

# The Jewish Week

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## After 1,000 Years, The Next Chapter

*Groundbreaking ceremonies for museum in Poland that will focus on history of its Jewish community.*

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Warsaw — In the Nozyk Synagogue, the city's only active Jewish house of worship, confetti lay scattered around the bimah in the center of the sanctuary this week, the remnants of a double wedding ceremony that took place on Sunday that saw two new Jewish couples begin their lives together.

Across town, another new beginning took place this week – the groundbreaking for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the most visible sign of a Jewish future in this country as it plans to honor its Jewish past.



The building – 140,000 square feet of multi-media, narrative space including videos, film, holograms and models, along with an education center, cafeteria and auditorium – was designed by the Finnish architectural firm Lahdelma and Mahlamaki, and is intended to transform the landscape of this city and redefine Polish-Jewish relations.

While many Jewish survivors still harbor deep resentment toward the Poles, who they say fostered anti-Semitism during and after the Holocaust, others note the strides the Polish government has taken to strengthen its associations with Israel and Jews. The planned museum is the most dramatic signal of such efforts, and will focus more on the long history of Jewish life in Poland than on the tragedy of the Holocaust.

The museum, across the street from the monument commemorating the Warsaw Ghetto, will explain the Jewish story in Poland from the Middle Ages until the present day. It is slated to open in 2009.

After entering the glass structure with an uneven scar running down the outside, representing the parting of the Red Sea, visitors will descend into an underground portion of the museum through a symbolic forest; subsequent sections will include such features as a reconstructed wooden synagogue, a typical Jewish street, and rubble representing the destruction of the war and of the community.

The museum's budget, estimated at \$65 million, was raised by a combination of public and private funds; the Polish government provided \$26 million to the project, including 3.2 acres of land. More than \$20 million has been culled from private donors internationally, with more yet to be raised.

Some of the speakers at the groundbreaking ceremony, including Polish President Lech Kaczynski, said that a museum dedicated to exploring the 1,000-year history of Jewish life in Poland is a late arrival on the scene, coming 17 years after the fall of communism and in the midst of a vigorous Jewish revival.

But in many respects, experts of Jewish life in Poland said, it has taken this long for the stage to be set for a museum that will not tell simply the devastating history of the destruction of Jewish life during the Holocaust, but rather the entirety of the Jewish impact on Polish culture and society.

Here in Warsaw and throughout Poland, a Jewish future is growing. Synagogue life is formalizing, cultural activities are ubiquitous and diverse, Jewish ceremonies are commonplace and, despite the small size of the official community, which is estimated at around 10,000 out of a national population of some 38 million, the place of Jews in the Polish consciousness is complex and robust.

It is against this backdrop that the new museum will open.

Though Polish and Jewish supporters of the museum recognize that the Holocaust is a crucial and remembered piece of the Jewish history of Poland, the museum's designers devote just one of the nine chapters to that story.

"The museum is dedicated to telling the story of the millennium of Jewish presence in Polish lands," said Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a cultural anthropologist and professor at New York University who is the leader of the exhibition team. "One of the statements the museum wants to make is that the history of Jews in Poland didn't end with the Holocaust."

Tad Taube, a major donor to the museum who was born in Krakow and now lives in San Francisco, called the museum a seminal moment for Poland and for Jews. Despite rifts and troubles, he said, the Jewish history of Poland and the Polish history of Jews is deeply entwined.

"For Poles [the museum] is significant because they are acknowledging that in losing their Jewish culture, a piece of Polish culture was amputated, too," said Taube. "This is a rejoining of an amputated part of Polish history."

At the ceremony, President Kaczynski, who as mayor of Warsaw targeted funds from the city toward the museum, spoke of Jewish contributions to Polish life such as the chasidic

movement, Jewish enlightenment, Jewish publishing and notable Polish-Jewish writers like Nobel Prize-winner Isaac Bashevis Singer.

“There were better and worse periods” of this shared history, said Kaczynski, but “undoubtedly the history of Polish Jews is part of the history of my nation and requires commemoration.”

The organizers of the museum, which is projected to draw some 500,000 visitors annually from Jews visiting Poland on roots trip, as well as Polish school children, say one of the most important aspects of the experience will simply be having different groups coexisting in the space together.

For non-Jewish Poles, said Jerzy Halbersztadt, director of the museum, the space will serve to feed a hunger many Poles feel for information about Jewish life, and will demystify Jewish practices for many who do not encounter Jews in the course of daily life.

Sigmund Rolat, another Polish-born donor to the museum and a Holocaust survivor, is looking forward to a site in Warsaw where Poles can learn about the Jewish history of their country and Jews can amend some of their preconceived notions about Poland.

“Any person who walks into that museum and visits, if he is Jewish he’ll be proud of the fact that he’s Jewish, and if he’s not he’ll walk out knowing all there is to know about the Jewish experience in Poland.”

In a speech at the groundbreaking ceremony, David Peleg, Israel’s ambassador to Poland, read a note from newly elected Israeli president Shimon Peres, who was born in Poland and is honorary chairman of the museum. Peres wrote of the cross-fertilization of Jewish and Polish culture and expressed his hope that the museum would be a legacy and a hope for the future.

Marian Turski, a survivor of Auschwitz and the Lodz Ghetto and president of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland, likened the missing Polish Jews to Atlantis, a once-thriving civilization later lost. Turski implored the world to remember the centuries of positive, productive history here.

And in a passionate speech, Rabbi Meir Lau, born in Poland and now chief rabbi of Tel Aviv, spoke of Pope John Paul II, a hero to Polish Catholics who knew Rabbi Lau’s grandfather and who regarded Jews as elder brothers of Christians.

Despite widespread support for the museum, exemplified by the several hundred people at the groundbreaking who braved unseasonable rain and chill to attend the outdoor ceremony, questions remain in the Polish-Jewish community and from outside observers about the impact the museum will have once it is built and, ultimately, opened.

Some worry that the modern, international museum will upstage more modest local efforts at reviving Jewish religious and cultural life in Poland; others fear that resources

will be diverted from existing institutions, or that the museum will antagonize Poles who are already wary of a growing Jewish presence in Poland.

Halbersztadt, the museum's director, spoke to the last piece by citing a recent study conducted of people living in the area of the museum who largely support the building project, and by a recent warming from the local Jewish community to the project.

For Michael Berkowicz, a New Yorker on the North American Council of the museum, being in Warsaw for the groundbreaking was a marker of all the positive features the project has begun to contribute to the Polish-Jewish dialogue. He compared the building of a new museum, which will stand as a symbol of Jewish progress in Poland, to the writing of a new Passover Haggadah, a Jewish ritual, an involved process in which to find joy.

"We are a people who like to tell and retell our story," he said. "It's a way of validating our past." N

The writer's trip was sponsored by The Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland, a project of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture