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In Poland, a Jewish Revival Thrives

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Photographs by Piotr Malecki
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KRAKOW, Poland — There is a curious thing happening in this old country, scarred by Nazi death camps, raked by pogroms and blanketed by numbing Soviet sterility: Jewish culture is beginning to flourish again.

“Jewish style” restaurants are serving up platters of pirogis, klezmer bands are playing plaintive Oriental melodies, derelict synagogues are gradually being restored. Every June, a festival of Jewish culture here draws thousands of people to sing Jewish songs and dance Jewish dances. The only thing missing, really, are Jews.

“It’s a way to pay homage to the people who lived here, who contributed so much to Polish culture,” said Janusz Makuch, founder and director of the annual festival and himself the son of a Catholic family.

Jewish communities are gradually reawakening across Eastern Europe as Jewish schools introduce a new generation to rituals and beliefs suppressed by the Nazis and then by Communism. At summer camps, thousands of



Hasidic dancing and singing, legacies of the 3.5 million Jews who lived in Poland before the Holocaust, are mainstays of the annual Jewish festival in Krakow. Last month, 20,000 people attended, though few of them were Jewish. Above, the Thursday night dance party, with music from the festival’s Hasidic dance band.

Jewish teenagers from across the former Soviet bloc gather for crash courses in Jewish culture, celebrating Passover, Hanukkah and Purim — all in July.

Even in Poland, there are now two Jewish schools, synagogues in several major cities and at least four rabbis.

But with relatively few Jews, Jewish culture in Poland is being embraced and promoted by the young and the fashionable.

Before Hitler’s horror, Poland

had the largest Jewish population in Europe, about 3.5 million souls. One in 10 Poles was Jewish.

More than three million Polish Jews died in the Holocaust. Postwar pogroms and a 1968 anti-Jewish purge forced out most of those who survived.

Probably about 70 percent of the world’s European Jews, or Ashkenazi, can trace their ancestry to Poland — thanks to a 14th-century king, Casimir III, the



Tadeusz Taube, left, an American Jew born in Krakow, is one of the festival's major benefactors. Janusz Makuch, right, was born to a Catholic family and founded the festival in 1988.



Krakovians and tourists watch a concert of Jewish music on the streets of Krakow during the festival. This year, more than 20,000 people attended, few of whom were Jewish.

Great, who drew Jewish settlers from across Europe with his vow to protect them as “people of the king.” But there are only 10,000 self-described Jews living today in this country of 39 million.

More than the people disappeared. The food, the music, the dance, the literature, the theater,

the painting, the architecture — in short, the culture — of Jewish life in Poland disappeared, too. Poland’s cultural fabric lost some of its richest hues.

“Imagine what it would mean for the culture of New York if all Spanish-speaking New Yorkers disappeared,” said Ann

Kirschner, whose book, “Sala’s Gift,” recounts her mother’s survival through five years in Nazi labor camps.

Sometime in the 1970s, as a generation born under Communism came of age, people began to look back with longing to the days when Poland was less gray, less monocultural. They found inspiration in the period between the world wars, which was the Poland of the Jews.

“You cannot have genocide and then have people live as if everything is normal,” said Konstanty Gebert, founder of a Polish-Jewish monthly, *Midrasz*. “It’s like when you lose a limb. Poland is suffering from Jewish phantom pain.”

Interest in Jewish culture became an identifying factor for people unhappy with the status quo and looking for ways to rebel, whether against the government or their parents. “The word ‘Jew’ still cuts conversation at the dinner table,” Mr. Gebert said. “People freeze.”

The revival of Jewish culture is, in its way, a progressive counterpoint to a conservative nationalist strain in Polish politics that still espouses anti-Semitic views. Some people see it as a generation’s effort to rise above the country’s dark past in order to convincingly condemn it.

“We’re trying to give muscle to our moral right to judge history,” said Mr. Makuch, the festival organizer.

