Building a Jewish Future

A conversation with Tad Taube, Chairman of the San Francisco-based Taube Philanthropies, and Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland in the San Francisco Peninsula Region. Interviewer: Shana Penn

SHANA PENN: Could you ever have imagined there would be a revival of Jewish life in your native Poland?

TAD TAUBE: As someone who was born in Poland and narrowly escaped the Holocaust, I spent many years after the war mourning a world that I thought was totally lost. But since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, in the country that saw an almost total annihilation of its Jewish population and the rich civilisation that it produced, I have had the privilege of being involved in this cultural revival as Jewish and Christian Poles reclaim Polish Jewish heritage. That is the purpose whereby my family foundation created the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland back in 2003.

The mission is to strengthen the revitalisation of Jewish life in democratic Poland, and to broaden the world’s understanding of the historical role of Polish Jewry and its significant contributions to western culture. We are honouring the past and building a Jewish future by connecting diaspora Jewry to their Polish heritage. Moreover, with so many Christian Poles involved, I view my foundation’s Jewish Heritage Initiative as working towards a larger goal of investing in the cultural future for all of Poland.

How did you first go about supporting Jewish programmes in Poland?

In the beginning, before we established the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland, we didn’t know very much about the support structure for the resurgence of Jewish life. But it didn’t take too long to figure it out. One of the first organisations we supported was a Jewish Day School in Warsaw for children between the ages of five and twelve. Normally children have the opportunity to observe a parent, an aunt or uncle, a grandparent or great grandparent, but in Poland in the early 1990s, it was the adults who were learning about Judaism from the children schooled in the classroom about religious holidays, history, music, baking challah every Friday, the meaning of their Jewish background, from its cultural foundation to its foundational languages. It was a kind of reverse-transmission of knowledge and experience of Jewish traditions. Seeing that direction
Tad Taube signing the July 2009 agreement at Kraków City Hall that established the sister city relationship between San Francisco and Kraków.
of Jewish education gave us insight into the bottom-up evolution of Jewish life in Poland at that time.

Which is more important, to create a community for those people who are just now discovering their Jewish roots, or to show all Polish people and the world at large this remarkable heritage that once thrived and was then destroyed?

Both are important. We are directing our philanthropic work in Poland toward a global community. There are millions of people on this planet who don’t have a clue about what Poland is today, what role it’s playing and has played in Jewish achievement, and what constitutes Jewish life in Poland over hundreds of years. At the same time, our work supports local awareness, consisting of the Polish people who are now learning the lessons of their history, including the people who had family connection to Jewish life. In the new free democracy, young people have a great thirst for knowledge, particularly about themselves and their past.

Another programme you support that focuses on the preservation and celebration of Jewish heritage is the Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków.

The Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków is the perfect example of an innovative civic and educational initiative that enables Jewish and Christian Poles to celebrate global Jewish culture and its Polish roots. The Festival is not intended for Polish audiences alone. In the summer of 2011, over 25,000 people from around the world attended more than 250 events during the ten days of the festival. Performers, speakers, artists and instructors flocked to Kraków from the US, Israel, Europe, the former Soviet Union, even Mali; and of course, from within Poland. The Jewish Culture Festival proved once again that it is a living testament to the power and durability of the Jewish People – and to Christians who respectfully seek to honour Jewish heritage in today’s democratic Poland. The Taube Foundation is proud to be the leading American sponsor of the Festival, and we hope it will soon become a destination site for Jews the world over.

A lot of young people attended the Festival in 2011, with the greatest age cohort being between 19 and 29. What do you think of this trend?

