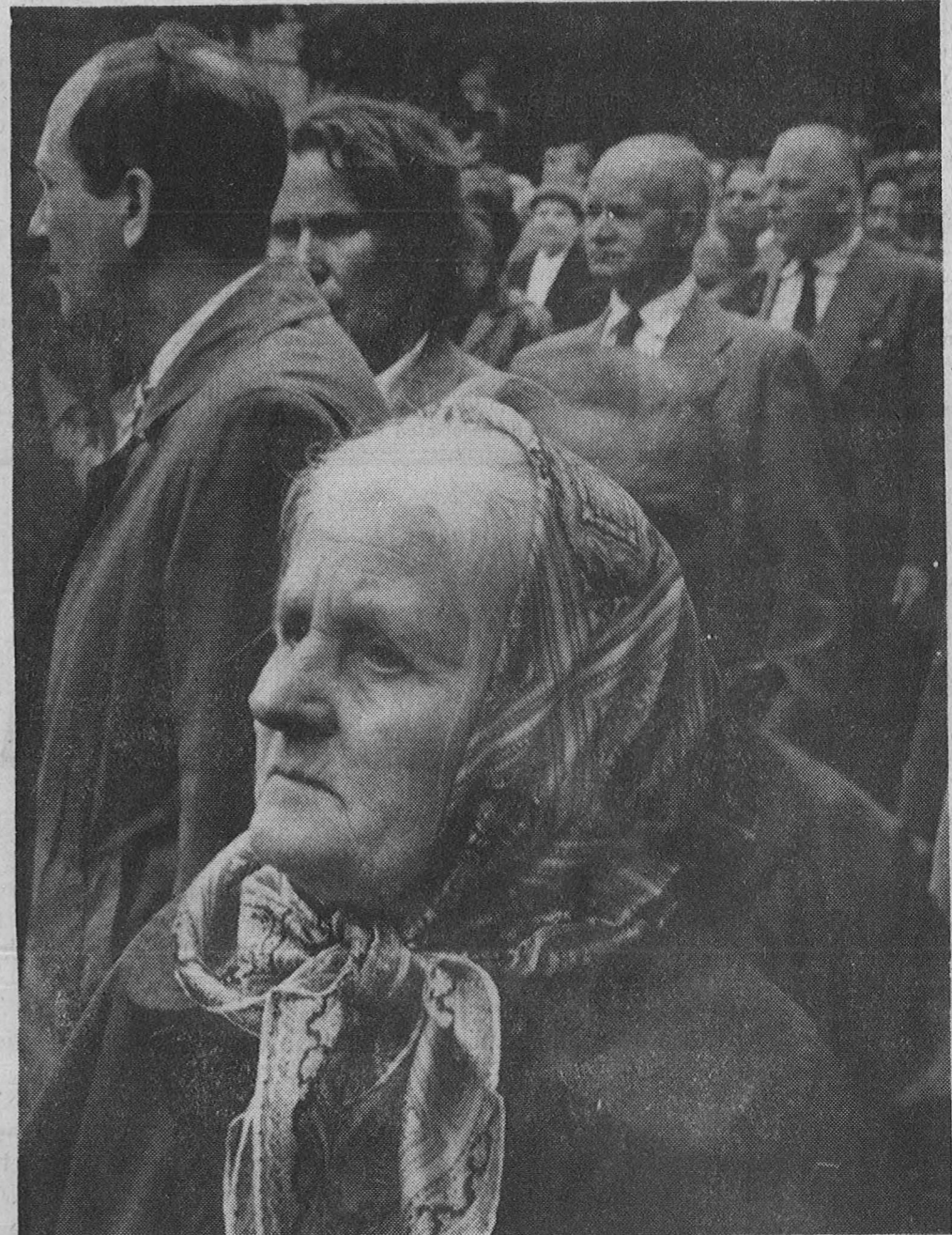
Alignment with a powerful neighbor is as essential for Poland as for Canada. At the moment, it is impossible for the Poles to look West, toward Germany. Russia is the only alternative.

It is difficult for Canadians to imagine the strength of anti-German sentiment in Poland. The older generation, of course, is still filled with personal hatred. They cannot forget that the Germans left Warsaw more than 80 per cent destroyed in 1945, and the Communist government makes certain that they do not forget. Museums across the country are filled with reminders of the Nazi occupation, when Hitler seemed bent on eradicating Poland as a nation from the face of the earth. Schoolchildren are indoctrinated with the idea that Germany is determined to regain the Western Territories of Poland, occupied by Germans until 1945. Speeches by West German politicians about these territories are reported widely in Poland to reinforce the impression that Nazi-style aggressiveness is far from dead in Adenauer's Germany.

