Jewish Spirit in Krakow

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By Igal Avidan

Sixty years after almost all of Krakow's Jews were murdered, their absence fascinates local Polish residents so much that they've staged the biggest Jewish culture festival in Europe - for non-Jews.

Ben Zion Miller - cantor, ritual slaughterer and circumsicer in a hasidic community in Brooklyn - is very pleased with his loyal Polish audience. The classroom in the grammar school in Krakow where he holds his workshop quickly fills up with people, many of whom join Miller in singing hasidic songs about Jerusalem in Hebrew, reading from song sheets in Polish letters. No one seems to understand Hebrew nor to be aware that Miller chose the songs to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Jerusalem's unification.

The 50 people present are content to repeat the songs over and over again, as Miller tells his audience that "Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach's tunes never end."

One thing troubles Miller, a stout man with a black yarmulke, white T-shirt and black suspenders and pants. He is not happy to be singing under a crucifix - which, he tells me, he refers to as "the swastika." But Miller, who has attended the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival for 10 years, did not want to have the silver and wooden image of Jesus on the cross, which adorns every classroom in overwhelmingly Catholic Poland, removed, possibly because he didn't want to have a dispute with someone in the audience or the local media. "In this way, he is forced to listen to us singing," he says, referring to the symbol without looking up. "After all, he is Jewish, too."

It is only one of the ironies and incongruities that accompany the annual Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow, held in early July for the 17th time this year, including 29 concerts, 17 workshops, six exhibitions, several meetings with Israeli authors and Polish experts on Israeli literature, 11 films and tours of synagogues and Jewish cemeteries.

An estimated 20,000-30,000 people attended the festival, the largest of its kind in Europe. The overwhelming majority of them were non-Jews.

Israeli singer and musician Shlomo Bar is not disturbed by the crucifix. In his drumming workshop, the Morocco-born Israeli musician devotes his whole attention to his audience, with whom he is conducting an intensive rhythmical dialogue - without words. He wears a large, colorful, Oriental-style yarmulke and is sitting barefoot in front of 30 adults and children. All of them are holding a drum between their legs. Bar pounds his drum and the group pounds in response.

"After 10 years of coming here, this place has practically become my second home," says Bar. "I've been working throughout Europe, performing and giving workshops to artists, but nowhere outside of Israel have I felt such a strong connection to my audience as in
Poland - and I sing only in Hebrew. Although the Poles don't understand a word, they seem to respond to the country's 1,000 years of Jewish culture, which - unlike buildings - cannot be erased."

Appropriately, the Jewish Culture Festival takes place in Kazimierz, Krakow's old Jewish quarter. Emptied almost completely of its Jewish population during the Holocaust, the buildings, streets and alleyways, synagogues, squares and cemeteries survived intact, retaining an Old-World charm.

For centuries, Kazimierz, enjoyed extensive autonomy and became the main spiritual and cultural center of Polish Jewry. In 1938, Krakow's Jewish population numbered some 60,000, about 25 percent of the city's population. In the 1930s Krakow had 120 officially registered synagogues and Jewish prayer houses. Between the First and Second World Wars, a particularly active secular Yiddish culture developed in Krakow, and the Kazimierz district can be seen in the opening scenes of the classic Yiddish movie "Yidl mitn Fidl" ("A Jew with His Fiddle"), filmed in 1936 and starring Molly Picon.

Most of Krakow's Jews were murdered in Auschwitz-Birkenau and in the nearby Plaszow camp; only 500,000 of Poland's prewar, 3.5 million Jews survived the Holocaust. The Jewish community of Poland was further decimated by post-war pogroms and Communist anti-Jewish purges. Today, fewer than 10,000 individuals belong to the Polish Jewish community, although, according to Polish sources, there are some 30,000-40,000 individuals in Poland who have some direct religious or cultural connection to the Jewish community.

But few returned to Kazimierz, and the area fell into neglect, a backwater unsafe at night. But with denationalization of property following the fall of Communism, and especially after Steven Spielberg filmed "Schindler's List" here, a form of Jewish culture began appearing in Kazimierz again. "Jewish-style" restaurants soon followed, and the narrow streets named Jozefa, Jakuba and Estery also boast hotels with Hebrew names, book stores selling Judaica and souvenir shops displaying rabbi dolls.

Seven synagogues still stand in this small neighborhood, three of which are active today. The Remuh synagogue founded in 1553, plundered and devastated during World War II and reconstructed in the late 50s, is open daily. The Temple synagogue, built in 1862 by the Krakow Association of Progressive Israelites, is open only on the high holidays and for special events as is the Kupa synagogue dating from the 17 century. The community of 170 mostly elderly members is traditional, and the only resident rabbi, Israel Boaz Pasz, is Orthodox. The Jewish Culture Festival, like most festivals of its kind, has also brought attention and new-found chic to the neighborhood.

The Festival has an annual budget of $800,000, half from state funds and the rest covered by private supporters, according to Janusz Makuch, the founding and ongoing spirit behind the festival. "The Friends of the Festival contribute some $40,000, and the Taube Foundation, located in San Francisco, helps as well, as do other foundations."
Such a Jewish revival in a city an hour's train ride away from Auschwitz would not have been possible without someone "meshugge" for Jewish culture and religion, and Makuch is that person. Until he was 14 years old, Makuch tells The Report, he had never heard the word "Jew." An elderly man in Pulawy, his hometown, told him that before the war, half of the city's population had been Jewish. This shocked the Polish boy so much that he began to search for what he calls "my own Atlantis." Jewish culture, he adds, is an important part of his Polish culture and he started the festival in order "to share with other Poles my fascination with Jewish culture and religion ... I also want to show Poles what they lost, and to focus on 1,000 years of Jewish heritage in Poland, not on the six years of the Shoah."

In 1980 Makuch moved to Krakow and began attending Shabbat services. He made friends with some of the city's few elderly Jews and read extensively about Jewish history and religion. In 1988, when Poland was still under Communist rule, he and Krzysztof Gierat, a film producer who was vice mayor of Krakow, gathered 100 people into a theater to celebrate a one-day Jewish festival.

Now the festival's sole director, Makuch says that the annual event aims to resurrect prewar Jewish Kazimierz. "We cannot return real Jewish life to Poland because there are only some 200 Jews left in Krakow today," he says. "On the other hand, the souls of those who vanished are still alive, and without their presence the festival would not be possible."

During nine days in early July, thousands of Poles and a handful of Jewish-American visitors listened to musicians from nearly a dozen countries, including Canada and Argentina, learned Yiddish or Jewish cooking, and heard lectures on subjects such as the lifestyle of contemporary Jewish Orthodox women or traditional Jewish clothes in Poland. Noting that there was almost no visible police presence or security checks at entrances to the event, Makuch says proudly, "This is probably the only place in Europe where this is possible."

In contrast to reports by the Anti-Defamation League noting that the proportion of the population holding anti-Semitic views is somewhat higher in Poland than in other countries, Makuch says only, "I know there is anti-Semitism in Poland, but except for a few graffiti, I've never experienced any of it."

Polish-Jewish publisher and journalist Konstanty Gebert has attended the Festival since its beginning. "The generation that was born after the war grew up in a Poland devoid of Jews, but where you felt their absence," he says. "You see abandoned buildings of a weird architecture, cemeteries with grave inscriptions you cannot even read, and you hear the silence when talking to your parents. You can use curse words as often as you want at your parents' dinner table and nobody will notice. You say 'Jew' and the conversation stops cold. There's something there - huge, invisible and yet present. So you're naturally curious and this curiosity has fuelled interest for the Festival," he tells The Report.
Commenting on the fact that the Festival is run by non-Jews, Gebert says, "Let's face it, we are 8,000 Jews in this country - so if there is going to be a Jewish cultural presence in Poland it will be organized essentially by non-Jews for non-Jews." Does he want such a presence? "I do, especially as most performers are Jewish and they provide high-class Jewish culture."

Not everyone is so delighted with the Jewish celebration in Krakow. Israeli author Aharon Appelfeld, a Holocaust survivor, was astonished and touched by the great interest sparked by two of his books that were published in Polish. Speaking to The Report from his home in Jerusalem, Appelfeld says, "I met a few Polish intellectuals - half-Jews and quarter-Jews, this is indeed a category there - for whom Jewishness is a mystery they discovered as adults. But it was difficult for me to forget those Krakow Jews who lived in Kazimierz and were burned. I felt as if I'm in a cemetery."

Appelfeld continues to say that Jewish life in Poland could have stood a chance had the Poles not murdered Jewish survivors after the war. Among them was an Auschwitz survivor shot dead in Krakow in August 1945 - seven months after the liberation by the Red Army. Dozens of others were wounded when a mob attacked Jews praying on Shabbat at Kazimierz's Kupa synagogue on August 11, 1945. Jewish men, women and children were beaten on the streets on which the Festival takes place today; their homes were broken into and robbed.

At a sold-out concert in the Temple synagogue, surely there are children and grandchildren of those who took part in the Krakow pogrom who are now applauding the legendary pianist, composer, conductor Leopold Kozlowski, the last prewar Klezmer musician still living in Poland (who played in Schindler's List and is the grandson of the renowned Klezmer musician Pejsach Brandwin). Is this the reason why they are so thrilled by the Polish singers onstage mimicking a dancing "rabbi" or a "yeshiva boy," while Kozlowski accompanies them on the piano? Maybe they believe that these stereotypical images of Polish Jews are real because they have never seen real Jews, but rather base their opinions on films about the shtetl?

These young Poles are here mainly to understand who they are, says Gebert. "Poland cannot understand itself without factoring in the Jews, without attempting to reclaim its Jewish past."

"They simply love the show," says Michael Sobelman, spokesman and cultural attaché of the Israeli Embassy in Poland, who attended the concert. "Since the 1980s, it became less intimidating to be Jewish," he points out. "Many Poles started searching for Jewish roots and identifying themselves as Jewish. Poles are not driven by guilt feelings because they just don't feel guilty. Instead, they see themselves as victims of the Germans."

Polish historian Edyta Gawron from the Department of Jewish Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Krakow adds that in general Poles did not assist the Germans in killing Jews in the concentration camps. "These were rather Ukrainian and Lithuanian guards.
Poles feel guilty not for killing Jews, because only a few did murder, but for not helping them enough."

Some, such as 21-year-old Anna Slobodianek, volunteer to work at the festival office and find time to visit the exhibit at the former Schindler factory and attend a "concert on the roof." Making her way to the klezmer concert at the Temple synagogue, she says that she doesn't know if any of her ancestors were Jewish, "but I wish they were."

Throughout Poland, the Jewish past is becoming more present, as it was particularly at the final concert, entitled "Shalom on Szeroka" and held at the large square in the very heart of Kazimierz. For hours, I watched the crowds singing songs like "Hevenu Shalom Aleichem" and dancing enthusiastically in circles to hasidic tunes. Touched, amused, fascinated, I tried hard to understand these young Poles. After midnight, I gave up and joined in.