

The Fall of the Wall and the
Rebirth of Jewish Life
in Poland: 1989–2009

Published by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture in cooperation with
the Honorary Consulate for the Republic of Poland in the San Francisco Bay Area



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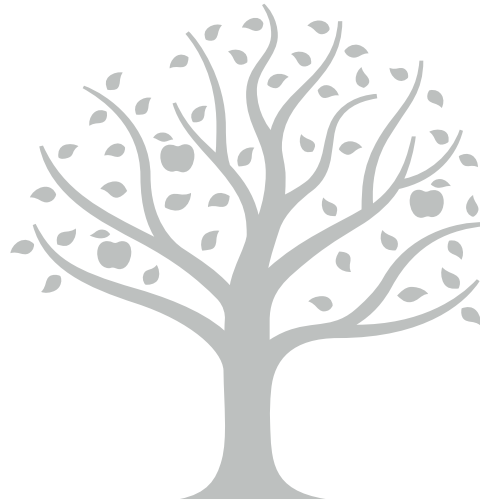
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TAUBE
FOUNDATION
FOR JEWISH LIFE
AND CULTURE

IN COOPERATION WITH THE HONORARY CONSULATE
FOR THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA





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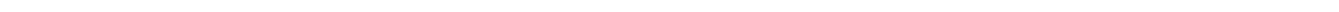


The Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland (JHIP)

A PEOPLEHOOD PROGRAM OF THE TAUBE FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH LIFE & CULTURE

The Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland (JHIP) is committed to strengthening the institutional life of Polish Jewry and to broadening the Jewish world's understanding of peoplehood as viewed through the historical role of Polish Jews in the life and culture of Jewish people everywhere. It does this by supporting and creating educational, communal and cultural programs for a growing Jewish population in Poland, and linking Polish Jewry to Diaspora communities in the United States and Israel.

Since 2004, the JHIP has become a major force in the revitalization of Jewish life in Poland, supporting more than 70 programs and five new educational initiatives that meet the dual needs of strengthening Jewish communities in Poland and linking American Jews to their Ashkenazi heritage through programs in genealogy, heritage restoration, education, traveling exhibits, and study tours. Our newest initiatives include a Cultural Tourism Program and the Jewish Genealogy Learning Center, developed for Jewish youth and adults worldwide who are interested in their Polish roots and also eager to celebrate the Jewish renewal taking place in today's democratic Poland. By linking living heritage to the Polish past, JHIP programs bring history forward for future generations in critical ways that inform identity and peoplehood.



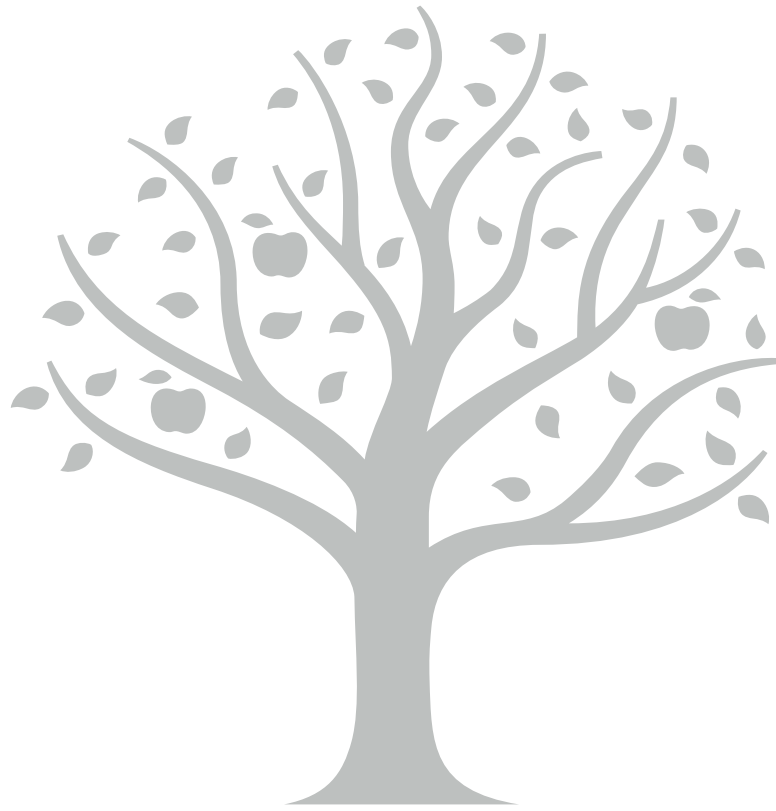


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Institutions and projects supported by the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland



Jewish Genealogy Learning Center of the
Jewish Historical Institute



Taube Center for Jewish Cultural Renewal, Warsaw



Concert at the Jewish Culture Festival, Krakow



Galicia Jewish Museum Exhibit, Krakow



Warsaw Jewish Cemetery



Lauder Morasha Day School, Warsaw



“Czulent” Young Adult Association, Krakow



Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw



Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Warsaw



Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich at the Nozyk Synagogue, Warsaw



Poland Jewish Heritage Tours

FOREWORD

by 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 wholly lost. But since the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in 1989, in the country that saw an almost total annihilation of its Jewish population and the rich civilization that it produced, I have had the privilege of being involved in a renaissance as Jews and non-Jews reclaim Polish Jewish heritage.

That is the purpose whereby the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture created the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland. And it also is the reason we are now celebrating the 20th anniversary of the “Fall of the Wall and the Rebirth of Jewish Life” with the release of this special collection of essays by some of the leading movers and shakers in the revitalization of Jewish culture and civil society in New Poland.

Each of the extraordinary testimonies contained in this publication is, in its own way, testament to individual and collective hopes for a renewed Jewish future in New Poland. These accounts should be read against the backdrop of Jewish history in Poland: one thousand years of vibrant Jewish life; fifty years of Nazi and Soviet domination; twenty years of democracy—in fact, these two decades comprise the first real and enduring democratic experience in Poland’s history.

That millennium comprised the most important center of the Diaspora after the end of the Golden Age in Spain; it produced formative religious, intellectual and political currents from Hasidism to Zionism, from Yiddishism to Jewish Socialism, from the birth of the Jewish theater to the flourishing of the Jewish press. But in later years Poland was also a site of mounting anti-Semitism under the growing shadow of two totalitarian neighbors – Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.

