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# Krakow: an open city?

*As part of my involvement with the Signs of Equality Federation, this July and August I held conversations with LGBT+ people from abroad who have settled in Krakow. We spoke freely about the openness of the city and people who come from there, about the local gay scene and interaction with the local community, about reorganising their lives and about how their experiences here compare with where they have lived previously. Here I present some of the issues raised and conclusions drawn from these meetings and conversations.*

In the autumn of 2016 Krakow City Council passed a resolution that brought in the "Open Krakow" initiative. This nineteen-page document contains a lot of information about the need to put appropriate anti-discriminatory mechanisms in place and the urgent need for changes in offices that deal with the public. Interestingly, the battle with graffiti on buildings occupies an important position in this document. However, in the resolution there is no mention of the fact that foreigners who come to Krakow may differ from the majority of city residents not only in terms of language, religion and culture, but also sexual

orientation.

### A different way of looking at things

I decided to take a look at non-heteronormative foreigners and find out what they had to say about the openness of Krakow. I chatted to eight people from outside Poland who belong to the LGBT+ community. I chose people to talk to who were as diverse as possible in terms of their nationality and age (the youngest person was only slightly older than 20; the oldest over 60). I spoke to people who had lived in Krakow for a long time and who had only just arrived. I wanted to have conversations with people who

represented different letters from the abbreviation LGBT+, and in the end I managed to chat to lesbians, gay men and one ally.

### All these people

They have come here from various parts of the world. It's difficult to count them; nobody keeps statistics on LGBT+ foreigners. Among them there are people who came here some fifteen or even twenty years or more ago and for whom Krakow has become their home. These people even remember a time when the main marketplace wasn't full of bars and restaurants. There weren't always crowds of tourists wandering around it. However, it seems that the majority of LGBT+ foreigners are people who travel around the world a lot and find a new place to live every few years.

### From the East, from the West

A brief glance at this group shows that they are ethnically very diverse. They don't only represent the nationalities living in our region that are officially the most numerous. They aren't only Armenians, Ukrainians and Vietnamese. People from Western European countries such as the UK and France are visibly present among them. You can also find people from many countries outside the EU, from the Philippines to Brazil and Argentina. Conversations with them show that before they came to Krakow these people

didn't know much about the city. Krakow was often seen through the prism of the image of Poland as a whole that's perpetuated throughout the world. They had acquired fragmentary information about the city from what their colleagues, their partners and the media had told them about it. The latter often doesn't make Krakow look very inviting. The image of a place that's conservative both in terms of its traditions and world view dominates. Those who arrived in Krakow in 2019 also talked about its image, visible in the media, as a place that isn't necessarily very friendly to non-heterosexual people.

### The journey to Lesser Poland

Despite this, people's initial impressions of the city were most frequently positive. Many people mentioned Krakow's touristy character and the wide range of things it has to offer in terms of entertainment and culture. The next positive aspect was the issue of finding work. Some people were lucky enough to find work before they came to Krakow, others had to start looking for a job after they got here. However, the latter coped very well with finding work. Once they had arrived in Krakow it took them not more than two to three months. Often it turned out that this time could have been shortened by as much as half, were it not for the administrative procedures associated with legalising one's stay and access to the job market. The vast majority of people I spoke to found work in shared services centres run by large corporations.

### A shared space

Despite being culturally and ethnically diverse, most people I chatted to had a very similar idea of what an open city is. For them it's a place that isn't afraid of being cosmopolitan. Evidence for this includes little things such as the effort of the hotel receptionist who tries to understand a newly arrived guest, even if the language barrier makes this a challenge. Proof of openness is also acceptance of what makes city residents different. Almost everyone gave the example of a place in which you can feel at ease and safe regardless of who you are. One of the people I chatted to compared the open city to Paulista Avenue in São Paulo. She described the avenue as an open and pulsating place, an "artery" full of shops and restaurants that serve food from throughout the world, where you can hear almost

every type of music. On this street nobody hides anything from anyone. Couples, whether gay or straight, aren't afraid to hold each other's hands.

### Friends and enemies

When asked to compare the situation of LGBT+ people in Krakow with the place where they come from the people I talked to only painted a moderately optimistic picture of the city. Most people used the example of the gay pride march. The foreigners from both Western Europe and Latin America pointed out that among the happy, colourful crowd numerous police officers and counter demonstrations were also to be seen. These are things you no longer see in the countries they come from. Marches there are associated more with joyful celebrations and social events rather than demonstrations.

### The daily grind

For most of the people I chatted with, organising their lives in Krakow wasn't particularly difficult. They were all in agreement as far as the ease with which they found work and the thriving social life were concerned. Some complained about problems with finding somewhere to live, caused, for example, by misunderstandings with agents.

### What should be changed?

In answer to my question regarding what should be changed in Krakow, one person said that it would serve everyone well if people did away with labels and stopped pigeon-holing other people. She believes that automatically classifying others as "believers" or "non-believers", "locals" or "foreigners", "us" or "them" means that everyone shuts themselves up in their own little bubble. Thus the opportunity for people to communicate with each other disappears, an opportunity which is a key element of every open city.



