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Polish Jewry, Coming Of Age

New era of self-reliance seen as community looks to itself for direction.

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When Poland's Yeshiva Chachmei Lublin, which before World War II was one of the greatest centers of Jewish learning in Europe, was rededicated last week, members of the Polish Jewish community looked on the ceremonies with a feeling of extreme pride.

The yeshiva, built by Rabbi Meir Shapiro in 1924, is the first building to have been restored solely by Polish Jewish funding, garnered from restitution of communal buildings, and it represents a sea change occurring in Polish Jewish life, observers say.

In the 1990s, the early years of Polish democracy, there was no model for modern Jewish life in a country that had seen all manner of religious continuity wiped out by the double burdens of the Holocaust and communism. Organizations like the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation stepped in with funding and visions for the future of Polish Jewish life, and over the next years a semblance of normality, of synagogues, minyans, mikvehs, learning and community, was re-established. People who had never known they were Jewish were free to explore this piece of their identities, and the Polish Jewish community grew.



Today, the challenges faced by Polish Jews are different. No longer like a wide-eyed child, Jewish life in Poland is entering adolescence 17 years after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe. As Piotr Kadlcik, chairman of the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland, puts it, "We have a generation of people for whom being Jewish is not a big deal. 'I'm Jewish – so what?'"

Kadlcik grew up under the specter of the Holocaust in a time when Judaism was a traumatic prospect; he only found out about his Jewish roots as a teenager, and attended synagogue services more than 25 years ago with a collection of mostly older men. But, he says, at 45 he is now among the youngest people praying in Warsaw's Nozyk synagogue, and his son and daughter are being raised in a Warsaw with Jewish youth clubs for children, Jewish schools, two thriving congregations and no sense of looming pain.

“This is a generation for whom being Jewish is nothing fancy, traumatic or exciting,” says Kadlcik. “I believe they will shape the future and now we are paving the road for them.”

Another development in Poland’s increasing self-determination is the ordination of the first native Polish rabbi, Mati Pawlak. Pawlak is now at the helm of Lauder Morasha, a school founded in the early ‘90s with a few children that today has more than 250 students in grades K-8, replacing the longtime American director. There are several other young Polish men studying outside the country to be rabbis, and it is the hope of the community that they will return to serve one of the Jewish communities in Wroclaw, Lodz, Gdansk or elsewhere.

And there is a new Jewish high school that is growing, according to Kadlcik, housed in another Warsaw building that the community procured through the restitution process.

Rabbi Michael Schudrich, an American who has served as chief rabbi of Poland these past 17 years, says the Polish Jewish community has been grateful for the support Americans and Israelis have provided in shaping their community and funding their projects, but that he, too, feels a shift in the relationship.

“The difference is it’s no longer just being the recipient of largesse both financial and educational,” says Rabbi Schudrich, who likens the relationship between Polish Jews and their American and Israeli supporters to a growing junior partnership. “It’s no longer just being excited about being Jewish. It’s beginning to form [its] own opinion.”

This self-reliance comes at a time when liberalism and minority groups in Poland are being challenged by a fragile, right-wing coalition government. The government has been outwardly supportive of Jewish life, with President Lech Kaczynski visiting Israel last year and inviting Rabbi Schudrich to the presidential palace after an anti-Semitic hooligan attacked the rabbi. However, there are also members such as Roman Giertych, who serves as deputy prime minister and minister of education and whose party, the League of Polish Families, has anti-Semitic roots.

Last week Maciej Giertych, Roman’s father and a right-wing Polish member of the European Parliament, evoked ire among the international Jewish community when he released a booklet called “Civilization at War in Europe.” The volume said that Jews willfully separate themselves from society by creating ghettos, and that the Catholic-based European civilization cannot coexist with the Jewish, Torah-based one.

But while the international quest for a more open democracy rages on, on the community front many agree that — discharged from the duty of simply celebrating their Jewishness — Polish Jews have now moved on to the task of defining and ensuring a Jewish future.

Konstanty Gebert, a prominent Polish journalist who is Jewish, feels that the opening of the yeshiva in Lublin was highly symbolic because “we did it ourselves,” and says that

people in his community do feel more empowered in recent years, but that the community is not self-sufficient yet.

“There does seem to be much more local involvement, essentially due to the fact that a new generation of Jewish activists who got their sea legs after ’89, instead of relishing the very fact of being Jewish and Jewishly open, were more interested in doing Jewish things,” says Gebert. “They are much more down to earth and less dramatic, and this is a clear improvement.”

Gebert is also the associate director of the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland for the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture. Tad Taube, a philanthropist born in Krakow who left Poland just before the war, has stepped into the funding arena of Polish Jewish life in the past few years and his is now the only American Jewish foundation office in Poland, according to Deputy Director Shana Penn.

“Religious, communal and cultural programs are all reaching new levels of maturity and self-sufficiency,” says Penn. “The Jewish community, since its re-emergence 17 years ago, had the vision to be self-sustaining and to nurture its own spiritual, communal and cultural leadership. Now those seeds, planted more than a decade ago, are bearing fruit, such as Polish-born rabbis, Jewish studies programs and the Museum of the History of Polish Jews.”

Penn also notes that the Taube Foundation builds bridges between Jewish and Christian Poles working on Jewish issues so there is not ill will between people working for a common purpose, and that the Polish Jewish community is now better able to advocate for and represent itself on the national and international stage, something that had previously been the purview of outside Jewish organizations.

And Gebert, optimistic, is already looking to the next step of the developing Polish Jewish autonomy, hoping for not only self-reliance but for his community to take responsibility for someone else, like BeloRussian Jews.

At a recent conference on “Poland and Judaism Today: Understanding a New Era in Polish-Jewish and Polish-Israeli Relations” held at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., former President Aleksander Kwasniewski spoke about the growing independence of the Jewish community of Poland in terms of its relations with the larger Polish society.

“We have separate faiths but common lives, histories,” he said. “Our nations are so connected it’s impossible to speak about Polish history without Jews or Jewish history without Poles.”

For his part, Rabbi Schudrich looks forward to seeing how Poland continues to grow in its role of junior partner to the larger Jewish world.

“The Jewish community of Poland was decimated and left by all for dead. Our revival of our re-emerging Jewish community is the fulfillment of the verse from Psalms:

“I will not die but live and proclaim the works of God” (Ps. 118:17).

More than 80 years after Rabbi Shapiro had a vision to build a yeshiva in Lublin for Polish Jewish scholars to learn about their faith, what remains of his community had the vision to pick up the pieces and is starting to build on its native ground again. n

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