So for many Jews, when we think prewar “Poland” we are of two minds. On the one hand, we recall the Baal Shem Tov, David Ben-Gurion,

Isaac Bashevis Singer and Raphael Lemkin, and on the other hand, we cannot help but think anti-Semitism and a steady exodus of hundreds of thousands of Jews who were to completely remake the face of American Jewry and eventually establish the Jewish State. That Poland came to an end in September 1939, just weeks after my family joined the exodus and established itself in America.

For almost six years, from 1939 to 1945, Poland was occupied by Nazi Germany (and by the Soviet Union from 1939 to 1941). Under Nazi control, Poland became the killing field of the Second World War. It lost six million of its 30 million citizens, half of whom were Jewish. The Nazis put their camps in Poland as a matter of expedience – that was where the Jews were – and not because they expected wholesale support from the Polish population. Hitler’s plan for the Slavic Poles was to decimate them, then turn the remainder into slaves. Thus, when we think post-1939 “Poland” we are also of more than one mind: we think of Nazi sympathizers who helped the German occupiers, but we also think of brave rescuers like Irena Sendlerowa, who saved 2500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto, and of the Polish underground’s Council to Help the Jews, the only



October 5, 2007: Tad Taube, right, accepts his appointment as Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland for the San Francisco Bay Area from the Honorable Janusz Reiter, Ambassador for the Republic of Poland in Washington DC.



body of that kind to emerge in occupied Europe. But most of all, we think of Jewish suffering, martyrdom and resistance: the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, doctor Janusz Korczak and the orphans he did not abandon on their final ride to Treblinka, the ghettos and finally, the death camps.

When the war ended, an estimated 280,000 Jewish survivors emerged from hiding or returned from the Soviet Union to try to rebuild a communal life in a shattered Polish nation under Soviet occupation. As the corrupt, brutal and incompetent Communist government lurched from crisis to crisis, Jews were made to foot the bill. Massive Jewish emigration due to Communist expulsion left only an estimated 30,000 Jews in Poland by 1970.

Given the grim picture at the end of the 1960s, it seems virtually impossible that any kind of Jewish life could blossom 20 years later. As described

in several of the essays collected here, the 1968 anti-Semitic campaign accusing Jews of trying to subvert Communism was so shocking to educated Poles that it actually sparked an awakening of memory and conscience among both Jews and Christians, especially among the postwar generations. Jewish Poles realized that there was no escaping their Jewishness, and Christian Poles realized that anti-Semitism could not be blamed solely on the Soviets or Nazis but that it also existed internally, within Poland itself. And so, ironically, the Communist regime's anti-Semitism served to de-legitimize Jew-hatred in the eyes of a large part of the society, and this intolerance of anti-Semitism gradually was woven into pro-democracy, anti-Communist activism.

Opposition activism culminated in the Solidarity movement of the 1980s, but experienced commentators did not give it a glimmer of a chance to thaw the Soviet permafrost. And, many of the



July 2007: Tad Taube in a crowd of thousands at the closing night concert of the annual Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow.
Photo by Wojtek Radwanski.

commentators asked, even if the democratic opposition were to succeed, would a free Poland respect the political and religious freedoms of its Jewish citizens? The prophets of doom began to be proved wrong when Solidarity unseated the Communist Party in 1989.

The original essays collected here provide us with invaluable insights into the lives and hopes, the successes and disappointments of Polish Jews who have borne witness from World War II until today. Though highly divergent in their personal and generational experiences, as well as in their assessments of the present and expectations of the future, they are united in their commitment to the welfare of the Jewish people in Poland. Reading these essays, you will be better prepared to encounter both the mainstream society and the astonishingly vigorous Jewish community that has emerged from the shadows.

Persevering against unimaginable odds, the authors refuse to believe that Jews could be eliminated entirely from the makeup of a country to



September 2005: The President of Poland and First Lady visit San Francisco. Left to right: Dianne Taube, Tad Taube, Aleksander Kwasniewski, Jolanta Kwasniewska.

which the Jewish people have contributed so much. In the 1970s, many of these authors got involved in the fledgling democratic opposition, envisioning a new Poland in the making, one in which everybody



June 26, 2007: Dignitaries on stage in Warsaw at the official groundbreaking for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Left to right: President of Poland Lech Kaczynski, and Museum benefactors Victor Markowicz, Sigmund Rolat and Tad Taube. Photo by Wojtek Radwanski.

– including the Jews – could be free. They believed then, and continue to affirm, that the past should never be repeated.

In today's New Poland, Jews are not threatened, either politically or physically. This New Poland is different from the country in which our authors, born over a half-century's span, lived their childhoods. This New Poland is also different from the images of it some carry in their heads.

Today free, democratic Poland is a member of NATO and the European Union, an ally of the United States and Israel and protective of its ethnic minorities. There is no denying that the hopes of Polish Jews for genuine equality and tolerance, appreciation and respect have this time been fulfilled. The essays that follow offer you proof of and testament to this Jewish miracle. 🕊️

INTRODUCTION

The Persistence of Rootedness

by Shana Penn

“The Old World hasn’t died. Not all of it. I can find it. The tragedy is that it mainly exists in people, not in and of itself. But at least it still exists. I had thought the Old World was dead, that that bloody Communism had destroyed everything.”

– Anka Grupinska, Holocaust researcher, 1989

When I first interviewed Anka Grupinska just after the fall of Poland’s Communist regime, the Old World of Polish Jewry persevered only within individual memory. But because Anka and others like her learned that with persistence they could connect to Jewish history and bring its cultural riches forward, today there is a vibrant and growing Jewish heritage revival in Poland. The revival’s evolution is intertwined with that of the country’s democratic opposition movement, for it was democratic aspirations that made the reclamation of Jewish life possible, although it would be wrong to imply that it had but a single origin. Rather, it is the most recent of many shoots that have sprung – despite overwhelming odds – from Jewish roots that are sunk almost a thousand years deep into Polish soil. Sixty years ago, Polish Jews emerged from hiding or returned from Hitler’s camps, leaving genocide behind only to face Soviet domination. Forty years ago, Jews helped to spearhead the democratic opposition that fought to regain Poland – although most did so as oppositionists, not self-consciously as Jews. Twenty years ago, when the revolution they helped foster finally bore fruit, these same Jews found that they had the freedom and the space to turn their energies to the rebuilding of Jewish life and culture. Each of these generations has persisted, valiantly, in the face of potentially debilitating cultural and personal ambivalence. For while each

generation had, and continues to have reason to think of itself as representing Poland’s “last Jews,” each was and is also committed, in its own way, to nurturing those deep Jewish roots, whose gravitational pull toward connection and continuity they could neither resist nor neglect.