Mr. Makuch was 14 when an elderly man in his hometown, Pulawy, told him that before the war half of the town was Jewish. “It was the first time I had ever



Traditional Hasidic dancing during the festival. This year, the festival had almost 200 events, including concerts and lectures and workshops in everything from Hebrew calligraphy to cooking.



Jewish guests before the start of Sabbath dinner, at the synagogue in the Kazimierz district of Krakow, Poland. Before World War II, Krakow was home to about 70,000 Jews. Today there are fewer than 300.

heard the word ‘Jew,’ ” Mr. Makuch recalled.

He became a self-described meshugeneh, Yiddish for “crazy person,” fascinated with all things Jewish. When he moved to Krakow to study, he spent his free time with the city’s dwindling Jewish community. There

were about 300 Jews, compared with a prewar population of about 70,000. There are even fewer today.

While few Jews have returned to the city, Jewish culture has, largely because of Mr. Makuch. In 1988, together with Krzysztof Gierat, he organized the city’s

first Festival of Jewish Culture, a one-day affair in a theater that held only 100 people. In 1994, it became an annual event. There are now smaller festivals in Warsaw, Wroclaw and Tarnow.

The Krakow festival has helped revitalize the city’s old Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, which deteriorated after the end of the war.

Today, quaint carved wooden figurines of orthodox Jews and miniature brass menorahs are sold in the district’s curio shops and souvenir stands. Klezmer bands play in its restaurants, though few of the musicians are Jewish.

Along one short street, faux 1930s Jewish merchant signs hang above the storefronts in an attempt to recreate the feel of the neighborhood before the war. Many Jews are offended by the commercialization of their culture in a country almost universally associated with its near annihilation. Others argue that there is something deeper taking place in Poland as the country heals from the double wounds of Nazi and Communist domination.

“There is commercialism, but that is foam on the surface,” Mr. Gebert said. “This is one of the deepest ethical transformations that our country is undergoing. This is Poland rediscovering its Jewish soul.”

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At a drumming workshop in Jozef Dietl primary school, Shlomo Bar, from Israel, led an elderly woman, a young boy in a Pokémon T-shirt and shorts, a young man in dreadlocks and two dozen other, mostly non-Jewish participants in a class on Sephardic rhythms.

Outside, Witek Ngo The, born in Krakow to Vietnamese immigrants, worked as a festival volunteer, directing visitors to other workshops in nearby schools.

In one, Benzion Miller, wearing a black yarmulke, white T-shirt, black suspenders and pants, taught 40 people Hasidic songs, a wood-and-silver crucifix high on the wall behind him.

Half of the festival's \$800,000 budget comes from the national and local governments. The rest is contributed by private donors, primarily from the United States, including the Philadelphia-based Friends of the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival.

Tad Taube, a businessman whose Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture is one of the festival's biggest donors, was born in Krakow and left shortly before the war.

Together with other donors, Mr. Taube's foundation has spent more than \$10 million to help revive Jewish culture in Poland. He attended the recent groundbreaking for a Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw, another effort he has supported.

Like many people involved in the resurgence of Jewish culture in Poland, Mr. Taube said he believed that it was not only important for Poland, but for



Young members of a Jewish community group from Pittsburg, Pa., at the Remu synagogue in the Kazimierz district of Krakow during the Jewish Festival. Remu is the only active synagogue in Kazimierz.



Locals and tourists on the streets of Kazimierz district of Krakow during the Jewish Festival. While some Jews are offended by the commercialization of their culture in a country almost universally associated with its annihilation, others see this celebration as a triumph of history.

Jews around the world.

Chris Schwarz, founder and director of Krakow's Galicia Jewish Museum, agreed, saying, "Rather than coming here just to mourn, we should come with a great sense of dignity, a great sense of pride for what our ancestors accomplished."

For others, the celebration of

Jewish culture in a city just an hour away from Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp where a million Jews died, is a triumph of history.

"The fact that you can walk around Krakow with a lanyard around your neck that reads 'Jewish Culture Festival' is an extraordinary thing," Ms. Kirschner said.