On 15th June 2019 the Krakow Equality Centre DOM EQ, the only one of its kind, opened its doors.

As befits a unique institution, the official opening went off with a glittery bang. Everyone cut the rainbow ribbon together, there was dancing and delicious treats. To mark the launch of the centre we displayed a cycle of paintings called “Manifesto” by Marek Pavellek, who was inspired by the issue of hate speech on the Internet. High culture went together with slightly less refined entertainment, resulting in a very successful unified whole.

The last guests left DOM EQ long after midnight. The organisers estimate that between 300 and 500 people put in an appearance at the party. We had to hurry with the cleaning because the next day a general meeting of the members of the Signs of Equality Federation was due to take place, at which a new board was to be elected.

Thus began the story of a place founded by the LGBT+ community for the LGBT+ community. The first three months since it opened have shown that it has found a permanent place in the hearts of Cracovians and people from outside the city.

Everyone together

The cultural side of our work began on 28th June 2019 when we showed a film to mark the 50th anniversary of the events at the Stonewall Inn. Afterwards we had a debate about the relationship between the current climate and the Stonewall events, as well as the current LGBT+ situation in Poland.



Two days later volunteers who had spared no effort in adapting the building of the centre and getting ready for the opening had the opportunity to meet over a barbecue and once again look proudly at the results of all their hard work.

The following week DOM EQ for the first time hosted a meeting for the parents of LGBT+ people. It quickly became apparent that it would be worth making these meetings a regular event.

Other Krakow groups have also turned up at 43 Czyżówka – thus the range of what the centre has to offer has grown and now includes regular meetings for LGBT+ Christians, run by the Faith and the Rainbow Foundation, for transsexual people and rainbow families, incidentally the only ones of their sort. There are also meetings for teenagers, which are aptly called MłodzieżEQ (the name is based on the Polish word młodzież, which means ‘youth’). In the middle of July we had our second film screening. We showed “Paris is Burning”, to which a touch of class was added by a vogue dance performance, known from Madonna’s cult music video and recently from the serial “Pose”. After the performance we had the opportunity to chat to the dancers about the idiosyncrasies of their style and about balls organised by the voguing community.

A few days later DOM EQ hosted its first book discussion, where we introduced the handbook “From A to Z about LGBTQIAP”. If you know Polish you really must check out the free e-book version of this interactive book that counteracts discrimination: <https://uprzedzuprzedzenia.org/od-a-do-z-o-lgbtqiap/>

The beginning of the school year saw the next interesting events. On the evening of 3rd September, together with the Hanna Community, we rolled up out sleeves and got down to some serious cooking. The next day the soups we made were handed out to needy people in the Planty park. We hope that peeling vegetables and cooking together will build permanent bridges between us and help us do a lot of good things together.

Another interesting event hosted by DOM EQ was a preview of a photographic exhibition called “A soft landing” on the subject of coming out. The photos were taken by Emilia Kutrzeba.

A few days later a workshop for singles took place called “I have an embroidered handkerchief” and we also organised – in both English and Polish – a workshop aptly called “I’m remarkable”. Those who took part had the opportunity to find out a lot of interesting things about self-promotion and learnt how and when to talk about their strong points.

The Krakow edition of “Tattoos for equality”, where you could come to DOM EQ and get a tattoo done, turned out to be a real hit. Some of the money that was paid for the tattoos went towards supporting the Signs of Equality Federation. Thanks to those who came DOM EQ managed to raise more than enough money to cover one’s month’s rent.

In addition, in the middle of September the first introduction to member organisations of the Krakow federation took place. People interested in our centre had the opportunity to find out how the Culture for Tolerance Foundation operates and what it does. A lot was also said about the work of the federation itself.

Coming soon

As you can see, the first three months of the centre were full of interesting events. The end of the year, which is fast approaching, promises to be even more exciting.

- We'll continue to hold regular meetings for support groups and meetings where we introduce member organisations of the federation. It will also be possible to find out more about what the Krakofonia choir and the Bears of Poland Association do.
- On the evening of 15th October there will be an unofficial “LGBT+ Business Networking Meeting” at DOM EQ where we'll host representatives of Krakow corporations. Together with representatives of the Signs

of Equality Federation and its member organisations they will consider possible models of cooperation between business and LGBT+ organisations.

- Thanks to an agreement with the firm Tongarioro, which runs the website OUTFILM, every other Friday evening we'll be organising film screenings. After each of them there will be time to discuss the film and share our impressions.
- On 6th October 2019 the doors of the DOM EQ Centre will be opened for voters as well as candidates in the Sejm elections. The Signs of Equality Federation have invited all campaign committees to the meeting. Those that respond will have half an hour to present their election programme and to answer voters' questions. The candidates' presentations won't be moderated or constrained in any way. The only limitation will be time – the same for every committee that decides to put in an appearance. We're counting on interesting questions and a fruitful discussion. We hope that this will give voters a unique opportunity to form their own opinion regarding the options presented. We ourselves will serve cakes, tea and coffee.