I first went to Poland almost twenty years ago to investigate, by conducting oral histories, why Holocaust survivors returned and/or remained after the war, rather than emigrate from Poland as had most survivors; what kinds of lives Jews had created behind the Iron Curtain; and what the connections were between dissidents’ identification with Jewishness/Judaism and their political resistance to Communist rule.

It was a time when a closed society was just opening, long-sealed geopolitical borders were breaking open, and people had dizzying ambitions for their future in a democracy. It seemed that Poland was just waking up from World War II – as if Communism had been a welcome anesthetic after the annihilation of the country’s Jewish population and culture in the Holocaust. This historic moment was marked by an awakening of individuals, which made it an opportune and necessary time for taking oral histories. After decades of censorship and cultural isolation, paper trails were neither extensive nor easily accessed, and so oral histories offered a distinct kind of primary source material.



There were then no formalized Jewish studies and only scant public discourse on “things Jewish.” There was hardly any visible Jewish presence in public life – indeed, there was hardly any public life to speak of, given the prohibitions of one-party rule and martial law. A few Jewish libraries and archives existed at the time, but were in dire states of neglect, disrepair and disuse. And yet, when I arrived in Warsaw that summer as the Cold War was melting away, the cracks I saw in that iceberg revealed...Jews!

One of my first interviews was with Anka Grupinska, then a 33-year-old Holocaust researcher whose collection of interviews with Marek Edelman and other surviving fighters of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising was just being published, and who was organizing an international conference on anti-Semitism during Communism. She succinctly laid out for me all the phenomena characterizing the dynamics that link Poland’s Jewish revival to its democratic opposition, beginning with her generation’s search for the truth of what had really happened to Poland in World War II. She taught me the Polish catchphrase *biale plamy*, the blank spots, which signifies the Communist Party’s pervasive silencing, distortions and lies about that period’s tragic history.

In reconstructing the taboo subject of World War II history, Anka not only discovered the suffering of Polish Jewry in the Holocaust but also learned that she was not alone in her reaction to

fight for democracy and for the reinstatement of Jewish experience into Polish history. In the course of their struggle and after their victory, several thousands of Poles also discovered what many had already intuited – namely, that they themselves were, in fact, Jewish.

Only 280,000 of Poland’s 3.5 million Jews survived the Holocaust and returned at the end of World War II. Why did they return? The Nazi occupation of Poland, from 1939–45, had bequeathed a legacy of tyranny and terror that was reinforced by the Communist Party, which took power in Poland by the end of the war. Postwar violence and persecution against Jews was institutionalized by the Communist Party, which destroyed most Jewish institutions and encouraged postwar pogroms. This reign of terror spurred 200,000 Jews to flee the country by the end of the 1940s.

Why did the 80,000 who stayed do so? Among them were the historians Feliks Tych and Marian Turski, whose essays help us understand this and other complex questions. Those who stayed faced two more waves of persecution and emigration by the end of the 1960s: in 1956–57 the government promoted Jewish immigration to Israel by disseminating exit visas; then, in 1968 Poland’s registered Jewish population was further reduced by a state-sponsored witch hunt that began with brutal police repression of nationwide campus protests for free speech and turned into a vicious anti-Semitic campaign. After the protesting students

Each generation is committed to nurturing those deep Jewish roots, whose gravitational pull toward connection and continuity they could neither resist nor neglect.

new knowledge about the recent past – Poland’s wartime and postwar generations both bore a tremendous burden of repressed trauma. Anka and her contemporaries risked imprisonment in order to reclaim history by uncovering historical and political knowledge the regime had brutally suppressed, but in the process they began to discover their own identities. Intellectually defiant men and women became human rights activists who would

were accused of being Zionist spies, first the government and subsequently all professions were purged of their Jewish employees, whether or not they knew they were Jewish or identified as Jews. Thousands were arrested, interrogated, ostracized, expelled from university or lost their jobs. Much of the nation was traumatized. An estimated 20,000 Jews emigrated. Poland under Communism became a country of anti-Semites without

Jews, I was often told. Yet weren't those Jewish names among the Solidarity leadership that engineered the overthrow of Communism – Adam Michnik, Helena Luczywo, Bronislaw Geremek, to name a few?

Why did the 20,000 to 30,000 Jews who remained in Poland after 1968 stay? Some stayed because they considered themselves part of the country and wanted not only to continue living there but also to fight to make it democratic. Others stayed with the express purpose of preserving Jewish memory and the remnants of an age-old Jewish past – from crumbling gravestones to empty, burned-out cheders and synagogues.

In the 1970s, after their traumatic defeat, students gathered to rethink their opposition activism. Meeting in secret they established a nationwide, underground, pro-democracy press to be read by intellectuals and workers alike. In 1976, when most

Poles still knew nothing about the Warsaw Ghetto or its 1943 uprising against the Nazis, the underground published a book-length interview with Marek Edelman, a surgeon and the only surviving commando of that uprising. Dr. Edelman's first-ever blow-by-blow account of those events broke the 33-year silence, and the *biale plamy* began to fill in. Forty thousand copies sold out with remarkable speed, and Edelman became Poland's only famous living Jew, the "last Jew in Poland."

"Marek awakened my generation," Anka Grupinska told me. The power of truth-telling and of personal narrative to raise political awareness and mobilize people en masse continued to gain momentum in Poland and would soon distinguish its history from that of all other Soviet Bloc countries.

In 1980, Solidarity came into being, the first and only grassroots, pro-democracy movement in



August 2005: Book party for Shana Penn during the 25th Anniversary Celebration of the Solidarity Movement at the US Ambassador's residence in Warsaw. Left to right: Shana Penn, US Ambassador to Poland Victor Ashe, US Secretary of State Madeline Albright, Undersecretary of State Barbara Labuda, President's Chancellor.



the Soviet Bloc. Soon ten million strong, Solidarity's vision of an independent trade union movement was in part fueled by the power of information-sharing, oral history, and truth-telling to cut through the lies, distortions and omissions peddled by Communist propaganda. Solidarity was a "talking revolution" within a trade union movement.

