

JEWISH JOURNAL

Is it time to stop hating Poland?

By Jane Ulman, Contributing Editor
2007-06-08

Last summer, as Hezbollah rockets rained down on northern Israel, a group of 15 Israeli teenagers from Nahariya were whisked away for two weeks' respite in Poland. In Israel, they'd spent their time hiding in bomb shelters; in Poland, they became guests of Lodz Mayor Jerzy Kropiwnicki and were treated to horseback riding, rock concerts, sightseeing trips and even Shabbat dinners complete with kosher food.

Many Jews still view Poland as the land of pogroms, persecution and prejudice; a terminally anti-Semitic and blood-drenched country where 3 million Jews were mercilessly murdered during World War II; a land dotted with death camps, desecrated cemeteries and deserted synagogues. What most Jews don't know is that Poland has changed radically over the past couple of decades, and these days, it is reaching out to Israel and to Jews -and not just socially, either.

As a member of the European Union, NATO and the World Trade Organization, Poland has become a land of economic opportunity. In fact, since the collapse of communism in 1989, many Israelis have been heavily investing in the country.

Elite Coffee purchased Poland's MK Café brand and has become one of the country's top coffee producers; Israel's Elran Group is a major financial partner in the newly opened Warsaw Hilton Hotel and Convention Center; and Israel's Elbit Systems has engaged in a joint venture with two Polish companies to produce unmanned reconnaissance aircraft for the Polish army and police.

Even Poland's public radio now broadcasts a daily 30-minute program in Hebrew, partially funded by Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"Poland is the most pro-Israeli country in the world," said Jaroslaw Nowak, deputy to Lodz Mayor Kropiwnicki in charge of relations with Israel and the Diaspora.

Yet many Jews harbor a seething, deep-seated hostility toward Poland that won't dissipate, no matter how many decades have passed since the Holocaust and or how markedly it contradicts the attitudes and behavior of present-day Poles.

"Jews in Poland felt they were betrayed by their neighbors, by people who had been their friends, and that betrayal looms larger than the betrayal by the Nazis, from whom they expected nothing," said Michael Berenbaum, Holocaust scholar and director of the Sigi Ziering Institute at American Jewish University (formerly the University of Judaism).

Berenbaum also explained that the totality of the violence in Poland -- the scope, intensity and speed, with essentially 90 percent of Poland's more than 3.3 million Jews wiped out in a matter of 14 months -- also fuels the intense loathing. And since a majority of the world's Jews trace their roots to Poland, the impact is personal and enormous.

Additionally, many questions concerning Poland's role in World War II remain unanswered. What really happened on July 10, 1941, in the town of Jedwabne, where at least 340 Jews were murdered by the local population, about 300 of whom were burned alive in a barn? And what instigated the pogrom at Kilce on July 4, 1946, where, of the 200 Jews who had returned home after the war, a Polish mob murdered 37 and wounded more than 80?

While Poland has passed legislation dealing with the return of communal Jewish property, survivors and heirs remain frustrated that the government still has not devised a way to compensate individuals whose private property was confiscated by the Nazis or later by the communists. And many people believe that anti-Semitism is too embedded in the Polish psyche to ever be overcome.

Still, 62 years after the Holocaust -- almost three generations later -- and more than 17 years after the fall of communism, Poland is a place where each summer since 1988 the Jewish Festival of Culture in Krakow has attracted thousands of visitors. A new Museum of the History of Polish Jews will break ground this summer, for which the land and much of the \$33 million cost were donated by the Warsaw City Council and the Polish government.

And because it is a place where Jewish life flourished and enjoyed relative safety for 800 to 1,000 years, a place that gave birth to the Ba'al Shem Tov and modern Chasidism and a place where more than 60 percent of all Jews can trace their ancestry, there is tremendous potential for tourism. So, naturally, Poland wants the word out.

That was the thinking recently when Poland's Ministry of Culture invited a group of 11 American Jews -- including Rabbi Steve Leder of Wilshire Boulevard Temple, Cantor Roz Barak of Temple Emanu-El in San Francisco, members of the American Jewish Committee in Los Angeles and Houston, as well as this reporter -- on a trip to explore Jewish life in Poland today.

