

A New Itinerary: Jewish youth tours to Poland

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Each year thousands of Jewish youth are sent to Poland on organised death camp tours to commemorate the Holocaust. However well-intentioned, the tours structurally and ideologically reinforce negative stereotypes about Poles and modern Poland.

A popular Israeli television programme once featured a comedy skit about a travel agent selling package tours to Poland:

“We have a few specials for Poland that I really recommend. First of all, we have the basic package, which includes five concentration camps in ten days, accommodation in four-star hotels and a free day for shopping in Warsaw. Beyond that we, of course, have ‘Classic Poland’ in 14 days, including visits to seven concentration camps, accommodation in four-star hotels and a visit to the Warsaw Ghetto with the afternoon free for shopping. We also have a weekend in Poland, which features seven concentration camps in three days – no, there’s no free day for shopping. And naturally there’s the 12-day cross-Poland package with all the concentration camps...my sister’s daughter went on a trip like that with her school and it was very impressive. She cried at Auschwitz.”

On a recent trip I made to Poland, a Warsaw University student, himself Jewish, asked me: “Why do you American Jews send your children on death camp tours to Poland? Why focus on death? Why don’t you show life?”

He had a point. Each year, an estimated 40,000 Jewish youth from the United States and Israel come to Poland to visit the sites of the destruction of European Jewry during the Second World War. On programmes sponsored by Jewish communal institutions such as synagogues, federations, high schools, Hillel Societies, and the March of the Living, which is the largest Jewish mass tour enterprise

combining Poland and Israel itineraries, students are exposed to concentration camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek and Treblinka. They bear witness to the thousands who died at ghetto sites in Łódź and Warsaw. Some are also shown where other Jewish victims were killed in post-war assaults such as the 1946 pogrom in Kielce (a city in central Poland – editor’s note).

The tour groups are so tightly scheduled around Holocaust sites and insulated from the contemporary culture of Poland to the point that the participants only have time to see the symbols that survived the six-year period, from 1939 to 1945, in which Poland was destroyed under Nazi occupation. Since the first March of the Living programme in 1988, thousands of Jewish youth have passed through Poland without learning about its history, experiencing its culture and society, meeting Polish and Polish Jewish peers, or realising that Poles are in the process of building a modern democratic nation. In a sense, the tour participants move through Poland without ever actually being there, and then, typically, fly to Israel to explore the rebirth of Jewish life after the Holocaust. The youth leave without having seen the rebirth of Poland and its own Jewish community.

The current form of youth tourism is under pressure to change. The problems and limitations of so-called “death-camp tourism” are increasingly recognised by an array of concerned critics including Jewish studies scholars, international Jewish organisations, Israel’s Foreign Ministry, and the Polish government and its citizens (both Jewish and not). The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, founded by Kraków-born American philanthropist Tad Taube and which I direct, has offered its own contribution to the emerging discussion. In 2003 it established the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland with the purpose of supporting the revitalisation of Jewish culture after communism, and to connect American Jewry, 70 per cent of whom have Polish origins, with their East European, Ashkenazi heritage.

Tad Taube and I have critiqued death camp tourism and called for alternatives. We have proposed value-added options to the March of the Living and Birthright Israel. In 2009 we created the Taube Jewish Heritage Tour Programme based on the assessment that change, which may be slow and incremental, will eventually happen. As a new generation comes of age and the Holocaust generation passes on, the purpose and structure of Jewish youth tours to Poland will broaden to encompass the thousand-year history of Polish Jewry and interactions with the local people and culture. In doing so, activities of remembrance will be joined by those of reclamation and reconciliation, which, in combination, can anchor the tours in real time and space.

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Survivors at heart

Trends in Israeli and American Jewish youth tourism to Central and Eastern Europe, and especially to Poland, differ from other young adult travel patterns, in that the youth are not going for leisure, recreation or knowledge. Surely, some individuals visit Kraków on their Euro Rail passes to feel the excitement of a young, open society, to explore a hip, cosmopolitan university town, to roam its cobblestone streets, enjoy the beautiful architecture and breathe in the natural wonders of the nearby Tatra Mountains.