"Voice was being regained in those years," writes Maria Janion, a revered octogenarian, public intellectual and a Gentile critic of anti-Semitism. "Story-telling exploded on an unheard-of scale, and

"I believe we are the last ones. Definitely," writes Konstanty Gebert in his essay.

Their understandable ambivalence notwithstanding, through the study groups, the publishing of Jewish topics in the underground press, Holocaust commemorations and religious observances, the reclamation of "things Jewish" became a meaningful expression of anti-Communist resistance. Come 1989, "flying university" participants, Jews and Christians alike, came out of hiding to form the nucleus of the Jewish communities

Intellectually defiant men and women became human rights activists who would fight for democracy and for the reinstatement of Jewish experience into Polish history.

the missing parts of the puzzle could be completed. Soon enough...martial law came in December 1981 – a new trauma. Nonetheless, the once-told history was already inside us."

Thus, the origins of the Jewish cultural revival and the renewed interest in religion and heritage can be traced back to the late '60s and early '70s and can be understood to have as much to do with the history of Communism as with the Holocaust. In the late 1970s–80s, the postwar generation, to which three contributors to this collection – Eleonora Bergman, Konstanty Gebert, and Stanislaw Krajewski – belong, began learning about Judaism. That was the decade when, together with Gentiles interested in Jewish heritage (including Janusz Makuch, another of this book's contributors) Jewish activists organized secret, underground groups known as "flying universities." Seeking to supplant the negative stigma around Jewishness with positive meaning, they had books sent over from the United States from which to study Jewish history, religion and culture. Given their admirable determination to gain Jewish knowledge and dissimilate, members of the postwar generation remained ambivalent about their future as Jews under Communism and assumed that for sure, after them, there would be no Jewish life in Poland.

and cultural programs in Warsaw, Lodz, Wroclaw and Krakow. They were assisted by American Jews who relocated to Poland, such as Rabbi Michael Schudrich, now the country's chief rabbi, and Helise Lieberman, founding principal of the Lauder Morasha Day School; both are contributors to this volume.

Some of Poland's non-Jewish educators and custodians also helped birth the new Jewish culture; people who, like Janusz Makuch, director of the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival, self-describe as *Shabbes goyim*. Acting on a healthy impulse far stronger than fashion or whim, they have had the determination and dedication to get degrees in Hebrew Studies, restore monuments and cemeteries, conserve archives, establish Holocaust educational curricula and whole academic departments. To me, they carry on the World War II legacy of Righteous Gentiles who rescued Jews, though in this case, they are rescuing Jewish heritage and memory.

For several thousands of Poles, a distinctive feature of the post-Communist Jewish revival was the revelation of their own Jewish identity – what Rabbi Schudrich refers to as the Madeline Albright Syndrome. For example, in 1989 I assumed Anka was Jewish. Imagine my surprise when she blurted out:



“I have to tell you right away – I cannot promise you that I am Jewish. I am a person without a background. It’s not uncommon in Poland... Most of us grew up with no one in our families talking about either their prewar or wartime experiences. I have reason to believe that my mother’s family was Jewish, though my mother has always denied it.”

In 2004, Anka learned from her stepmother that her father had been a hidden child in the Holocaust. Her father, not her mother, was Jewish. But Anka’s scholarship and her long-held belief in her Jewish roots had already created a Jewish world

museums and archives, a genealogy center, and the world’s largest Jewish Culture Festival, the community is alive and well because the country was finally freed, because government and world Jewish organizations provide significant support, and because growing numbers of people are embracing Jewishness, even if some think of themselves as the last ones, as Konstanty Gebert muses.

Since the early 1990s the number of Poles who acknowledge or discover their Jewish roots has been increasing. As people who had passed as Gentiles start to age or decline into ill-health, they often decide to reveal the truth of their Jewish roots to their

For the youngest generations of Jews, who have no memory of Communism, the biggest challenge is not fascism or creating democracy but demographics and tradition.

in which a *Shabbes goy* like herself belonged. She didn’t need her stepmother’s overdue admission. Marek Edelman had already embraced her. She had forged her own authentic ties to the heritage.

Their very lack of tethers to a background, I came to understand, is what led Anka and others of her generation to overstep and resist the state censorship that their families had internalized. They did this, in part, by creating their own personal narrative and shaping meaning from the unvoiced losses that their families had suffered in World War II; losses their generation had inherited without having had the lived experience. The author Eva Hoffman, in her last work, *After Such Knowledge: A Prisoner of Memory*, refers to herself and others, like Anka, born during or after the war as the “hinge generation” – hinged between experience and memory of the Holocaust. Just as survivors have written or recorded their wartime experiences from memory, notes Hoffman, their children will write about memory itself.

Today’s Jewish community is not merely a custodian of the past. With its day schools, synagogues, Jewish studies and Holocaust education courses, young adult groups, a new JCC in Krakow,

children and grandchildren. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the “deathbed confession.” In response to this unexpected though now common occurrence, several psychologists and Jewish community organizers, including essayist Stanislaw Krajewski, organized a weekly Identity Crisis telephone hot line in the 1990s to take calls from people wanting to know their options as they explore their newly discovered identities. This is but one example of the Jewish community’s sensitive and resourceful responses to the unexpected conditions that make up the culture’s post-genocide reality. Jews and Jewish life had been hidden for more than four decades. The distinct predicament of reclaiming one’s Jewish identity after growing up Catholic or atheist and fully assimilated into Polish culture leads to a process of dissimilation and a need for Jewish education for adults ranging in age from 16 to 86.

Now that Poland has become a democracy, Polishness is regarded in terms of citizenship, and not of race or religion. That is why anti-Semitism is now widely perceived as a threat, not only to Jews but also to the whole of society. This realization stems from the student demonstrations and purges of

1968, and as Tad Taube describes in the Foreword, it is the idea that has created New Poland. Few educated Poles would now deny that anti-Semitism has deep roots in Poland. In fact, respected intellectuals like Maria Janion initiate public debate about the linguistic and cultural roots of anti-Semitism in Poland, and these debates have engendered genuine soul-searching and catharsis, which are tracked by opinion polls. Historian Feliks Tych writes in this book's pages: "It took the country's opening wide to the outside world, and above all a generational change, to generate what has become something of a historical miracle."

For the youngest generations of Jews, born in the early '80s during martial law or at the end of the '80s and who thus have no memory of Communism, the biggest challenge is not fascism or creating democracy but demographics and tradition. As explored in the essays by Anna Makówka-Kwapisiewicz, Daniela Malec and Jan Spiewak, the number of *halakhic* Jews is minute, and the population of youth with one Jewish parent or with one or two Jewish grandparents is shrinking. The next generations will increasingly claim Jewish roots that are three or more generations removed.

