

Visit to Poland leaves Bay Area residents optimistic

by carolyn b. slusky

On a recent tour of Krakow's underground tunnels, a group of Bay Area residents learned about the connection between Poland's burgeoning democracy and the revival of Jewish culture lately exploding there.

Karen Underhill, who has studied Polish and Polish-Jewish culture for years and has been living in Krakow for about a decade, led the group through the city's dark basements and beneath streets that had housed centuries of Jewish history.

She explained her theory that the Jewish situation in Poland today is a bellwether for the country's identity as a contemporary European society.

In times of trouble, Underhill told the group of about 25, "what Polish culture knows how to do best is keep culture underground — literally — and revive it."

The group traveled to Poland as part of a trip sponsored by the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland, a project of the Belmont-based Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture. Peninsula resident Tad Taube, a leader in the Jewish revival in Poland recently, hopes to get other area leaders involved in reinvigorating Jewish culture in the country of his birth.

"If there's a chance for the Polish-Jewish community to survive, it has to be with active participation from American Jews," he said. "We go back to our country — our other country — and tell what we've seen, that it's not a graveyard. It's active, it's vibrant, and we need it."

Sue Diamond, board president of the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco, was moved by a meeting with members of the Polish-Jewish community in the Nozyk synagogue in Warsaw. The trio of young men included the editor of a Jewish magazine and two founders of Jewish youth clubs.

The Holocaust, she realized, is never far from their minds. Even so, they choose to be openly Jewish against a backdrop in which it would be easier to choose not to.

"As nascent as it might be, they are eagerly seeking out being Jewish, and we ought to be part of it with them," she said.

For Moses Libitzky, president of the Jewish Community Foundation of the Greater East Bay, Polish-Jewish history is personal.

"My mother felt every rock was soaked with Jewish blood, but she had good memories too," said Libitzky, contrasting his previous trips to Poland, when the future looked bleak, to this one, which filled him with a sense of optimism. "Poland today is not a stereotype — Poland is a good friend of Israel, and you have to look at what context produces that."

Anita Friedman, executive director of the S.F.-based Jewish Children and Family Services and a Taube foundation board member, likened Poland's Jewish situation to posttraumatic stress disorder on a societal level. As such, she hopes the community will lay down new neural tracks. "You can't be stuck like a car in the snow in 1945," she said. "I can see how genuinely committed to democracy Poles are, and Jews flourish within a democracy."

For Jeff Farber, CEO of the Koret Foundation in San Francisco and a Taube foundation board member, the journey cemented his commitment to growing Jewish life in Poland. "It's an honor to be able to recognize that what happened, happened. You can't take it back. But you can recognize and understand it and make Jewish lives that much better."

For those involved in Bay Area Jewish communal organizations, the trip also provided an opportunity to think about how to connect their communities with Poland's. Diamond hopes to initiate travel programs to Poland and host exhibits from the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Friedman is involved in a project to create books for local Holocaust survivors with Polish roots.

As the weeklong Krakow Jewish Culture Festival drew to a close and activities raged outside, in the quiet of a luncheon in the Klezmer Hois, a Jewish-style restaurant, the visitors reflected on their visit.

"I came interested in the past," Diamond said. "But I leave interested in the future."