The youth of Poland are interested in learning about their history, and embracing it. Hundreds of Christian Poles have been filling Jewish studies courses, researching community archives and delving into all aspects of Jewish culture. The Jagiellonian University recently inaugurated a Masters Programme in Holocaust Studies, and it is already receiving applicants. The Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland also supports young adult groups which are constantly increasing their membership and contributing to the cultural discussion, such as ZOOM (Polish Jewish Young Adult Association) and Czulent. The president of ZOOM, Anna Bakula, was nominated to the European Union of Jewish Students
(EUJS) and elected its vice president. Past president of ZOOM, Jan Śpiewak, and member, Ivo Krankowski, have received praise for their documentary film, “8 Stories That Haven’t Changed the World”, documenting the childhood memories of eight Polish Jews born before the Second World War. Just as the children taught their parents about their Jewish heritage in that first generation after the end of communism, it is the younger generation today that are leading efforts to learn about, appreciate, and transmit Polish Jewish heritage.

Tell us about another remarkable project you are championing: the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

The Museum of the History of Polish Jews will present the thousand-year history of Jewish civilisation in Poland, the epicentre of world Jewry for centuries prior to the Holocaust and the ancestral home of the majority of Jews today. When completed in 2013, this world-class educational facility will be on a par with the US Holocaust Memorial Museum and Israel’s Yad Vashem. The key difference is that the Museum of the History of Polish Jews will extend the historical narrative beyond the Holocaust to encompass an epic Jewish history that shapes Israeli and American Jewish life even today.

The Museum is organised as an interactive history museum, a “theatre of history”. There are going to be eight large exhibit halls and each will portray a certain segment of Jewish history in Greater Poland. Greater Poland means not necessarily the borders that are on the map today, but the borders as they were as they shifted from one period of history to another. One exhibit gallery will be devoted to the Holocaust. However, the museum will not be Holocaust-centric; it will be a history museum telling the epic thousand-year story of Jewish civilisation in Poland, from the earliest times in the tenth century through to the dismantling of the People’s Republic of Poland and the rebirth of Jewish life today. I think every person that has any scholarly interest has a pretty good appreciation for the fact that there is some component of the past that’s going to dictate what happens in the future, and so it is with this museum.

The City of Warsaw donated the land for the Museum, and together with the Ministry of Culture is covering most of the capital costs of the building, with a continued investment in the Museum for the future. Why do you think these government institutions have involved themselves to this extent?

The best answer I can give you is their answer. Early on, when we were putting together an advisory group to help us plan, we had in that group a high-ranking diplomat representing the government of Poland. One of the people in the group asked him the question, why. Why are the Poles doing everything they can do now to assist the renaissance of Jewish life in Poland, renaissance of organisations,
Institutions and so forth? And he said, “Before the war, the percentage of the Jewish population in Poland was about ten per cent of the total. There were about three and half million Jews out of a Polish population of 38 million.” The Poles are painfully aware that when they lost their Jewish population, they lost an important element of their own cultural life. A vast number of Polish Jews who emigrated to the United States have been extraordinarily successful in the arts, music, theatre, science and so forth. Over 70 per cent of the Jewish population in the United States today has Polish origins. And Polish people are also aware what extent of historical responsibility their country had. They are working very hard to regain something that is very important to Poland. They have made significant investments in restoring some of these cultural activities. As noted, they have a majority of the investment, in addition to the land, in the structure of the Museum. The Polish Government is also undertaking to pay for a large part of the operating expenses, and it is usually the operating expenses that make or break a museum. As there is so much front-end effort to raise money to build the museum, there is often very little residual energy left to fund the ongoing expenses of operation, which for a museum are very large.

**What is the most challenging aspect of the work that you are doing in Poland and specifically about this museum project?**

The principal challenge is that we are trying to complete a multi-million dollar project in a country that is not accustomed to large capital projects of that kind. We are trying to explain the need for this kind of capital to largely American donors, because Americans have the interest and the money to support large capital projects, and we are still faced with the problem of trying to explain what this Museum is and why it is so important, taking into account the geographical disconnect. Why should a wealthy individual who lives in Detroit and is capable of making a large gift support a museum in Warsaw? It’s not the easiest story that one can champion if you are trying to fund a large capital project. And then one encounters significant residual resistance from people who really don’t understand that there has been a phenomenal societal transformation in Poland, that it is not the same East European country which propagated anti-Semitism over several hundred years. The Polish government has been the least of our challenges. They have been the most supportive, helpful to a fault, not only with money, but with their outreach. We had the former President of Poland, actually both former Presidents of Poland, but initially Aleksander Kwaśniewski, come to the United States and do a multi-city tour promoting the Museum. Think of how important that must be to Poland to have the president out there acting as a spokesperson for and promoting this Museum. His successor, the late Lech
Kaczynski, was also advocating in the United States. He was the former mayor of Warsaw, so he was the mayor who actually made the decision or joined in the decision to contribute the land for the Museum. And the Foreign Ministry has been extremely helpful. I can't think of an element of organised political life in Poland that hasn't been at the forefront of trying to make this happen.

You have supported a myriad of programmes in Poland via your philanthropic organisation. How has your role as Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland helped you in your involvement?

My role as Honorary Consul gives me a formal title through which to advocate for Poland. Recently, I have been spearheading a campaign on behalf of Poland's inclusion in the Visa Waiver Program, together with other Honorary Consuls across the United States. The bill is currently in the US Senate and House of Representatives, and we have high hopes that it will be passed and the visa requirement waived for Poland.

With my fellow Honorary Consul in the San Francisco Bay Area, Christopher Kerosky, I am also the co-chair of the San Francisco-Kraków Sister Cities Program, which sponsors activities to bring the two metropolises closer together. For example, through the Sister Cities Program, we recently launched an academic exchange between the Jagiellonian University School of Law and the University of California, Berkeley Boalt School of Law. Starting in the summer of 2012, a group of Jagiellonian law students will come to California for an intensive summer course in American law. I could not be prouder to support such activities that foster cross-cultural experiences.

You have indicated that what brings together your activities in Poland and the San Francisco Bay Area is the area of Jewish philanthropy is an overarching goal of supporting “Jewish Peoplehood”. Can you define Jewish Peoplehood for us?

Peoplehood is everything that one would consider to be traceable to Jewish culture. Peoplehood is a hot pastrami sandwich on rye. Peoplehood is Jewish comedians. Peoplehood is Israel. Peoplehood is the Torah, bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs. It is an all-encompassing phrase that defines who a Jew is and the breadth of what that really means.

The most important purpose of Peoplehood is to give individuals a sense of who they are and where they came from. Jewish Peoplehood in all of its components, including the work that we do in Poland, ultimately leads us to the conclusive statement that Judeo-Christian culture and western civilisation are the work, in part, of Jewish people over a 1,000-year period in Eastern Europe.

I would encourage everyone to go to Poland, and to experience and celebrate the revival of Jewish life, and I would encourage those already in Poland to do the same. I would encourage everyone who can to go to the Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków, the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute
and the Jewish Genealogy & Family Heritage Center, the Galicia Jewish Museum, the Jewish Community Centre in Kraków and the up and coming Jewish Community Center in Warsaw. And I would encourage all to visit the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, scheduled to open in 2013, a year that will honour the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. The opening of this modern, forward-thinking museum in this anniversary year encapsulates what we are trying to do: honour the past, see how it has shaped the present, and use that to create a better future for Jewish people, reinforce Polish democracy, and inspire the international community.

Tad Taube, born in Kraków, Poland in 1931, left with his parents for the United States in May 1939, a mere few months before the Nazi occupation. For nearly a decade, as Chairman of the San Francisco-based Taube Philanthropies and President of the Koret Foundation, he has directed his philanthropic efforts toward supporting the resurgence of Jewish life in his native country. Taube Philanthropies is the single largest American Jewish family foundation operating in Poland today. Tad Taube is the recipient of the 2004 Commander's Cross, Poland's highest civilian medal, and was appointed Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland in the San Francisco Peninsula Region in 2007.