

Author Shana Penn On Today's Jewish/Polish Renaissance

Will lead an Osher Marin Jewish Community Center-sponsored "Jewish Culture is Alive and Well" tour, to Poland and Germany.

By Richard Rapaport
December 1, 2010

The complex, tragic and wondrous were all on display Tuesday evening at the Osher Marin Jewish Community Center.

Shana Penn, executive director of the Taube Philanthropies, and author of "Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland," spoke about her latest project, a history of "the richly vibrant Jewish cultural renaissance" in Poland over the last several decades.

This summer, Penn along with Joanne Green, director of the Center for Jewish Life at the Osher Marin JCC, will guide a trip to a number of Holocaust-related and Jewish cultural sites. The trip will culminating on a decidedly upbeat note; a visit to Krakow to attend the 20th Jewish Cultural Festival, an event the Jerusalem Post happily deemed, "a semi-kosher Woodstock."

The Festival has included talents such as Theodore Bickel, Schlomo Carlebach, the Klezmatics, and other well-known Jewish and non-Jewish performers.

Prior to Penn's talk, attendees were encouraged to view the "Centropa Exhibit," a collection of 30, six-foot-tall banners that, through biographical photos and text, offers a look at 20th century Jewish life in Poland. The posters portray the lively, ordinary, human interaction of life, work, leisure and cultural life of Poland's 3.5 million Jews. The exhibit is made all the more poignant by the sheer normalcy of the snapshots of a culture that could not imagine that it would be utterly extinguished during the five-years between 1940 and 1945. The exhibit will close in mid-December.

Penn introduced a video about Krakow's Jewish Culture Festival before speaking about the transformation of Poland over the last several decades, which, she believes, has made what was the most sinister of all the Holocaust's killing-fields into a nation eager to explore the thousand-years of rich Jewish life that leavened Polish nationhood before nearly being wiped out, and then purposefully suppressed during what was a five-decade cultural holocaust in which Poland's Communist rulers attempted to bury what little remained of Jewish/Polish life. Along with post-war pogroms and the exodus of virtually all remaining Polish Jews to the United States or Israel, Jewish life in Poland was virtually moribund.

Penn told the story of various rabbis and scholars who came to Poland beginning in the 1960s thinking of themselves as "the last generation," custodians who could, in essence, give Judaism in Poland a proper burial. The idea, according to Penn, was to secure the

surviving synagogues, holy sites and graveyards, operating under the theory "that to have a Jewish life, you need Jews." This proved to be not entirely true, with Penn suggesting that Poland's cultural reawakening was coincident with the triumph of democracy. According to Penn, "where democracy thrives so does Judaism."

Penn also noted the rise of underground "Flying Universities," the Solidarity Movement, and the fall of Communism itself, leading to a dawning discovery by Poland's younger generation of the millennium of Jewish life in Poland the absence of any knowledge of which had left tragic, debilitating holes in Polish life and culture. Penn spoke, for example, about what she terms "the Madeline Albright Syndrome," in which thousands of older Europeans made "death-bed" revelations to their children and grandchildren that they too, were Jewish, and had "passed" for decades in order to survive both Nazism and Communism. These revelations about Jewish identity, in turn, led to an identity crisis in the younger generation, which, according to Penn, "wondered what to do; to see a rabbi, a genealogist, to immigrate or be circumcised?"

Most of all, Penn believes, the discovery of what was a vast well-spring of culture led young ethnic Poles to openly study and celebrate Poland's rich Jewish heritage. This, Penn relates, has led to an "historical miracle," in which, "today there are more ethnic Poles who speak Yiddish than Polish Jews who do." Part of this equation has to do with the sheer numbers. Penn believes that there are no more than thirty-thousand practicing Jews in Poland.

This is a demographic flyspeck compared to the three-and-a-half-million Polish Jews at the beginning of World War II. Their presence, however, does at least make tangible an increasingly celebrated heritage.

It is this heritage that Penn and the Marin JCC's Joanne Green will help explore during their "Jewish Culture is Alive and Well" tour from June 2 to July 7. Members of the group will travel to Warsaw, Krakow and Berlin, not only visiting Jewish cultural and commemorative sites, but also meet with scholars and community leaders who will speak on various aspects of the unlikely, near-miraculous renaissance of Poland's once-lost, now-being-found Jewish heritage.