Accompanied by Los Angeles Polish Consul General Krystyna Tokarska-Biernacik, the trip was designed to show Poland's vibrant and emerging Jewish life. Its mission was also to dispel American Jews' stereotypes of Poland and Poles by examining historical fact and fiction, as well as modern misconceptions.

For starters, there is Jewish life in Poland.

Just walk into the Lauder-Morasha Jewish Primary and Middle School in Warsaw, which began as a preschool with seven children in 1989. Today, 240 students, ages 3 to 16, are actively engaged in Jewish and secular learning. Student-made Stars of David and

mezuzahs adorn the hallways, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet circle the classrooms like wallpaper borders and the boys sport brightly colored kippahs.

The new head of school, Rabbi Maciej Pawlak, 29, who took the helm in September 2006 and who was educated at New York's Yeshiva University, is the country's first young Polish-born rabbi since World War II.

At Beit Warszawa, Poland's first post-war liberal synagogue, on any Friday night, 50 or more primarily young, casually dressed Jewish Poles welcome Shabbat by singing "Hinej Ma Tow" and "Szalom Alejchem," among other songs and prayers, the Hebrew words transliterated into Polish.

American Reform Rabbi Burt Schuman, 59, who arrived in July 2006 and who is the congregation's first full-time rabbi, gives the drash in Polish, a language he is quickly learning, and then English. Afterward, many of the congregants join together for a communal Shabbat dinner.

The synagogue, now a member of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, was founded in 1999 with just a few people by Holocaust survivor Severyn Ashkenazy, 71, who divides his time between Warsaw and Los Angeles. It now boasts more than 200 members.

"It is live, passionate and progressive Judaism," said Schuman.

There are other synagogues, as well.

In Warsaw, Poland's chief rabbi, American-born Michael Schudrich, 51, heads the 500-member Orthodox Nozyk Synagogue, which offers Friday night and Saturday morning services, daily minyans, classes and cultural events.

In Lodz, Symcha Keller, 45, a Polish-born cantor who lived in Israel and the United States from 1987 to 1993, conducts traditional Shabbat services and a daily minyan in the town's Jewish community center.

Chabad also now has a presence in Poland, with synagogues in Warsaw and Krakow. As for how many Jews now live in Poland, no one can say exactly.

The first problem is, who is a Jew? Is it someone counted according to the law of return, which identifies anyone with one or more Jewish grandparents as ethnically Jewish? Or should each Jew be counted according to halacha, or Jewish law, in which case the mother must be Jewish?

To date, about 5,000 self-identified Jews have registered with one of the two official Jewish organizations, the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland or the Social and Cultural Association of Polish Jews, both successors to established prewar groups. But Jewish community leaders believe the real number is 30,000 or even higher. One

reason is that many people are still discovering they have Jewish roots, with the typical scenario being a deathbed confession of a parent or grandparent.

Another issue in creating an accurate count is that many people are reluctant to admit they are Jewish. After all, and what is difficult for American Jews to fully grasp, is that from 1939 to 1989, through Nazi occupation and communist rule, it wasn't safe to be Jewish.

In Nazi-occupied Poland, being Jewish constituted a death sentence. And in communist Poland, a virulent wave of state-sponsored anti-Semitism in 1956 forced an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 members of the country's largely assimilated Jewish population to emigrate. In 1968, another outbreak of anti-Semitism pushed out approximately 13,000 more Jews.

Thus, in Poland today, according to Beit Warszawa's Schuman, "Nobody takes their Jewish identity for granted."

Some people have always known they were Jewish. That was the case with Monika Krajewski, an artist and teacher at the Lauder-Morasha School. During the 1970s, she and her husband, Stanislaw, then in their 20s, started studying in secret with a small group of friends, calling themselves the Jewish Flying University.

"We started learning; we didn't even know the names of the holidays," she said, explaining that their only resource was a copy of "The First Jewish Catalogue," published in 1973. Now she and her husband, a writer and professor at Warsaw University, are members of Nozyk Synagogue.

Others learn later. Malgorzata (Gosia) Szymanska, for example, was 12 when she asked her father why he always perked up when news of Israel came on television.

