

OP-ED

In the New Poland, 20 years of democracy and Jewish life

By Tad Taube

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA) -- This month marks the 20th anniversary of the fall of communism in Poland and the rebirth of Jewish life. Today's Jewish revival is viable because Poland is a stable democracy for the first time in its history.

Today's society, based on law and respect for individual rights, provides an environment in which Poland's citizens can reconnect with a Jewish past that they may hardly know. The generations born after 1989 no longer harbor fears that the practice of a Jewish religious tradition may bring danger, whether from fascism and the desperations of war or from communist repression. In fact, the emergence of energetic new Jewish institutions and cultural life and traditions promises that the New Poland will regain its visible and important position in the international Jewish community.

It is an incredible outcome following 50 years of Nazi and Soviet domination. But New Poland and the Jewish cultural revival taking place there must be understood against the backdrop of 1,000 years of vibrant Jewish civilization in Poland. This extensive period, often referred to as the "Jewish Golden Era," is the foundation of today's global Jewry: More than 70 percent of the Jews in the United States and more than 60 percent of the Jews living in Israel come from families with roots in Poland.

As Poland's Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich has noted, "Where would Israel and American Jewry be without their Polish history?"

Rabbi Schudrich's question recognizes that Jews, above all others, live their history. Their sense of peoplehood supersedes differences in practices, and their commitment to Israel helps bind them together. It is continuity with the past and the prom-

ise of the future that Jews share with one another and with the world around them. Their deep and long heritage also serves as the underpinning of Judeo-Christian Western culture. Where would Western civilization be without Judaism and Jewish history?

Indeed, the Western view embodies a Judeo-Christian perspective that Western culture owes much of its foundations to that Jewish Golden Era. The Jewish millennium in Poland began in the 11th century, when European Jews started moving eastward into Poland and its neighboring states. Across shifting political allegiances and boundaries, these Jewish pioneers held a single religious and cultural identity. The communities they built performed a critical role in the development of Eastern Europe, with Poland at its center.

In the 16th century, the culture and life of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews was co-existent with the Polish empire, which at its height extended from the Baltic in the north through parts of Russia and Ukraine in the east and south into the Balkans. The emergence of Yiddish literature, centers of rabbinic learning, and new Judaic practices during the 17th and 18th centuries reflected a richness of traditional culture in a changing, more secular world. Migration west, to northern Europe and to the Americas during the 19th and early 20th centuries, was matched by a new Jewish urbanism and an emerging Jewish middle class throughout central Europe. On the eve of World War II, one in seven Warsaw inhabitants was Jewish.

After the devastation of the Holocaust, few could imagine that again there would be functioning synagogues in eight Polish cities, Jewish day schools and academic programs with enrollments

in the thousands, and community centers where Jews of all ages share companionship and deepen their understanding of Judaism.

Who could have predicted during the long years of Soviet domination and precarious Jewish life that Poland would ever become a democracy with Jewish legislators in Parliament, Jewish cabinet members and Jewish politicians active in towns across the land? Did anyone foresee that Poland and Israel would become important trading partners and strategic allies, or that Israeli visitors would be commonplace in Polish cities?

Moreover, Jewish cultural life is stronger for the willingness of non-Jewish Poles to support their fellow citizens in the exploration and celebration of a long-shared culture. Education in democratic norms has made both Poland's government and its people increasingly intolerant of anti-Semitism. Growing tolerance and an awareness of Jewish participation and integration in civil society have opened Polish

eyes to their newly rediscovered culture of Judaism.

Witness, for example, the Jewish Culture Festival held in Krakow each summer. This national and international celebration of Jewish culture attracts nearly 20,000 non-Jewish and Jewish participants from Poland, Europe, the United States and Israel.

Through support of events like this, with all their positive implications, the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture joins with other international Jewish organizations and individuals to renew our shared commitment to strengthen the institutional life of Polish Jewry and broaden the world's understanding of Jewish peoplehood as viewed through the historical role of Polish Jews.

(Tad Taube is the chairman of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, and honorary consul for the Republic of Poland. This summer, the foundation will celebrate a new sister-city relationship between Krakow and San Francisco.)