"West Germany remains a militaristic and aggressive nation," was the flat comment of a senior Polish government official.

On the whole, young Poles tend to be quite cynical about political issues. Subjected to heavy Church propaganda on one side and Communist indoctrination on the other, they take each with a grain of salt. But the German question excites even the most blasé.

I was dining one evening in Warsaw with an intelligent 22-year-old student when he suddenly announced, in the middle of the meal, that we would have to change tables. The table behind him had been occupied by a family of German tourists. The student claimed that he could not tolerate listening to German conversation and we had to move.



The Roman Catholic faith burns deeply within Poland's older generation. This woman, watching a Corpus Christi procession in Warsaw, has seen the Polish church survive two World Wars and 18 long years of Communist rule.

This antipathy doesn't stop Poland from trading briskly with West Germany, which is rapidly becoming its best trading partner outside the Soviet bloc. There are also signs that friendly relations with East Germany may be doing something to soften prejudice. But Poland today is still not good territory for German tourists from either side of the Curtain.

Poles view almost every international development through the lens of West Germany. When I talked with government officials about Canada's decision to accept nuclear weapons, they would bring Germany into the picture immediately. Will Canada's action set a precedent for West German acquisition of nuclear weapons? This was their only concern.

Said one official: "We believe that effective power in North America and some European countries is in the hands of—to use a stereotyped expression—the friends of peace. It is possible to talk with people such as this. But it is far different in West Germany; and there is a great danger that West Germany may draw North America into extremely dangerous situations."

This approach locks Poland firmly into the Soviet alliance. "Better Russia than Germany" is the unspoken slogan. It is not without logic.

This alliance effectively limits Poland's independence as a nation. Officially, there is no criticism of Soviet policy. Newspaper writers may criticize aspects of the Communist system but the system itself is beyond reproach. Poland's official objective is "building communism."

At the unofficial level, the picture is entirely different. The amount of freedom in private discussion is amazing. It takes a visitor no time at all to discover, for instance, that most Poles personally dislike Russians. If they are being polite, they will explain that Poles and Russians possess different cultural heritages. After a few vodkas, there is no doubt about which heritage is superior.

Poles sneer at the "sloppy" clothes worn by Russian tourists, although they admire Soviet industrial skill. "A Russian car may ride like a tank," they say, "but on our roads, you need a tank."

The main complaint seems to be that the Russians lack "finesse." They have no style. Khrushchev's recent edicts against abstract art and literary freedom are ridiculed by Polish artists and writers in private conversation. Officially, of course, the Polish government has "put on the brakes."

It is difficult now for an abstract artist, even a recognized master, to exhibit in anything but small private galleries operated by artists' associations. Lucrative state commissions are now going to more traditional painters and writers. But almost all Poles, privately, deplore this political interference with art, including many who personally agree with Khrushchev's rather ordinary tastes.

In Krakow one afternoon, I was introduced to a young man who was starting to

write a definitive history of abstract painting in Poland. "But I thought that the subject was taboo," I said.

He grinned delightedly as he explained, "It takes about three years to write a book of this type. I figure that the official line on art will change in about three years. Then, when the wind starts to blow again in the other direction, I will be first in the field with a new book on the subject."

Despite all their talk about the "facts of life" within the Soviet bloc, Poles don't believe by any means that they have the best of all possible worlds. Their inability to speak with an independent voice on international affairs is felt keenly. My visit to Poland gave me a much sharper appreciation of the freedom enjoyed by Canada in its relations with the United States.

In Canada, we tend to dwell on our dependence on the United States. We think a great deal about the negative aspects: our inability to control our own economy, our military helplessness and our cultural weakness. Often overlooked is the magnificent freedom which we enjoy—the right to stand up and take a poke at Washington, not only in private conversation but in print, on radio and television and in Ottawa.

"Yes, yes, I know that Canada depends on the United States for many things but you can't compare it with our dependence on Russia," insisted a Polish engineer as he waited for the Warsaw train to pull into the station at Katowice.

"Any day, Khrushchev can pick up the telephone in Moscow, dial Warsaw and say, 'Hey, Gomulka, what are you doing there? Stop it!' And if Gomulka doesn't stop it—no more Gomulka."

"Can you imagine Kennedy doing that to . . . what's-his-name in Ottawa?"



Buildings all over Poland, like this modern office structure in Katowice, carried banners and photographs hailing the flight of Soviet cosmonauts.



Polish youngsters pilot small MiG-style aircraft at a state-operated park near the coal and steel centre of Katowice. Prices of admission to the

"Merry Little Town" are nominal. The life of the average Pole is a constant struggle to acquire good food and clothing

Staff Photos by Peter Desbarats