At the time, she didn't understand what being Jewish meant.

Now 26, Szymanska received a joint master's degree in Jewish communal service at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and public administration at USC in 2006 and has been working this past year as a project manager at American Jewish Committee's Los Angeles office. She returns to Poland this month to become Beit Warszawa's first full-time administrator.

But it's not only Jews who are rediscovering their past. Non-Jewish Poles have become aware of the 800 to 1,000 years of Poland's rich Jewish history only since the collapse of communism in 1989. They are coming to understand that Polish history and Jewish history are integrally intertwined. And they are wondering how a small minority of Jews could have had such a huge influence on their country, sometimes referring to the absence of Jews as Poland's "phantom limb."

Polish universities -- including Krakow's Jagiellonian University, Warsaw University and Wroclaw University -- now offer full Jewish studies programs.

And places such as Brama Grodzka (Grodzka Gate), the archway once linking the Christian and now-extinct Jewish sections of Lublin and currently a cultural center, are dedicated to preserving whatever can be salvaged from the Jewish past, including photographs and oral histories, and to educating people through exhibits, theater performances and lectures.

Artist Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, 50, who is not Jewish and who founded Brama Grodzka 15 years ago, explained, "I was born a second time at Grodzka Gate in 1992."

Zuzanna Radzik, 24, a devout Catholic who served as a guide on the trip, has been involved in Catholic-Jewish dialogue since high school. In 2001, when she was 18, she mounted a campaign against a bookstore renting space in the basement of All Saints Catholic Church in Warsaw when she discovered it was selling anti-Semitic literature. She circulated a petition and tried to meet with various church officials, drawing widespread attention to the situation, but it was eventually a new parish priest who succeeded in ordering the bookstore closed in December 2006.

Radzik received a master's degree in Catholic theology from the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Warsaw. She has been accepted at Hebrew University for the fall term, and if funding comes through, will pursue a second master's degree in religious studies.

She is also a board member of Forum for Dialogue Among Nations, founded in 1998 by former Polish National Parliament member Andrzej Folwarczny, 37, who serves as president. The purpose of this not-for-profit, nongovernmental Polish organization is to promote conversations between Poles and Jews in order to foster understanding and to help eradicate anti-Semitism.

Folwarczny believes that the visits the 20,000 to 30,000 Israeli and American Jewish teenagers make to Poland every year on March of the Living and other organized trips present a "golden opportunity" for dialogue. "Many Polish students have never met Jews," he said, also pointing out that the Jewish teens, if they are denied personal contact with Poles, often return home with even deeper prejudices.

But some questions that arise between Polish and Jewish teens stifle dialogue.

Realizing this, Folwarczny's organization collected 50 of the most challenging topics -- questions such as "Are Poles anti-Semites?" and "Why don't Jews recognize Jesus Christ as the messiah?" -- and asked various Polish and Jewish scholars and religious leaders to provide answers. The result is the newly published book, "Difficult Questions in Polish-Jewish Dialogue," a joint project of the Forum and the American Jewish Committee. Folwarczny recently completed a tour of seven U.S. cities, including Los Angeles, to talk about his work and the book.

Folwarczny is attracted to this work for many reasons. For one, as a Lutheran in a country that is 95 percent to 98 percent Roman Catholic, he is a member of a minority. His grandfather, in fact, a Lutheran minister, was imprisoned in Dachau.

Also, during the 1990 Polish presidential election, he witnessed anti-Semitism when some right-wing extremists accused Lech Walesa's opponent, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, of having Jewish origins. And later, working with German Jewish and Polish Jewish student dialogue groups, he saw, to his amazement, that many Jews held the Poles more responsible for the Holocaust than the Germans.

It is exactly that belief -- that the Poles were worse than the Germans -- that typifies the challenge of breaking down stereotypes.

While Poland did not instigate World War II -- the country was invaded and occupied by the Germans and 3 million Poles were killed, rendering them victims also -many Jews believe that the Poles were complicit in the Holocaust, that they failed to come to the Jews' aid and that the Germans placed the camps in Poland because of the Poles' entrenched anti-Semitism.