But for thousands of Jewish teens and college students, group tours to Poland are offered as a sobering pilgrimage, as a life-changing mission. Most American Jews do not know the details of their family roots, neither the full names of their ancestors nor the names of the towns, cities and countries their ancestors came from. They tend to identify with having Russian, not Polish, roots, because they were told that their families lived under tsarist rule in the Pale of Settlement (a region in Imperial Russia where Jews were allowed to live – editor's note), without understanding that most of the territory making up the Pale was also a part of Poland.

As these tours are most commonly paired with travel to Israel, Poland's symbolic counterpart, a fundamental message is promoted: "Come to Poland to see where European Jewry was murdered, then come to Israel to see where the Jewish People were reborn." With programme titles such as "From Anguish to Hope", the itineraries are marketed, "Departing Poland, having witnessed the darkness of the Holocaust first-hand, we fly overnight to Israel, where we land in the vibrant, sun-soaked Jewish State." Three-country tour packages to Poland, Austria and Israel sponsored by the National Conference of Synagogue Youth's Jewish Overseas Leadership Training (JOLT) state clearly in their materials that Poland represents the Past, Austria the Present, and Israel the Future. On the North American Federation of Temple Youth L'Dor V'Dor tour of Poland, Czech Republic and Israel, Poland is again primarily representative of the Holocaust, Israel of the Jewish People's rebirth, and Prague is where the students can enjoy the sightseeing pleasures of a normal vacation.

The negative stereotyping is reinforced structurally and logistically. Tour groups bring their own security guards, guides, scholarly experts, a representative Holocaust survivor and language translators; these elements are part of a formula that protects participants from interactions with the local population, including local Jews. Within such narrow parameters, what can the participants do? Tens of thousands of Jews, young and old, including 3,000 North Americans and thousands

more from 40 countries worldwide, assemble each year on the three-kilometre march from Auschwitz to Birkenau to "retrace the steps of the 'March of Death,' the actual route that countless numbers of our people walked on their way to the gas chambers at Birkenau. However, our march will be a 'March of the Living' concluding with the singing of *Hatikvah*, which reaffirms *Am Yisrael Chai*, the Jewish People Live".

Youth tour participants are encouraged to imagine themselves in the position of Jews during the Holocaust. Rona Sheramy, the Executive Director of the US-based Association for Jewish Studies, has analysed various orientation materials from the March of the Living and writes that, "Marchers are made to feel as though they could identify with the survivor experience," and asserts that "the impact of this approach is significant as one March alumnus reflected after the trip, 'I am so proud to be a Jew – I feel like a survivor at heart'."

When asked why the programme sends teens to Poland rather than to Germany, the Florida-based organisers explained to Sheramy that it is "because of the importance of Poland to both the Nazi extermination plan and the history of modern Jewry". Sheramy was also told, "If young Jewish people were going to mourn the loss of European Jewry, then the most appropriate site for them to do so was in the area where European Jewry perished. Furthermore, in order for young Jews to understand the world that was lost, it was important for them to visit the centre of that world."

In truth, however, the alleged objective to expose young people to a lost world goes unfulfilled. By focusing almost exclusively on how Jews died at the hands of Nazi Germany and its collaborators, teens do not learn about how Jews lived and flourished for centuries leading up to the Holocaust. Neither do they learn how Jewish culture has come back to life after communism. It was in Poland that major Jewish movements in religious learning and secular culture blossomed, from Chassidism and the Haskalah to Modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature. It was also in Poland that Zionism and the Bund found such strong support. These eventful chapters of Jewish existence in the Diaspora have shaped modern Jewish identity in the United States and Israel. However, very little of this cultural legacy is regularly taught as part of American Jewish education outside of academia. Biblical history, the Holocaust, and the founding of the State of Israel comprise the majority of educational curricula, while European Jewish achievement before and after the Holocaust does not shape contemporary Jewish teaching in the same way.

