A Brief History of Poland

Located in the heart of Europe and having once stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, Poland has been a crossroads between Eastern and Western civilization during her more than 1,000-year history. From the Italians, Hungarians and Jews to the Tatars and Mongols, Poland has been a melting pot of cultures for centuries. Major East-West trade routes passed through the country which left its mark on everything from language and the arts to culinary traditions and dress.

DID YOU KNOW: The Polish word for “Slavs” is “Słowianie” which is derived from the word “słowo” meaning “word”, so “Słowianie” means “people of the word” or “people who speak the same language”.

Poland was officially founded in the year 966 when Mieszko I, duke of the Polanie tribe of West Slavs, was baptized and adopted Catholic Christianity as the official religion of the new nation-state, among the first in Europe. Mieszko I was the first king of the Piast dynasty, which would rule Poland for the next 400 years. In the late 14th century, Poland’s Queen Jadwiga married the Grand Duke Jagiełło of Lithuania. The new Jagiellonian dynasty would rule Poland-Lithuania for almost 200 years, and this union would make Poland-Lithuania the largest political entity in Europe for the next 400 years and usher in Poland’s “Golden Age”. Towards the end of the 15th century, the Polish landed nobility gained increasing power and transferred most of the legislative power from the monarch to the parliament (Sejm), which began Poland’s rule by the “free and equal” nobility (szlachta).

DID YOU KNOW: Poland’s Queen Jadwiga, who later became Saint Jadwiga, was a great benefactor of the Jagiellonian University (founded in 1364) in Kraków and donated her personal jewelry to the institution which enabled 203 students to attend the university.

In 1569, the Union of Lublin created the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and further reduced the power of the monarchy by establishing an elective monarchy. Increasingly, legislators viewed the country not as a monarchy but as a “republic under the presidency of the King”. Although the right to vote was restricted to the landed nobility, the noble class in Poland was the largest in Europe which meant that Poland enjoyed the most representative form of government found anywhere in Europe at the time. This new policy allowed many foreigners to be elected King of Poland - from a Frenchman and an Italian to a Swede and a Hungarian – who brought with them ideas, customs and dress, and culinary contributions from their home countries. While fostering the most representative form of government of its day, Poland also enjoyed the most tolerant religious climate in all of Europe. Jews who were being expelled from Western Europe beginning in the 13th century found a home in Poland, and over the course of the next several centuries, Poland became home to the largest population of Jews in the world.

DID YOU KNOW: In the 16th century, Mennonite emigrants from the Netherlands, escaping religious persecution at home, settled in Poland establishing “Olęder” settlements where they could practice their religion freely.

DID YOU KNOW: The Royal Grant of 1576 signed by King Stefan Batory assigned a district of Kraków to Scottish immigrants. By the 17th century, an estimated 30,000 - 40,000 Scots were living in Poland.