That's why, like generations before them, Jewish youths today worry that they are the Last Jews in Poland. They do not blame anti-Semitism and forced emigration. Instead, they are concerned that their generation of half- and quarter-Jews won't be able to marry Jewish, and create pertinent, modern Jewish lives and families. They worry that every new generation's connection to Jewish lineage will be too diluted to transmit Jewish consciousness. Their generation can live anywhere in the European Union or easily go to Israel, not only for work, but to date Jews. Why stay in Poland, where the choice of Jewish mates is as scarce as bluebirds in a Polish winter?

Twenty-two-year-old Jan Spiewak's Jewishness is neither discovered nor invented. Both his parents are Jewish. His grandfather was the revered Jewish historian Szymon Datner. Determined to build a meaningful Jewish future for his generation, Jan writes: "The fall of Communism and success of Democracy

have resulted in providing a space for Jews in Poland. The question now is: Can we grow the space, and encourage young people to stay in Poland?"



June 2007: Shana Penn and Tad Taube attend a Foreign Ministry reception honoring the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Photo by Wojtek Radwanski.

Closing an historical circle, in a way, Jan recently met with Anka Grupinska at an oral history workshop she was conducting for his youth group. The group was to interview Holocaust survivors, an intergenerational activity that would transmit knowledge of the past forward to Jan and his peers and extend their connections to Poland's deep Jewish roots.

It probably cannot be stated often enough that this current era is Poland's first real experience of democracy. As the contributors to this book can attest, Jews and Christians who were active in Solidarity have invested their very life force in the deep and ongoing conviction that where democracy thrives, Jews can, too. 🇵🇱

Polish Jewry, 1989–2009: A Timeline

by Konstanty Gebert

Foreign observers still occasionally express surprise at the very existence of a Jewish community in Poland, which they often believe had been totally eradicated under the impact of the Shoah. And though today's vibrant Jewish community is but a pale shadow of the glory that was prewar Polish Jewry, it draws from the same roots – a green twig, as it were, which sprouted from a supposedly felled tree.

For Jews who remained in Poland during the Communist period, it gradually became clear that only reestablishing democracy and independence could give Polish Jewry a chance – hence, the marked Jewish participation, alongside the majority Poles, in the democratic opposition movement.

The developments that followed the end of Communism in 1989 have confirmed the validity of that assessment. The new Poland has consistently respected Jewish rights and has proven to be a reliable friend of Israel. The rebirth of the Jewish community after 1989 would not have been possible without this. In this sense, this rebirth cannot be considered surprising: a democratic society allows its members to make the identity choices they please. In an existential sense, however, this rebirth – a fruit of long and patient efforts – is still nothing short of miraculous.

1989

The fall of Communism, first in Poland, followed by the other Soviet Bloc countries. In early '89, after protracted negotiations between the Polish government and the Aguda, the authorities consent to the appointment, for the first time since 1961, of a Chief Rabbi of Poland. The job went to Menachem Joskowicz, an Israeli Orthodox rabbi who was a Polish Holocaust survivor. The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation starts operating in Poland, supporting Jewish education, media and communal life. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is allowed to operate in Poland again, after having been shut out in the Communist era. In June '89, Poland's first semi-democratic elections since the war elect to Parliament a number of democratic politicians of Jewish origin from the former opposition. The new government pledges its democratic character. Its first foreign policy decision is to renew ties with Israel. After a crisis in Auschwitz over closing a Carmelite convent on its

grounds, the Vatican reiterates its desire to relocate the institution. The Jewish Culture Festival organizes its second summer season in Krakow, on a modest scale. Over the years, the Festival will grow to become Europe's largest Jewish culture event. That same year, a group of Jewish parents in Warsaw opens Poland's first Jewish kindergarten since 1968.

1990

The Polish Catholic Church issues a pastoral letter in which it reservedly criticizes Christian anti-Semitism and Polish hostility toward Jews. Later that year, Pope John Paul II visits Poland, meets with the Jewish community, and in a sermon in Kielce commemorates the victims of the 1946 pogrom. Jewish institutions start experiencing a "Jewish boom," as thousands of Poles of Jewish origin start investigating their roots. The boom will continue for several years and lead to a revival of the community.

1991

During the first ever visit to Israel by a Polish leader, President Lech Walesa apologizes in a speech at the Knesset for “wrongs committed against Jews in Poland.” Poland becomes one of the most pro-Israeli European countries. The Catholic Church publishes a letter deploring anti-Semitism.

1992

Israeli President Chaim Herzog visits Poland. High-level ties will be consistently maintained into future years. Poland co-sponsors a successful drive to repeal the UN’s “Zionism is racism” resolution of 1975.

1993

After a personal request by Pope John Paul II, the Carmelite nuns at Auschwitz move to a new location. The 50th anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising is a state event in Poland, with the participation of the president and prime minister, the prime minister of Israel and the Vice President of the United States. A “Law on the Relations between the State and Jewish Religious Congregations” is passed by Parliament, guaranteeing Jewish religious rights and making possible the partial restitution of the prewar property of the congregations. The restitution process continues, with dozens of buildings and plots being returned.

1994

An article in the liberal daily *Gazeta Wyborcza*, documenting murders of Jews by Poles during the Warsaw uprising of 1944, generates a nationwide debate. Later that year, the Lauder Morasha Jewish elementary school, an offshoot of the Jewish kindergarten started five years earlier, opens in rented premises in Warsaw. In another development, the American Jewish Congress’ successful lobbying for Poland’s NATO membership gives the organization important political credibility in Poland.

1995

A new crisis develops in Auschwitz as Jewish organizations demand the removal of a large cross planted on the site of the former Carmelite convent. In reaction, Catholic fundamentalists plant hundreds of smaller crosses around the big one. These crosses are eventually removed by the government, but the large cross remains standing today.

1996

The Polish Prime Minister attends a commemorative ceremony in Kielce on the 50th anniversary of the pogrom. In Tel Aviv, Yeshayahu Weinberg sets up a team of experts to help design the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. The project, now well underway, has been strongly supported by the Polish authorities, as well as by international sponsors, Jewish and non-Jewish, private and institutional. The City of Warsaw donated the plot of land the museum is to stand on, assigned a 40 million zloty (approximately 12 million USD) grant for that purpose, and volunteered to cover part of the construction costs.

