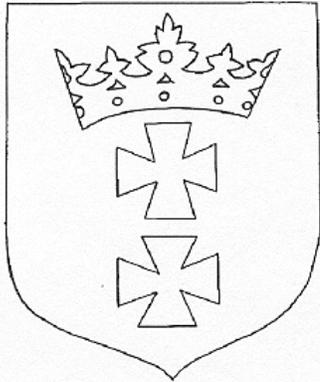# Gdansk

Gdansk is a Polish port city 4 miles (6 kilometers) from the Baltic Sea. It lies on the Vistula River, Poland's chief waterway. Its location has made the city one of the leading ports of Central Europe. Gdansk's population is over 470,000 (1995).

In the 10th century when Poland was firmly establishing its prominence on the Baltic shores, Gdansk became a defense stronghold. The harbor was ideally located. It was connected with the trade route called the "Amber Road" which was used by the merchants from the Mediterranean countries seeking amber from the Baltic shores. Due to its suitable location, Gdansk developed rapidly.

In 1308 and 1454, Gdansk was continuously being invaded and conquered by the Teutonic Knights. The citizens asked the Polish King for protection and money to rebuild the city. The most rapid growth took place during the 16th and 17th centuries. The further economic decline was caused by wars, fires and epidemics. It especially suffered during the siege of 1734.

During the First Partition of Poland in 1772, Russia annexed the northern part of Poland. Gdansk defended itself but separated from Poland and from the sea, it became a free port. During the Second Partition Gdansk fell under Prussian rule. In 1807 it was recognized as a "Free City" and became a French and Polish military base, In 1815 Gdansk was again incorporated into a Prussian state.

After the First World War the Treaty of Versailles gave Poland a strip of barren sea coast in exchange for Gdansk. Gdansk, with its delta of the Vistula River was designated a "Free City" under the protection of the League of Nations. Poland had the right of free use of the port, but the Gdansk Senate, acting under orders from Berlin, created difficulties for the Polish administration. In the face of continuous disputes and harassments, Poland was forced to seek her own outlet on the Baltic Sea.

The decision was taken to build a new port. The small fishing village of Gdynia was transformed into one of the largest and most modern Baltic ports (1924-1939) making Poland independent of Germany in overseas

The worsening of relations in the Free City by the Nazi authorities provided one of reasons for the invasion of Poland in 1939. In September, 1939, Gdansk earned fame for its heroic defense of Westerplatte, a peninsula situated at the entrance to the port, where there was a Polish fort. During the Second World War, 60% of Gdansk
was destroyed including 90% of its historical center. In 1945 it was returned to Poland.

Today Gdansk, Gdynia and Sopot comprise one big metropolitan area. The Gdansk shipyards are important in world trade and export of ships. Factories in Gdansk make chemicals, electrical equipment, food products, machinery, metal products, and textiles.

In 1970, Gdansk was a center of protest against the Communist government in Poland. In 1980, strikes in Gdansk and other cities led to the creation of Solidarity, an organization of trade unions. Solidarity, with its leader Lech Walesa, helped bring down Communist rule in Poland and other countries in the Communist Block. Free elections in Poland and the establishment of a non-Communist government followed.

Gdansk and its surrounding cities of Gdynia and Sopot play a very important role in the economic, scientific and cultural life of Poland. There are numerous research institutes, many university level schools, an Opera House, a Philharmonic Orchestra, theaters, a Forest Opera and museums where many exhibitions and festivals are presented. Beautiful music is played on a 200 year old organ in the magnificent 14th century Oliwa Cathedral during the International Festival of Organ Music. Artisans, folk dancers, and musicians from Poland and abroad take over the streets and plazas of Gdansk during the European Dominican Fair.

Gdansk has many historic buildings including remnants of city fortifications, a 14th century grain elevator, a Gothic Town Hall, a Renaissance Armory and patrician residences.

In 1998 Gdansk celebrated its 1,000th year of existence.