

## Personal ties spur philanthropist to bring Poles, U.S. Jews together



Vilja Fussell

Tad Taube, left, and his son, Sean, stand in front of the Taube family's pre-war home in Krakow, Poland.

BY CAROLYN SLUTSKY

KRAKOW, Poland, Aug. 17 (JTA) — When Tad Taube decided to create the Polish Jewish Heritage Program, a branch of his Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, he did it for more than philanthropic reasons.

“I was born in Krakow,” Taube told JTA. “I have linkages that I feel positive about, and I wanted to make those linkages stronger.”

Beyond the personal connection, Taube is motivated by a perception that Americans misunderstand Poland and its relationship to Jews — and he wants to bring Polish and American Jews closer together.

“American Jews are certainly wary about Poland because they relate it to history — extreme anti-Semitism — and they don’t have much of a sense of what’s different at this point,” he said. “Prior to World War II there were 3.5 million Jews in Poland; it was the most culturally productive Jewish population that ever lived. Consigning those 3.5 million people to a postscript in history is unacceptable.”

The San Francisco-based Taube is founder of Woodmont Companies, a real estate investment and management firm, and president of the Koret Foundation. He recently traveled to Poland accompanied by the board of directors of his Taube Foundation.

The group toured Jewish sites in Warsaw and Krakow and met with local Jewish leaders to understand the impact of the foundation’s work on the estimated 8,000 Jews in Poland today.

The foundation currently supports several Poland-based organizations, Krakow’s Center for Jewish Culture and the city’s annual festival of Jewish culture, as well as Warsaw’s Jewish Historical Institute. Allocations for these projects approach \$1 million annually, Taube said.

Another project the foundation is helping to fund is the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, slated to open in Warsaw in 2008. The museum has received \$1 million in donations from the foundation so far.

---

While in Warsaw, Taube opened a new resource center at the Lauder Morasha School, an institution for Jewish children from kindergarten through ninth grade started by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, Taube's philanthropic partner in Poland. Taube dedicated the center in honor of his parents, Zygmunt and Lola Taube.

"My parents were great optimists. They believed in tomorrow," he said, before cutting a ceremonial ribbon. "I can think of no better way to honor them."

Board members toured the school; met with groups such as the Forum for Dialog Among Nations, which works to improve Polish-Jewish relations; visited the Moses Schorr Center, which offers classes in Hebrew and on Jewish themes and issues; met with Poland's chief rabbi, Michael Schudrich; and lunched at Beit Warszawa, Poland's Reform congregation. The encounters crystallized what until then they had only heard about Poland's Jewish community.

"We didn't really feel what was needed until we came here," said Anita Friedman, executive director of Jewish Family and Children's Services in San Francisco. "Now we know."

Stephen Dobbs, the Taube Foundation's executive director, outlined the major goals of the Poland initiative: to recover the country's pre-World War II Jewish culture, preserve, sustain and restore Jewish facilities, acquire Jewish artifacts, and improve the lives of contemporary Polish Jews.

"In the U.S., we've had 350 uninterrupted years to engage in dialogue on what it means to be a Jew," while Nazism and communism froze that discussion in Poland for many years, Dobbs said. Only with outside help can that conversation be re-launched, he added.

For Friedman, who traveled with her husband, Igor Tartakovsky, and their three sons, the trip was marred by an encounter with the darker side of contemporary Polish-Jewish relations.

The daughter of a Polish Jew who immigrated to the United States in 1947, Friedman took her family to her father's hometown, Gniewoszow. As the family walked around town, they were approached by local hooligans who shouted at them and threatened them.

"Americans have never really felt" this type of anti-Semitism, she said. "These are the type of people who pointed out our families" during World War II. "They were so ready to use physical violence."

In the end, the hooligans didn't harm the family but left them shaken.

But Friedman knows Poland is a changing country that can't be understood in a single visit.

"Poland means death to so many Jews," she said, "and the notion of vibrant Jewish life is shocking — it flies in the face of stereotype."

"There's a period of mourning and then rebirth," she explained.

Shana Penn, director of the Polish Jewish Heritage Program, said it's important for her board and other Jews to see Poland up close.

"One wants one's board to be totally engaged with initiatives," she told JTA. This project "calls for direct participation because we're breaking through stereotypes and recognizing the similarities of being Jews in the world today."

For board member Rabbi Steven Pearce of Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, donating time and money to help rebuild Polish cultural institutions lays the groundwork for the community's continuity and future self-sufficiency.

"When Jews here come out of the woodwork, they now have a place to call home," he said.