In fact, the history is not so simple. The camps were placed on Polish soil, at least in part, out of efficiency, because that's where the Jews were. It was cost-effective, according to Maciej Kozlowski, a historian and ambassador-at-large for Polish-Jewish relations for Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Which doesn't excuse the Poles, either. "The vast majority of Poles were indifferent," Kozlowski said. He pointed out that the Poles themselves were coping with severe wartime conditions, immobilized by hunger, cold and fear, and, for some, even relocation and captivity. He also noted that the punishment for aiding Jews in Poland, unlike other Nazi-occupied countries, was death, as well as death for other family members.

On the other hand, about 6,000 Poles risked their lives and their families' lives to help Jews and are recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. This is the highest number in any one country and about one-third of the total.

Additionally, the Polish government in exile was the only such government that actually tried to assist the Jews, albeit unsuccessfully, and even alerted the Allies to the German's plan to exterminate the Jews by sending couriers, such as Jan Karski, from Warsaw to London armed with information and documents.

To help clarify Poland's role, David Peleg, Israel's ambassador to Poland since January 2004, is always careful to refer to the murdered Jews as "the millions killed by the Germans on Polish soil." And in July 2006, the United Nations agreed to rename the Auschwitz concentration camp, a U.N. heritage site where 1.5 million people, mostly Jews, died, "the former Nazi German concentration camp of Auschwitz."

"I think it's important to note that Poland today is not an anti-Semitic country," said Peleg. He explained that the government fights against anti-Semitism and that the kind of physical attacks on Jews that occur in countries such as France and Belgium aren't happening in Poland. Rather, Peleg sees Poland's anti-Semitism as rooted in stereotype, more than contemporary reality.

The Catholic Church historically has been guilty of perpetrating much of Poland's anti-Semitism. Jews were viewed as Jesus' killers, eternally damned and incapable of salvation.

It wasn't until *Nostra Aetate* ("in our time"), Vatican Council II's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, was announced by Pope Paul VI in 1965 that the church's position on Jews was officially reversed by removing charges of deicide and deploring all forms of anti-Semitism, among other changes.

However in Poland, where the communists were in control, the first official Catholic Church document reflecting *Nostra Aetate* wasn't published until 1990, and its message didn't start spreading to the public until 1993, almost 30 years after Vatican Council II, according to Yale Reisner of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

"[The church] is moving in a positive direction, but it's going to take time," said Reisner, an American scholar who has lived in Poland since 1994. He noted that the Polish Catholic Church is the only Catholic institution, outside of Italy, that since 1998 has sponsored an official Day of Judaism. It takes place on Jan. 17, and its purpose is to foster interfaith dialogue and education.

Another huge issue is restitution for confiscated Jewish property.

The Polish government passed a law in 1997 giving the Jewish community permission to submit claims for synagogues, schools, cemeteries and other communal religious properties. "The scale is enormous," said Monika Krawczyk, CEO of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, who stated that about only 20 percent of the claims have been resolved in the time-consuming restitution process.

Of the more than 1,200 Jewish cemeteries that have been identified, for example, one-third have been destroyed and only 60 have been officially transferred to the Jewish community. Additionally, once these properties have been procured, the repair and upkeep is often financially daunting.

The return of private property is even more complicated, given that homes, land and businesses were confiscated from Jews, as well as from non-Jewish Poles, by the Nazis and later by the communists. Many of the properties were destroyed, along with any identifying records, and were later rebuilt by different people, making it difficult to trace original ownership.

Some movement, however, is finally being seen. A draft of a long-awaited restitution bill has been presented to the Polish Parliament, in which Jewish and non-Jewish former

property owners who are no longer Polish citizens would be able to collect approximately 15 percent of the current value of the buildings or lands.

But the real question is, is there a future for Jews in Poland?

Holocaust scholar Berenbaum believes the unrealistic hatred toward Poland will slowly cease as the numbers of Holocaust survivors diminish. He also sees the Polish Jewish community becoming more assertive and more involved in shaping its own future.

And the truth is, we may not even know for another 50 years if Judaism can take root again in Poland. But for people like Symcha Keller, who heads the 300-member Jewish community in Lodz, that doesn't matter.

"It is not easy to be a Jew in Poland," he said, "but it is very, very important."