1997

Midrasz, Poland’s first postwar Jewish opinion monthly, is launched in Warsaw. It will become one of the most important public voices of Polish Jewry.

1998

Extreme right-wing activists set up hundreds of crosses on the site of the former convent in Auschwitz. The Polish government removes them.

1999

Polish prime minister Jerzy Buzek and Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu together lead the March of the Living – a massive Jewish manifestation held biannually at the site of the former German death camps in Auschwitz and Treblinka. That same year Beit Warszawa, Poland’s first Reform congregation since World War II, is launched in Warsaw. Lauder Morasha Jewish elementary school moves into its own spacious



premises in a restituted prewar Jewish home for the elderly, and soon becomes one of Polish Jewry's most important institutions.

2000

Neighbors, a book by émigré Polish Jew Jan T. Gross, a sociologist and historian teaching in the U.S., documents for the first time the massacre in 1941 of the Jewish inhabitants of the small town of Jedwabne by their Polish neighbors, in the aftermath of the German invasion of the USSR, which had occupied Jedwabne since 1939. The book, published a year later in the U.S., generates possibly the most important public debate in post-Communist Poland. Gross's findings are confirmed by the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), the Polish Yad Vashem, and a clear majority of Polish public opinion accepts them and reassesses the previously prevalent rosy picture of wartime Polish attitudes towards Jews.

2001

The Polish president, Aleksander Kwasniewski, attends the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Jedwabne massacre. The Church, and the town itself, boycott the event – though earlier the Church holds a separate penitential service asking God to forgive the crimes committed by its faithful. Though the debate has brought forward new accusations of Polish anti-Semitism, the Polish Jewish community does not see itself as threatened. Though anti-Semitic literature, which in other democratic countries would be banned or boycotted as hate speech, is freely available at newsstands and many churches, the level of anti-Semitic violence is consistently low.

2003

Barely 1231 people, in a nation of 39 million, report their ethnicity as Jewish in the national census. This very low number contrasts with the approximately 8,000 members of different Jewish organizations and the estimated 25,000-30,000 people who are connected one way or the other with Jewish activities. One possible explanation is

the census's flawed methodology, which obliged respondents to deny they are Polish before they could choose any other identity.

2004

The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture starts a series of generous programs in Poland, designated to support and sustain the revival of the Jewish community and Polish-Jewish understanding. Continuing today, with an office in Warsaw, the Taube Foundation's Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland has poured several million dollars into sustaining Jewish institutions representing heritage scholarship and preservation, spiritual life and cultural innovation. Michael Schudrich becomes Poland's Chief Rabbi, a position that has remained vacant since the departure of Rabbi Joskowicz. An American rabbi who has been active in Poland since the late '80s, Schudrich has been immensely instrumental over the years in fostering the rebirth of the Polish Jewish community. The same year sees the departure of Polish-born Israeli ambassador Shevach Weiss (appointed 2001), who was easily the most popular foreign ambassador to Poland since 1989. His departure occasions a six-month long series of public events, in which, in the words of the JTA, Weiss is "smothered in love." (Ten-thousand young Poles sang "May he Live a Hundred Years," a traditional Polish birthday song, when Weiss celebrated his birthday during the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow the previous year.)

2005

Reversing the pattern of the previous 16 years since democracy was restored, in which liberal anti-Communist governments alternated with reformed Communist ones, the Right wins both the presidential and the parliamentary elections, but without enough votes to govern on its own. The new president, Lech Kaczynski, is known as a friend of Israel, however, and in his first interview after his victory is confirmed, he compares himself to Ariel Sharon.

2006

The Taube Foundation's Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland launches two new, Poland-based projects: one is a seed grant program to support research and publishing in Jewish studies; and the second is a media project to monitor Polish press coverage of Israel. President Kaczynski's conservative PiS party, is unable to form a sustainable minority government and forms a coalition with two junior partners: the rabidly populist Self-Defense party and the extreme-right League of Polish Families (LPR), which considers itself the heir of Poland's prewar anti-democratic and anti-Semitic National Democrats. The LPR's youth movement is rife with neo-Nazi sympathies; some branches of the party demand that prospective members bring proof of their "Polishness" three generations back; others denounce the "pernicious anti-Polonism" of the Jews. As concern over the new coalition grows, both in the Jewish community and in European institutions, the appointment of LPR leader Roman Giertych as minister of education is seen as particularly worrisome, as that ministry supervises Polish-Israeli youth exchange, including the March of the Living. Reacting to LPR public declarations that smack of anti-Semitism, the Israeli ambassador to Poland, David Peleg, decides his embassy "will not have any contacts" with the minister. Giertych, visibly shaken, publicly professes his love for Israel and the Jewish people, makes an unscheduled appearance at the commemorative ceremonies in Jedwabne, and declares "there is no place for anti-Semitism" in Poland. His remarks are all the more pertinent, as Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich, in an atypical act of physical violence, was assaulted on the street in Warsaw by a lone assailant earlier in the year. (The police eventually catch the perpetrator, who is tried before a criminal court.) Also this year, Jan Gross's second book, *Fear*, first published in the U.S., is published in Poland and generates another soul-searching debate, this time about the fate of Polish Jewry in the immediate postwar years.

2007

The ground breaking ceremony for the Museum of the History of Polish Jews takes place, and the dramatic design by a Finnish architectural design firm is selected after an international competition. The Jewish Genealogy and Family Heritage Center begins development at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Tad Taube, founder and chairman of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, is appointed honorary consul for the Republic of Poland in the San Francisco Bay Area.

2008

The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture begins development of an innovative cultural tourism program called Poland Jewish Heritage Tours, PolandJewishHeritageTours.com, which will be formally launched in the spring of 2009.

2009

The Taube Center for Jewish Cultural Renewal formally registers as a Polish non-profit organization in order to represent the Taube Foundation's program in Poland. A sister cities relationship between Krakow and San Francisco is established. Over 100 people from the San Francisco Bay Area participate in the Krakow ceremony. The Cantors Assembly USA brings 70 cantors and close to 400 tourists to Poland for a national celebration of the Polish roots of cantorial music.

Sources: Rafal Zebrowski "Dzieje Zydow w Polsce. Kalendarium." Żydowski Instytut Historyczny, Warszawa, 1993; personal information.

