

Lvov: Different Masters, Distinct Identity

By Karen Dabrowska

When my father arrived in New Zealand as a refugee after WW2 he was asked by an immigration official about his place of birth. "Lvov, Poland", he replied. "But Lvov is now in the Soviet Union", the official insisted. My father refused to acknowledge that his birth place was now in the Soviet Union and spent most of his life in exile campaigning against the Soviet-installed government in post-war Poland.

The author outside the family home



When the Soviet Union collapsed Lvov emerged as the most elegant city in an independent Ukraine. Sadly my father passed on before seeing it but the family's first-floor flat is still there at number 41 Bandery, a grey dark building with a curious, mysterious medieval quality, across the road from the polytechnic. The family's coffee shop is no more but the Polish residents of the city, who make up only one percent the 900,000 inhabitants, proudly speak Polish. For them Lvov Poland exists as a sort of mental hyperspace, independent of such banalities as governments and borders. In 2006 the city celebrated its 750th anniversary with a son et lumiere in the city centre.

Throughout its history Lvov has had many masters but it has always retained its distinct identity. It is a proud city where the buildings embody its past incarnations. The city centre is modern but the smaller streets, with their charming cafes where an English menu is the exception rather than the rule, are characterised by townhouses and apartment blocks with graceful balconies and ornate stonework. Many are rough and have clearly seen better days but the romantic decay adds to their charm.

Lvov (Lviv if you use the Ukrainian spelling) was founded by King Danylo Halytskyi of the the Ruthenian

principality of Halych-Volhynia and named in honor of his son, Lev (the Lion). There are thousands of lions on doorknobs, cornices, gates, keystones and just about every facade in the city centre. The city was captured by Poland in 1349 and in 1356 Casimir III brought in German burghers and ensured that all matters relating to local government were resolved by a council elected by the wealthy citizens. As part of Poland, and later the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Lvov became the capital of the Ruthenian Voivodeship. The city prospered and became ethnically and religiously diverse. The 17th century brought invading armies of Swedes,





Hungarians Russians and Cossacks to its gates but it was the only major Polish city which was not captured by invaders until 1704 when Swedish troops entered after a siege.

In 1772, following the first partiion of Poland, the city was called Lemberg and became the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Kingdom of Galicia. It was captured by the Russian army in September 1914 but retaken by Austria-Hungary in the following year.

When the Habsburg Empire collapsed at the end of World War 1, Lvov was attacked by Stalin's Red Army but resisted. Between the world wars it was the third largest Polish city. After World War Two a decision taken at the Yalta Conference saw Poland's borders relocated towards the west and the city became part of the Soviet Union to the chargin of thousands of Poles, like my father, who had fought with the allies dreaming of an independent Poland and a return home which was not to be. With the collapse of the Soviet Union the Ukraniains got an independent country for the first

time in history and Lvov emerged as a main cultural centre famous for its university and polytechnic, the philharmonic orchestra and the theatre of opera and ballet.

The old city was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1998 due to its urban fabric and architecture. "Lvov is an outstanding example of the fusion of the architectural and artistic traditions of eastern Europe with those of Italy and Germany", UNESCO stated. The building boom which took place in the 16th and 17th centuries was heavily influenced by the Italian Renaissance and today architecture students from Europe and America are coming to the city to admire its Italian designs.

The city has an international airport with daily flights to Warsaw, Frankfurt and Austria. It is also possible to take the train from Krakov in Poland and cross the border at Psymsl on a train which has steamed out of Agatha Christie's Murder on the Orient Express. I arrived early at the station

and the bewildered station master asked if I was in a hurry to get to see Lvov "Not really", I replied. "I have been waiting for 51 years". The two major hotels in the city centre are the George and The Grand Hotel beautiful buildings synonymous with the buildings tourists come to see. Lvov is a city of historic churches dating back to the 13th century. Its architecture reflects various European styles and periods. It lost most of its gothic-style buildings but it retains many buildings in renaissance, baroque and classic styles. The buildings have many stone sculptures and carvings, particularly on

large doors, hundreds of years old. some three-to-five storey buildings have hidden inner courtyards and grottoes in various states of repair. In the centre the Soviet era is reflected mainly in a few modern-style national monuments and sculptures. Every Ukrainian city has replaced its Lenin statue with a Shevchenko monument. The one in Lvov is a masterpiece: standing behind the poet is a sweeping relief depicting Ukrainian history and religious folk art. the statue was a gift from the large Ukrainian community in Argentina and stands in the central prospect Svobody park.





In addition to the History Museum, the National Art Museum, the Lvov Art Gallery and the Museum of Folk Architecture and Life there is the more unusual Bread Museum with three dimensional installations that reach beyond the traditions of bread-making and qualify as pure art. The Pharmacy Museum is still a going concern: the shop in front has been in business for the past 250 years and looks as it did three centuries ago with coloured bottles and wooden herb drawers. As well as introducing the history of early chemistry the museum is an excellent example of an old Lvov house with magnificent doors featuring Galician art.

The best view of the city is from the High Castle (Vysoky Zamok) built by King Casimir (1310 - 1370) of Poland. Only the wall of the castle remains and there is no statue to King Casimir but the climb up the steep steps is well worth it and only a television tower reminds visitors that they are in the 21st century. The modern world sometimes intrudes into the city where the past is king: scantily lit alleyways with cobblestones and lion statues, buildings with a long and distinguished history, are a stark reminder to would-be conquerors that regardless of its 'masters' the city will always retain its unique character.