Human rights will be our theme at the beginning of December. On 10th December, to mark the anniversary of the enactment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the General Assembly of the UN in 1948, a special lecture will take place at the DOM EQ centre and a film called “Article 18” will be shown. Of course after the film there will be time for those present to have a chat about it.

Join us!

Our schedule is fast filling up and you can follow it on DOM EQ's Facebook page. The ambition of the federation is for DOM EQ to be both creative and to be created by the LGBT+ community. Anyone who wants to suggest an initiative or has their own idea for an event is welcome. You can share it with us by sending us an email: [domeq@znakirownosci.org.pl](mailto:domeq@znakirownosci.org.pl).

Our choir follows the principle EVERYONE HAS A VOICE. This means we help lots of people to believe that they're a valuable and unique part of society. And of course that they can sing.

We've given public performances in the Tricity of Gdańsk, Gdynia and Sopot, in Warsaw, Katowice, Frankfurt-am-Main, at the international Various Voices festival in Munich and many times in our home city of Krakow. We also performed at TEDxKazmierz! All that in just five years! Now the time has come for our crowning glory ... we want to celebrate our fifth birthday with you!

We want to give an anniversary concert, which will also be a fabulous party. Apart from us the Estonian LGBT+ choir Vikerlased, or the Rainbow Vikings, will also perform in the concert.

Vikerlased was formed in 2017 and is the first LGBT+ choir in Estonia and the Baltic countries. It is a place for Estonia's LGBT+ community as well as their friends, relatives and allies. The choir gives the rainbow community a voice – singing together gives them strength and positive energy.

Vikerlased's repertoire consists of Estonian choral classics as well as more modern and more varied songs from other countries. In 2019 Vikerlased made history by being the first LGBT+ choir to take part in Laulupidu -- a traditional Estonian Song and Dance Festival. The concert in Krakow will be their first performance in a country other than one of their neighbours.

The date will appear shortly on FB: @LGBTQkrakofonia

[www.krakofonia.org](http://www.krakofonia.org) - [chorkrakofonia@gmail.com](mailto:chorkrakofonia@gmail.com) - @LGBTQkrakofonia

The Infection Prevention Association “One World” is organising a training event called “What every helper should know, or basic information about HIV/AIDS”. The training session will be free of charge, and attendees will be given basic information about prevention, diagnosis, treatment, the course of an HIV infection, as well as the social aspects of HIV/AIDS. The course is intended mostly for those who so far have not had contact with this subject matter or already have an interest in it but would like to structure and broaden their knowledge. After the training session participants will have the opportunity to do some voluntary work for the association and find out what it does.

If you want to do something to help others, do something socially useful, and familiarise yourself with how NGOs actually operate, then this is an opportunity for you!

More information will appear soon on our Facebook fanpage: <https://www.facebook.com/StowarzyszenieJedenSwiat/>

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The Culture for Tolerance Foundation

Since May 2019 this foundation has been working together with the Entertainment Agency FARO and Henryk Pasiut, the producer of The Only Drag Queen Revue in Poland, which resulted in him becoming one of the sponsors of a show with Papina McQueen called “My Way, My Dream, My Life”, which was premiered in June at Krakow’s Barakh Theatre. The foundation is currently helping to produce a new version of the revue, called “Diamonds of the Night”, with Polish drag queens.

Diamonds shine at night, you can warm yourself in their glare

“Diamonds of the Night” is a show that will not leave the audience cold. It'll be emotional, but above all it'll make you happy and make you laugh time and again.

– We all want to be rich, beautiful, healthy and attractive. We want to love and be loved. The cast assure you that you'll find all of this in the amazing new revue “Diamonds of the Night”. You'll hear the greatest hits ever performed on the stages of the world. It'll be a rich, colourful and dazzling experience – in short -- it'll be a real revue. We do everything to express ourselves artistically, to give you a moment of happiness and make you feel euphoric and elated.

Four drag queens, Papina McQueen, Shady Lady, Savannah Crystal and Ka Katharsis, as well as the illusionist Victor Febo and the belly dancer Nadira, will perform in the fifth edition of this camp vaudeville-like revue. The premieres are scheduled for 28th and 29th September, again on the stage of the Barakh Theatre. The next performances will be on the following dates:

- 5th and 6th October at 19.00
- 9th and 10th November at 19.00
- 28th December at 17.00 and 20.30

Faith and the Rainbow

This foundation works for gay, bisexual and transsexual Christians

Dates of meetings

Krakow. Let's meet! – An introduction to the Faith and the Rainbow Foundation at the DOM EQ Equality Centre

- 15th October, 18.00–20.00

Krakow: meetings of the local group at the DOM EQ Equality Centre:

- 24th October, 18.00–20.00
- 22th November, 18.00–20.00
- 17th December, 18.00–20.00

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