

## Anchored in the Past, Food for Thought in the Present



### *Field Guide to Jewish Warsaw and Kraków.*

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Contemporary understanding of cultural heritage emphasises that it is not so much the stock of tangible and intangible elements created in the past that have survived until today but rather these aspects of the past which are found useful in the present day context. As such, the making of heritage or heritagisation is seen as a process of discovery, revaluation and reinterpretation of certain aspects of the past which are understood as inspiring and relevant in the present, for a variety of economic, social, cultural, and identity-related reasons. The usual questions which follow such understanding of heritage are in what ways and to whom it is relevant.

The authors of the *Field Guide to Jewish Warsaw and Kraków* seem to depart from this very point of view, presenting Jewish heritage of the two cities in the context of its ability today, not only to provide Jewish visitors from abroad with anchors to the troubled past but also provoke and inspire questions about the

present. The guide is written by an interesting, trustworthy team of expert contributors, many of them well known participants in the revival of Jewish life and scholarly discussions on the past and contemporary presence of Jews in Poland. The rather emotional introduction to the publication reveals that it was written by individuals who have a strong sense of mission. Aiming to present Jewish heritage in Poland in a multidimensional way, they seem to be convinced of the urgent need to break away from the dominant narration of Poland as the land of the Holocaust and anti-Semitism, especially a single purpose-oriented instrumentalisation of youth visits to Poland, well presented in J. Feldman's, *Above the Death Pits, Beneath the Flag* (2008).

Jewish travellers, including educational and memorial tours, are without a doubt an important group of visitors to Jewish heritage sites in Poland, and if they are to obtain a more complex understanding of Poland, a profound change is needed in the character of Jewish visits in this part of Europe. As discussed with respect to youth tours by one of the guide's authors, Shana Penn, also in her text in *New Eastern Europe* (issue number 1(11)/2012), there is a need to move away from death camp tours focused on the Holocaust to Jewish heritage tours comprising not only of extermination sites but most of all of places where Jewish life still exists or thrived for centuries. As follows, the publication wants to encourage Jewish visitors to discover „the Polish cityscape as a layered text, a palimpsest with hidden layers of history and a complex, multicultural past visible on the surface“. If a regular guide book presents mainly sightseeing information, this one, in addition, tries to offer concise yet

comprehensive contextual information relevant for Jewish readers and provoke thinking over and discussion on different topics of potential interest to Jewish visitors to Poland.

First of all, the volume includes an introduction to the richness and diversity of pre-Holocaust Jewish presence in the two cities and more broadly speaking Polish lands. It provides information on the basic facts of Polish history, showing the broader context of Jewish presence in the country such as its experiences during the partitions in the 19th century, the Second World War, and the communist regime. Secondly, travelling back and forth in time on the proposed walking tours, the guide stresses the existence and revival of the present day Jewish communities in “the Land of Ashes”, including comments on the complex, new models of Jewishness in Poland, an issue which many visitors may not be aware of.

Linked with that is the question of agency and stakeholders of Jewish heritage in Poland. These stakeholders are very diverse, ranging from the international Jewish community, national and local authorities, and present day Jewish communities, to NGOs and individual non-Jewish Poles. It also mentions a myriad of initiatives related to Jewish heritage in the two cities and beyond them such as museum institutions, art in public spaces and festivals. In doing so it tries to show that both the past and the present are not black and white, including the coexistence of anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic approaches, and that Poland may be fascinating and inspiring not in spite of but often precisely because of the frequent paradoxes which one encounters.

Showing a broader context, in some parts of the publication interesting comparisons are made, which may make the data more meaningful to readers such as the remark on pre-war Warsaw being more Jewish than New York or the question of contemporary usage of sites of atrocity not only linked with Jewish but also Native American or African American suffering. The constant moving between the past and the present is likewise emphasised by the use of historic and contemporary photographs as well as making references to key political and cultural figures whose legacy is still relevant today, such as famous Jewish writers.

The idea to provide Jewish tourists with a structured set of questions to be asked and discussed while visiting Poland is excellent. This invites them to reflect on the main issues which often surface on such occasions but may remain unspoken. These include the relevance of pre-war Jewish life in Poland to the development of contemporary Jewish identity, pros and cons of pre-war assimilation, issues of memorialisation, agency and participation of non-Jewish Poles in looking after and celebrating Jewish heritage, property ownership and the issue of Jewish revival in Poland.

Notwithstanding the guide’s unquestionable value as a companion assisting preparations for and the actual travel of Jewish groups and individual tourists to Poland, especially youth tours, following the invitation voiced in the book to provide feedback to the authors, a few minor concerns may be raised. First of all, I am ambivalent about its promise to travellers to Poland of “a journey of transformation” where “all visitors discover things they did not expect, and find their understanding of Jewish culture permanently transformed”. While this is most

often true, and it is surely advisable for the visitors to stay open minded and attempt at leaving behind them or deal with the prejudices and stereotypes they may have coming to Poland, their experiences may actually seem less unique and meaningful if they come with a preconceived notion and expectations of such special experience.

Since the guide clearly aims to motivate its readers to ask questions and ponder on complex topics, if indeed their interest and curiosity is aroused, they should be offered some further guidance in their search for the meanings of Poland. Although different interesting publications are referred to throughout the book, there is no list of suggested further reading at the end of the volume, similar to the list of organisations and institutions provided there. It could also be of practical use while visiting Warsaw and Kraków, where several well stocked specialist bookshops may be found. In some cases it might have been useful to provide the readers with more precise data, especially where a topic is rather controversial (e.g. financing the restoration of Jewish heritage sites in Poland). The few factual mistakes found in the book may be easily corrected in its next edition such as the information that the frescos in St. Mary's Church in Kraków were designed by Stanisław Wyspiański, or the error in the English version of the title of R. E. Gruber's book.

In my opinion, being a native of Kraków, naturally much more familiar with this city than with Warsaw, there are some further interesting sites which should be included in the proposed walks focused on the Jewish heritage in the city, of which the authors were surely aware of but perhaps due to volume limitations could not include them. To better introduce Krakow

as a multicultural city in the 19th and the early 20th century, Szpitalna and Floriańska Streets could be added to the tour of the city centre, indicating numerous, once very prestigious and well known locations of shops owned by Jewish residents of Krakow as well as the former synagogue building adapted for the purpose of a Russian Orthodox church after the war. The tour of Kazimierz could in turn include a "detour" to the tenement house of Mordechaj Gebirtig and a broader mention of Jewish institutions present in the quarter prior to the Second World War. Numerous sites outside the scope of the proposed walk, concentrated especially in the south and south-western parts of Kazimierz testify to vibrant Jewish life in pre-war Kraków, such as the Jewish theatre on Bocheńska street, the headquarters of the Jewish community on Krakowska street, the Jewish hospital on Skawińska Street or Jewish sport institutions and their venues.

On a broader plane, Jewish heritage and experiencing it on tours may be an opportunity to reconsider many issues important not only in the development of Polish-Jewish dialogue or redefining Jewish identity, but also for the identity formation of Poles and the development of a pluralist, tolerant society in Poland. As such, as a valuable contribution to the specialist guide book literature, the modified, Polish version of the field guide, including similar, well thought out discussion topics and questions could also be very useful to non-Jewish, Polish tourists, particularly educational youth groups, which increasingly often take tours of Jewish Kraków or Warsaw.

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