The narrative

In attempting to build a future upon a foundation that rejects the past, American and Israeli Jewry have replaced in-depth history with a mythical narrative, in which Europe, and especially Poland, reinforces notions of Jews as victims facing a hostile, violent world. After the 1967 Israeli-Arab War, anti-Semitism and the Holocaust formed the rationale that enabled American Jewry to rise to Israel's defence. That rationale continues to justify a vision of Israel as Jewry's singular, exclusive end-point.

The tours have their origins in the concerns that were raised by the American Jewish community of the 1980s regarding assimilation, intermarriage, lack of education, and a shrinking population. As a reaction, alarms were sounded, debates held, and surveys commissioned to study and recommend programmatic solutions for reinforcing Jewish identification, affiliation and continuity. The freedom, openness and individualism characterising American society were often presented more as problems than as entitlements. Programmes were adopted that tended to stress a return to tradition and an increased identification with Israel. It was in this context that the "death-and-rebirth tour" crystallised. Although the negative stereotyping of Poland may be distracting, the underlying purpose of the tours is to ensure the continuity of an active Jewish life in the United States — one that is focused on Israel. In essence, the tours are an American Jewish response to American Jewish concerns.

When the Taube Foundation began to evaluate American Jewish youth tours to Poland (and to both Poland and Israel), Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett of New York University steered me to her ethnographic study on the "Israel Experience". She writes that, "What immersive [tour] experiences gain in immediacy and personal significance, they sacrifice in information, analysis, and synthesis — in the intellectual coherence that counts as knowledge." The test of the programme's success "was not how much information or knowledge the youngsters acquired, but the nature and intensity of the emotions they felt". At the end of the day, they were asked to assess their experiences for "personal significance". The programme was designed to give the youngsters "jewishly tinged emotional 'highs'" to make them feel a strong attachment to Israel, and to ensure that they would be *laden* with many experiences. The tours aim to "institutionalise identity".

Secular rites

Cultural anthropologist Jack Kugelmass asks an almost rhetorical question, "Why go somewhere with the intention of *not* having a good time?" And yet his answer is straightforward: "For Jews, visiting Poland and the death camps has become

obligatory: it is ritualistic rather than ludic — a form of religious service rather than leisure ... I believe that those who go, particularly those who travel in tour groups — the majority of Jewish travellers to Poland do so to participate in a secular ritual that confirms who they are as Jews and, perhaps even more so, as American Jews." Kugelmass argues further that the aims of the secular pilgrimage are not to enlighten, inform or challenge preconceptions but rather to fuel people's apprehensions.

Ironically, in the 1990s, just as Israeli and American Jews had begun to solidify Poland's graveyard image vis-à-vis "death-and-rebirth" tours, Poland began building a modern democratic society. The process entailed accounting for complicity in the Holocaust and nurturing a Jewish rebirth at home. As Poland rose from a perceived bed of ashes, its people and government began to acknowledge that a future cannot be made without a past. Perhaps this is Poland's challenge to world Jewry. The narrative of Israel as Jewry's true safe haven, which has overshadowed and obscured Poland's leadership roles in the defeat of communism and the expansion of the European Union, has lost impact in the face of the ongoing Middle East conflict.

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs has responded with pre-trip educational orientations that include learning about centuries of Polish Jewish history and present-day alliances between Israel and Poland. In addition, the amended tours have incorporated meetings with Polish peers; 160 schools, more than half of the Jewish schools in Israel, have incorporated cross-cultural encounters between Israeli and Polish students into their youth tour programmes. The tours include visits to living heritage sites, from the Galicia region and Kraków's Kazimierz and Wawel Castle to Zakopane, the nearby mountain resort area. There are also plans to bring Polish students to Israel.

