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An Overlooked Renaissance

By Shana Penn

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On one of my recent trips to Poland, a young Jewish man studying at Warsaw University asked me: “Why do you American Jews send your children on death camp tours of Poland? Why choose only death when you could show life?”

He had a point. Each year, more than 20,000 Jewish youth from the United States and Israel come to Poland to visit the sites of the destruction of European Jewry. On programs such as March of the Living, students are exposed to Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek and Treblinka. They see where thousands more died at ghetto sites in Krakow and Warsaw. They are then flown to Israel to explore the rebirth of Jewish life. But they leave Poland with no idea that they have missed out on another rebirth within Poland itself.

In the past 15 years, Jews and non-Jews in Poland have brought about an amazing revival of Jewish culture, including Jewish studies programs, a national student network, an annual book fair and film festival in Warsaw, and Krakow’s Jewish Culture Festival, which draws a crowd of 15,000 from around the world.

The Jewish world has not absorbed the extent of the Jewish cultural renaissance in Poland or Polish society’s growing tolerance toward Jews. Otherwise, we would insist that March of the Living be true to its name, or we would choose tour programs that explore the sites of our centuries-old civilization, allow for participation in the cultural renewal, and introduce our youth to their Polish counterparts, such as the Warsaw student whose message to American Jews is: “Don’t think of us as ghosts or remnants. We’re Jews!”

Three generations of Jews have outlived the Nazi genocide and communist persecution in Poland — the survivors of the Holocaust, the postwar generations and now their children like the student I met. Though their numbers are relatively small (an estimated 20,000 Jews in a population of 38 million), individual Jews play prominent roles in all aspects of public life. As a social group, Jewish Poles possess a growing confidence and sense of security, reweaving ties to a rich cultural heritage and generating public discourse about Jewish identity and history, religious practice and antisemitism. Indeed, the estimates of the Polish Jewish population have doubled or tripled since the fall of communism, with thousands of Jews coming out of the woodwork and reclaiming their heritage.

The unanticipated rebirth begs American Jews to contemplate Jewish continuity in the heart of Europe and also to remember the centuries of Jewish existence that preceded the Holocaust. With our attention necessarily fixed on Israel these days, it’s easy to forget that, prior to World War II, Poland was the guiding light of world Jewry for close to 1,000 years. Chasidism, the Haskala, Yiddish literature, Bundism, Zionism — major movements in religious learning and secular culture blossomed there. So why hasn’t this profound cultural legacy been routinely taught as part of American Jewish religious education?

Biblical history, the Holocaust, Zionism and the founding of the State of Israel comprise the majority of educational curricula, but European Jewish achievement before and after the Holocaust does not shape contemporary Jewish pedagogy in the same way. We provide our young with a compressed history that slights the eventful middle chapters of Jewish existence in the Diaspora. A 900-year-old narrative, concentrated in Poland, has thus become a footnote in Jewish history.

There could be no more poignant way of honoring 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. We cannot re-create the pre-war past, but if we do not take advantage of the wealth of Jewish resources in Poland, what will happen when America's current generation of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe is gone and the pre-war Jewish experience is not transmitted within Diaspora families? How will we sustain our lifeline to our Ashkenazic roots? Pilgrimages to Poland are one way to recover and reconnect with a land and a legacy from which many American Jews descend.

There already is a basis for interest among younger generations in Ashkenazic culture — witness the phenomenal revival of klezmer music, which has piqued Jewish curiosity to delve deeper into the artistic, intellectual and spiritual content of our Eastern European heritage. Now teens and college-aged students, especially the thousands who have already visited Israel, can take the next step by going to Poland. At present, several American foundations, such as the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, are investing in new study tour programs and exchanges that will enable students to explore the Eastern European experience and help sustain the Jewish cultural renaissance in Poland.

I can imagine a chorus of anxious murmurs in response to this development, chief among them, “Must it be Poland, that breeding ground of antisemitism?” Given the positive changes underway, it's high time we overcome our images of Poland as a graveyard and Jews as victims. Surely we can accept that there are non-Jewish Poles of good will, who are participating in the cultural revival and challenging their society to confront its history of antisemitism. By now we've been hearing that France, with its recent displays of anti-Zionism and historical revisionism, has become more antisemitic than Poland. And still, our vehement rejection of Poland, though rooted in wholly legitimate causes, distances us not only from that nation but also from our history and thus from ourselves. By discovering a life-affirming existence, our uneasy ties to the lost world of Eastern European Jewry can find resolve. Let's rally behind the Warsaw student's appeal and make a victory of life over death.

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