



Warszawa, Poland — photographed on 29th October 2004

This image shows the western part of downtown. On the left you can see a few old houses from the beginning of the twentieth century. On the right toward the north-west you can notice an older church from the second half of the nineteenth century. The modern skyscrapers were constructed between 1995 and 2004. The centre of the photograph is dominated by the tallest structure in Poland - the Palace of Culture and Sciences of which construction was finished in 1955, ten years after the end of World War II. In fact, most of the houses did not exist before the war.

Warszawa grew during a period of over six hundred years from a small settlement on the banks of the Vistula river. It was situated more or less in the geographical middle of the Kingdom of Poland, which itself is in Central Europe (only recently being in the political entity called "Eastern Europe"). The history of Warszawa is very interesting and worth knowing as it is interwoven with the history of other nations and cultures.

In August of 1939 Warszawa was home to 1,300,000 people. During the siege in September 1939, at the beginning of World War II, the bombardment and fires destroyed some 10% of the houses, heritage and government buildings. This marked the start of daily street executions and the destruction of everything that had historical or political value to Poles. After the Ghetto Uprising in 1943 and the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, occupying forces started a methodical razing and burning of the city. House after house, block after block were blown up or burned. A mass deportation of the city's inhabitants was effected "to wipe Warszawa from maps". More than 650,000 civilians from this European capital died during over five years of occupation.

60 years ago, on 17th January 1945, the last divisions of enemy forces were driven out of the city. It was a ghost of its past glory with 85% of the city being a sea of burned skeletons of the houses, churches, synagogues, schools and office buildings. Only a handful of people emerged from the ruins. Yet the displaced and survivors started returning, some from slave labour, some from concentration camps, others from victorious armies. In September 1945 a census revealed 422,000 people living in Warszawa and resurrecting the city back to life as the capital of Poland.

As a child in the early sixties I played in places still standing in ruins. Then, I witnessed a new housing complex being built in the middle third of the above image. As a teenager in the seventies, for months I saw and photographed the construction of the Central Station which is visible left of the Palace. In front of my own eyes the city was transforming. I also became aware how much the city was changed by my parents' generation. They were lucky to survive the horrors of war and yet find energy and will to rebuild the city and restore its life.

In 1986 I decided to abandon Warszawa. With my wife and three children we left for unknown... Well, that is another story for another time.

Today Warszawa is a thriving cultural and political centre, home of 2,000,000 hard working people. I returned there twice in 1997 and in 2004, each time seeing how my city is still growing anew.