A different approach

To gain an idea of how youth tours might evolve in the future requires that we look elsewhere. Trips that depart completely from the mediated Holocaust tour are organised by NCSJ, a Washington, DC, Jewish advocacy group for revitalising Jewish communities in post-Soviet countries. NCSJ organises student leadership and advocacy visits to national capitals such as Moscow, Kyiv and Warsaw, where American Jewish students and their Russian, Ukrainian and/or Polish Jewish peers spend seven to ten days together exploring how Jewish community and culture have come back to life in the new democracies after decades of authoritarian

governance. Students exchange ideas and experiences regarding questions of identity, community, heritage and democracy. They visit Jewish community centres, synagogues, orphanages, and day schools, as well as famous Jewish heritage sites and Holocaust memorials. They meet with government, media and Jewish community spokespersons, who discuss the various ways in which they support the rebuilding of Jewish life and confront culturally ingrained anti-Semitic attitudes. Helise Lieberman, director of the Taube Heritage Tour Programme and who led the NCSJ group in Warsaw, says that participants of these tours are able to “honour the memory of the six million not only at the places they perished died, but also at the places where they lived,” and that “learning about the world created by those that perished at once intensifies the sense of loss but and helps to repair the broken chain of transmission of this precious legacy, even though the Holocaust is not the primary focus of these tours”. Nor are the participants shielded from meeting local people and experiencing the culture.

While it is understandable that trauma trumps everything, that the Holocaust and the void it left have overshadowed the pre-war heritage and the post-1989 re-emergence of Jewish culture, one element is stronger than trauma: youthful energy and the learning potential of encounters among young adults, such as these tours encourage. One need only read the accounts by students from Stanford University and Moscow Hillel who visited Warsaw and met their Polish peers, to see what the students absorbed from their surroundings and conversations, and the extent to which they changed their preconceptions and were heartened to find positive developments and role models in the communities they visited. “I expected Warsaw to be a dilapidated city,” noted one student. “I was pleasantly surprised to find a thriving, legitimate European city.” Another commented that, “In Jewish day school and at home, I was never taught to think of Poland as more than a cemetery for millions of Jews. To see a functioning, modern European society was a nice shock to the system, and I left more optimistic about Poland than about Russia. It was especially nice to spend time with people from the Jewish community, and to really feel their energy and optimism.” By supplanting out-dated representations with pertinent ones, such tour programmes can help transform the social dynamics and national myths that have kept a once vital culture frozen in its tragic past.

Beyond the Holocaust

Another new opportunity for illuminating Polish Jewish culture and education is the much-anticipated Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, scheduled to open in 2013. This world-class cultural and educational institution will be on a par with the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Israel’s Yad Vashem. The

key difference is that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will extend the historical narrative beyond the Holocaust to encompass the thousand-year history of Jewish civilisation in Poland. The new museum symbolises the Jewish awakenings in Poland and is a focal point for its development. More than almost any other initiative, it will transform relations between the Diaspora and the government and citizens of Poland. By virtue of the history and heritage it will innovatively present, this educational facility will transform Jewish heritage tourism to Poland.

There can be no more poignant way of honouring those who perished in or suffered during the Holocaust than to remember and connect with the extraordinary world that they shaped and that shaped them. “So, too, does praising the efforts of survivors, the Poles and the growing number of overseas supporters of the Jewish cultural revival in Poland,” states Honorary Consul and philanthropist, Tad Taube. The pre-war past cannot be recreated, but the wealth of Jewish resources in Poland can be accessed to help sustain world Jewry’s lifeline to their Ashkenazic roots. Heritage tours to Poland are one way to recover and reconnect with a land and a legacy from which many Israeli and American Jews descend. For the time being, however, the rejection of Poland continues to distance Israeli and American Jewry, not only from that nation but also from their own history and thus from themselves. By discovering a life-affirming tour narrative, world Jewry may be able to revolve its uneasy ties to the lost world of Polish Jewry. As an American high school student commented, after returning home from Poland, “It’s good to have a balance of remembrance and optimism for the future.” ❧

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