

OP-ED

A Changed Poland Is Israel's Good Friend

By Tad Taube

The new Poland that has emerged since the fall of the Iron Curtain is a strong friend of Israel and does not deny the horrible chapters in its past, writes an honorary consul for Poland in America.

SAN FRANCISCO (JTA) — The historic, first-ever joint session of the Polish and Israeli governments in Jerusalem last month underscored the importance that Poland attaches to its ties with Israel.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk spoke of Israel as Poland's "strategic partner" — a term reserved until now for Germany and the United States — and assured Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that "Israel can always count on Poland."

Israel regards Poland as its ambassador in the European Union. Poland votes on Middle East matters in the United Nations more like the United States than the rest of the European Union.

"Poland and the Jewish people share a thousand-year history, and ever since we regained our independence in 1989, the state-to-state relations with Israel have also increased in importance," Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski told Israeli media during the state visit in late February.

The new Poland's advocacy of Israel and the Jewish people has fostered something remarkable: a full-fledged Jewish cultural renaissance in Poland. A country once perceived as the so-called cemetery of the Jewish people has given rise to a vibrant, unprecedented renewal of Jewish life in a flourishing democracy. Meanwhile, Sikorski is talking about an old-new love affair between Poland and Israel.

Nations can change. The tragic experience of Polish Jewry in the middle of the 20th century came as such a shock to the Jewish people precisely because Poland had been a safe haven for them for ages.

(Papal nuncios in the 17th century would complain to Rome that Poland was a "paradis Judaeorum," a Jewish paradise.) In the 20th century, European anti-Semitism drove hundreds of thousands of Polish Jews to the United States.

Just as Poland had changed from paradise to



The Museum of the History of Polish Jews rises on the site of the Warsaw Ghetto. *Top*: recent construction photo; *bottom*: architectural drawing.

cemetery under Nazi occupation, in the last quarter century the new Poland, after recovering its independence from the Soviets in 1989, has moved dynamically to a rebirth of freedom and democracy.

Contemporary Polish Jewish culture documents that transformation. A 35-minute documentary film at this year's New York Jewish Film Festival, "Eight stories that haven't changed the world," showcased

this new view of Poland. In the short film, eight elderly Polish Jews remember their childhood there before the war. Their stories, all ending before the Holocaust, are moving, charming and funny, as are the people telling them, and the young Polish Jews who made the film. The *Forward* gave the film a rave review, urging every JCC and synagogue in the United States to show the film.

The film is one of many manifestations of a new Jewish culture being produced in the new Poland, which connects the past with the present and the future. The cultural revival, like the film, is assisted by American Jewish philanthropies, including ours, the San Francisco-based Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture.

Education in diverse and innovative forms is the engine driving Poland's Jewish cultural renewal for Jews and non-Jews in Poland and for Jews the world over. From the Lauder Morasha School to the annual Krakow Jewish Culture Festival, from Birthright Israel trips and Jewish student unions to JCCs, synagogues and Jewish studies scholarship, educational programs transmit the complexities of Polish Jewry that deserve to be recognized and appreciated.

A public building under construction in Warsaw is symbolic of the Jewish awakening and a focal point for its development: The Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Its stunning architecture is designed to evoke associations with the parting of the Red Sea during the Exodus from Egypt. When completed next year, the museum will document the thousand-year-old glory of Polish Jewish history and culture.

Funded by the Polish federal government and the city of Warsaw together with extensive private contributions, the museum is illustrative of democratic Poland's embrace of its Jewish past and present.

The embrace also must include an honest accounting of the darker pages of Polish history — and the Poles are doing it. Polish historians have started to investigate earnestly the attitude of Poles to Jews during World War II. Their books are being published, and make hard reading in a nation that used to believe it was history's victim, not a perpetrator. But these books are being read and discussed. A harrowing play about Jedwabne, the Polish town in 1941 where local Poles massacred some 300 local Jews, won Poland's most prestigious literary award last year.

Yes, none of these accountings of histories will change the world or the past. Yet story by story, breakthrough by breakthrough, they change the way Poles and Jews in Poland view each other.

Last year, for the first time since such polls started to be made in the 1980s, a majority of Poles expressed friendly attitudes toward Jews. This should come as no surprise to any Jew who has seen the enthusiasm of thousands of non-Jewish spectators at Jewish culture festivals or encountered the hospitality of Poles when traveling around the country.

There is a new Poland out there that is friendly to Jews and is waiting to be rediscovered.

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