Poland, like America

by Stanislaw (Staszek) Krajewski

The year 1989 was a watershed. Nobody could have predicted it. My wife, Monika, our one-year-old son, Gabriel, and I spent most of 1988 in New York. We witnessed innumerable conversations among Poles on the single topic of whether to go back to Poland or stay in the US. We participated with as much fervor as anybody else. No argument seemed decisive. We did come back, even though abandoning our newly established connection to Jewish life in America in general and on the Upper West Side in particular was a weighty consideration.



1988: Monika and Stanislaw Krajewski with their son Gabriel.
Photo by Lena Stein.

The richness and variety of Jewish expression is taken for granted by New Yorkers, but we were fascinated by it. I felt at home in the Minyan Me'at of the Anshe Hessed shul. It was a truly powerful feeling to know that some people in that synagogue, beginning with Michael Strassfeld, were among the creators of *The Jewish Catalogue, A Do It Yourself Kit*, which had inspired us in our attempts to revive Judaism in Poland. We had had no choice, we and a group of friends, but to do it in genuinely do-it-yourself fashion, having received no tradition from our families. Like mine, many of my friends'

parents were Communist and were sure that their Jewish past had become completely irrelevant. We had some contacts with the regular members of the Nozyk synagogue in Warsaw, but they did not know how to teach those of us who had had no cheder education and spoke no Yiddish. To them it seemed obvious that Judaism was going to disappear from Poland together with them. This total lack of any orientation towards the future was matched by the complete absence of any relationship between synagogue life and the rest of their lives. That we and they both read Buber did not provide common ground. We felt much more in common with the American Jewish visitors to our home: they knew about Buber as well as about the hippies, the Beatles, Shlomo Carlebach, vegetarianism ... and they knew about our dissident activities.

Living in America in 1988 we could enjoy a spirit of commonality, Judaism was made relevant to other dimensions of life, and being Jewishly involved did not mean being marginalized. This was my deepest experience: the respectability of Judaism. Important, successful, well-to-do people, university professors and artists, social leaders and even politicians, were not only reading or discussing Jewish themes but were also going to their synagogues on Yom Kippur, or even much more frequently. We had known about that, but to live that was something else. We were inspired and quietly hoped that at least a fraction of that reality could happen in Poland, though the Soviet system seemed immunized against making Judaism respectable. While we did not dare to dream about the system's disappearance, we did feel that it was growing less and less sturdy and increasingly vulnerable.

The Communist power's lack of teeth became apparent when the Memorial Path was inaugurated. The Path leads from the famous Ghetto Monument made by Natan Rapoport in 1948 to the then-newly built Umschlagplatz Memorial on the site from



1984: Stanislaw Krajewski, at left, working with others to help erect a monument made of displaced tombstones at the Jewish cemetery in Kazimierz Dolny. *Photo by Monika Krajewska.*

which, in 1942, 300,000 Warsaw Jews were taken to the death camp in Treblinka. I was a member of the Path's planning committee, which was composed of people who were opposed to the regime. However, the project was sanctioned and assisted by the government, otherwise it would not have happened. The inauguration took place in 1988, so I could not attend, but I learned later that it had been a dual event. First a many-thousand-strong anti-Communist rally took place at the ghetto monument and proceeded from there to the Umschlagplatz, where Marek Edelman, the surviving leader of the ghetto uprising, was the main personality. The official ceremony took place later. In 1988 the winds of freedom were already being felt, and the oppositional event was not bothered, unlike the unofficial commemorations that had taken place in an atmosphere of fear in previous years.

After 1989, in democratic Poland, the official commemorations we had avoided became generally "kosher" to all sorts of Jews, including those who had identified with the opposition, many of whom, having been political prisoners, had just become members of government institutions. I knew many of them, so in the first years after the collapse of Communism I had a wonderful feeling of trust in the government and its good will. This might have been a bit naïve, as we were to learn soon that good will is not enough, and a system of checks and balances is equally necessary. Still, I felt strongly connected to the new policies, the new politicians and the whole "revolution," and this, combined with my American experience and contacts, led to a short period of consultancy for the American Jewish Congress followed by lengthy involvement with the American Jewish Committee (AJC) from the 1990s through to the present. I had been trying to



explain the Polish realities, history and sensibilities to American and other Jews, and at the same time to explain Jewish history and sensibilities to Poles. After so many years of hiding our contacts with the West, of publishing underground, of never speaking freely on the phone, the new freedom to cooperate with foreign Jewish organizations was exhilarating.

In addition to gaining civic and political freedom, we were also experiencing an economic transformation. In the market system that was about to be introduced in Poland, one needed to be able to put forward one's qualities or achievements, even to boast. Our stay in America had given us a taste of that skill, which was contrary to the Polish upbringing,

In the US, Judaism was being made relevant to all dimensions of life, and being Jewishly involved did not mean being marginalized. This was my deepest experience in America: the culture's respect for Judaism.

ing, and even more to the Communist style where to say something positive about oneself was considered bad taste, to boast was definitely a sin. One was supposed to wait passively until others noticed one's qualities or achievements. In America, we found that we had to explain why it would be a good idea to invite us to give a talk. It was a revealing experience that people who lived surrounded by manifestations of Jewish presence could be interested in hearing about the modest attempts to revive Jewish life in Poland in a way appropriate for our postwar generation. Only gradually did we come to understand that problems of Jewish identity, involvement and continuity also exist in America.

One American market economy experience we had was as frustrating as it was instructive. Monika's book, *Time of Stones*, combined artistic photographs of Jewish cemeteries in Poland with poetic quotations. This much-praised book was the fruit of our many years spent locating and visiting the remnants of Jewish cemeteries in an era when almost no one else was doing so. It appeared in 1982 and had gone out of print, and when we were living in New York we tried to find a publisher for a new and expanded edition. Prepared for publication during the creative

time of the initial Solidarity movement, of which we were enthusiastic members, it was among the books allowed to appear after martial law was introduced in December 1981 and was published separately in four languages. It was a huge success and helped many people discover a new way of relating to Jews, or rather the absence of Jews, and many artists were inspired by the photographs. Many people have told us that the book began a new phase of their artistic projects, and some people made university careers out of studying the cemeteries. Monika and I understood from this that we could make a difference in Poland in a way that would have been unthinkable in the US, and this was one of the specifically Jewish arguments for us to go back to Poland.

