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POLAND AND ISRAEL SHARE MORE THAN JUST A PAINFUL HISTORY

MODERN RELATIONS FLOURISH AND SO DO INVESTMENTS

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BY TAD TAUBE

Which European country is said to be one of the most favorably inclined toward Israel? Which has students organizing Israel Days at major universities? Whose president made the first visit by a head of state to Israel immediately after the war with Hezbollah?

Amazingly, that country is Poland.

Surprised? Even if a Google search on "Poland and Israel" generates 177 million hits, the news highlighted above is not what you find when you open your morning paper. More often, you are likely to read that a Polish member of the EU Parliament published an anti-Semitic pamphlet -- but it is seldom mentioned that the Polish president and other government representatives condemned him. Bad news travels fast -- especially if it is bad news we have been conditioned to hearing. And Poland has seldom been the beneficiary of good news.

Policy priority

And yet, the Web site of the Israeli embassy in Warsaw carries a message of thanks for letters and e-mails of support for Israel that the embassy "receives daily." Next to this, a bulletin announces that Leszek Kolakowski, Poland's greatest living philosopher, has just been awarded the Jerusalem Award. Even if Polish-Jewish relations still suffer from the hangover of a painful history, Polish-Israeli relations are flourishing. And not only in the cultural sphere. As Andrzej Krawczyk, foreign policy adviser to President Lech Kaczynski said last summer before his boss's visit to Israel -- good relations with Israel are "among Poland's foreign policy priorities."

This was reinforced in January at a conference at Georgetown University in Washington, where former Polish President Aleksander Kwasniewski, current Israeli ambassador to Poland David Peleg, and Joanna Hoffman, of the Polish Embassy in Washington, spoke in almost identical glowing terms about the positive state of Polish-Israeli relations. The two countries, both with strong political ties to the United States, share similar perspectives on international relations and have developed close ties even in such sensitive areas as military, security and economic cooperation with each other and with the United States. Poland appreciates the growing Israeli investment (assessed at \$3 billion) in the Polish economy. "We have to stop looking at Poland mainly from the perspective of the Holocaust," said Ambassador Peleg. "Poland is a partner."

Vulnerable sites

Both countries strive for a world in which nations can live in peace and security. Poland, saddled with a geography not less difficult than that of Israel, has managed to build good relationships with its neighbors, and is therefore positioned to survive occasional political storms, such as its recent political spat with Germany about remembering World War II -- something that may sound bizarre to many other nations, but certainly not to Israelis. Further, understanding that freedom must be defended, often at a price, Poland has a military presence in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

The burst of cooperation does not come out of the blue. When communism was toppled in 1989, Poland offered to let Soviet Jews travel through its territory, terrorist threats notwithstanding, even before Poland became the second ex-Soviet bloc country to re-establish relations with the Jewish state.

When Poland joined the European Union, Shevach Weiss, a former Israeli ambassador to Poland, remembers that the Polish foreign minister phoned to assure him that the Polish voice would be "decent," Weiss says, "and it really has been."

In the educational arena, both countries have embarked on an ever-growing program of youth exchange. Thousands of young Israelis make the trip to Poland each year. Israelis are naturally interested in visiting Holocaust sites, but more frequently, Israelis exhibit growing interest in learning about Polish Jewry's remarkable 1,000-year-old cultural history and its renaissance within a democratic and prosperous Poland. And young Poles, who do not yet have the means to make the reverse trip, flock to Israeli events in Poland to witness the life rebuilt by the grandchildren of their neighbors' ancestors. When the two groups mingle, one can literally hear the sound of walls tumbling down.

TAD TAUBE, chairman of Taube Philanthropies and president of the Koret Foundation, in San Francisco, is co-hosting a Bay Area visit this week by the Polish ambassador to Israel and the Israeli ambassador to Poland.