Despite our considerable efforts to find a US publisher – we even hired a literary agent – nothing worked. The reactions were positive but, as one of the publishers said, "Death is not saleable." We were shocked: to us the book was about life, values, former presence and current absence, history, tragedy, and also beauty, not just about death. It was published in Poland in 1993 with the title *A Tribe of Stones*.

Although better and better produced, it had a smaller impact than the first book because after 1989 the book market had changed very quickly. No longer severely limited and censored it became a Western-like heaven of abundance. This was well illustrated by Jewish interest books alone. Before, they appeared once every few months, and everybody in our circle bought them, and read them, too. After, an avalanche of books, both translated and in Polish, reached us – and made us happy but frustrated, since hardly anybody could know the really good ones among so many.

Partly due to freedom, partly because of the computer revolution, new Jewish periodicals as well as numerous bulletins and brochures began to appear. I was publishing mostly in the monthly *Midrasz*, but I also felt a deep connection to a



short-lived magazine, *Idele*, produced in the mid-1990s by a group of teenagers. Though a generation younger, they were discussing the same problems of identity, history, tradition, prospects for the future, etc. that had been debated by our circle fifteen years earlier. Unlike us, however, they did it in public. I was especially pleased that they organized a debate about their grandparents' generation's involvement in Communism, an involvement that included support for Stalinism, the cruelest form of Communist rule. This debate was inspired by an article I had written in the 1980s for an underground publication.

Yet in 1978 or even in 1988, nobody could predict that in 1998 or in 2008, Jewish life would exist, let alone be much stronger, more genuine, pluralistic, and youthful.

These younger colleagues were at ease talking about an issue that most Jews my age were reluctant to discuss, namely, the presence of Jews among the Communist power elite. My peers, let alone the older ones, were afraid that the discussion would strengthen the anti-Semites who drew the absurd conclusion that Jews had been ruling in Poland. Fortunately, the post-Communist freedom gradually made all issues public, be it the issue of Jewish Communists or the fact of anti-Jewish violence in postwar Poland.

Freedom led to deep changes in Jewish life in Poland. The impact on institutions was, however, rather slow. What was visible first, and meant so much to us personally, was the presence of the Ronald Lauder Foundation, which was organizing summer camps and Jewish schools, and assisting many initiatives. Summer camps in Rychwald, southern Poland, became for us and many other families an invaluable Jewish experience. There were also other programs, some of them assisted by the JDC, but the Lauder activities represented a new trend: a religious revival. Though this was exactly what I needed, I quickly understood that the sophisticated blend of tradition and modernity, with traces of counterculture, that we saw at Anshei Hessed was very difficult to imitate. What remained

was either the more traditionalist approach, often at risk of become fundamentalist, or a strongly anti-Orthodox one, often at risk of become separated from the tradition.

The reemergence of Judaism became the trend, with the rise of religious communities instead of the hitherto dominant secular, formerly strongly Communist, Jewish association. The change was slow but visible. While in the 1980s there was no rabbi in Poland, in the 1990s there were one or two; now there are about ten. This does not mean that Polish Jews became so religious en masse. Yet basic religious observance is now seen as normal

among vastly more people, including some – not many – successful and respectable individuals, though not – not yet? – politicians. To give an example, in the 1980s only a few dozen people in Poland participated in a Pesach seder. We have had one at our home since 1980, but we felt ourselves to be an exception. Now in Warsaw alone many hundreds participate, in homes and at communal seders. In the course of this evolution many “firsts” occurred. For example, in addition to the traditional balcony, I was able to introduce a mechitza downstairs in our Orthodox Nozyk synagogue; this was done on



1984: Seder with friends at the Krajewskis' home in Warsaw. Photo by Monika Krajewska.

the occasion of the bar mitzvah of our older son, Gabriel. And the bar mitzvah of our younger son, Daniel, was especially memorable.

Daniel has Down syndrome, so he could not follow the standard way, and with the support of Rabbi Michael Schudrich, we found a format that we



2004: Daniel Krajewski at his bar mitzvah, leading the congregation at the Nozyk Synagogue in Warsaw as he takes the Torah scroll from the holy arc to the bimah. At right, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland. Photo by Monika Krajewska.

hope can be used elsewhere. Daniel did not read the Torah or *haftarah*, he only said the blessings. Before that, however, he led the congregation in taking the Torah scroll from the holy arc to the *bimah*. He did it so beautifully that people had tears in their eyes. In addition, after the prayers, he presented big

paintings he had made on the theme of the *parshah* and the Torah in general; he accompanied that with explanations using words and gestures. This was also powerful and memorable. We are sure this was the first ever bar mitzvah of a Down syndrome boy in Poland. And before 1989 for at least 20 years there had been no bar mitzvahs at all!

Gradually, new Jewish institutions have been formed. For example, I helped organize a Jewish telephone hotline in Warsaw in the late 1990s. It was available to people looking for information but was meant primarily for those who were unsure of their Jewish identity or were hiding it – sometimes from their closest family members! – and were afraid to “come out.” I felt that my friends and I knew much about such problems, since we had discussed them at our underground meetings under Communism, and therefore, we could help others. The most recent of the new institutions is the B’nai B’rith lodge, reconstituted after almost 70 years. It includes some respectable individuals who did not want to be active in religious communities. Among the chief concerns are contacts with Israel and Israel advocacy. Israel feels infinitely closer than before 1989, when one had to hide visits to Israel from the Polish authorities (one went there from another Western country and the visa was put on a separate sheet rather than in the passport). Now, we need no visas.

For all these dramatic improvements, the participants in Jewish life are relatively few, especially when compared with American Jewish life. Yet in 1978 or even in 1988, nobody would have guessed that in 1998 or in 2008, Jewish life would exist in Poland, let alone be much stronger, more genuine, pluralistic, and youthful. Nor would they have guessed that we would have to pay for our success by facing the many problems of Jewish identity, involvement, continuity, and tensions among various trends of Judaism that are quite similar to those in America. ❧

From Stalin and Hitler to Remuh

by Daniela Malec

The end of Communism was the end of my childhood, both literally and figuratively. In 1989 I turned 11, woke up from my childhood reverie, opened my eyes and went out into the street with a revolutionary's shout. I wanted to witness the Great Transformation, which I understood none too well, but I felt in my youthful bones that the world around me would change beyond recognition. My parents equipped me with a basic knowledge about the bestiality of the collapsing system, though it disquieted them to I see I was getting politically

My peers generally did not share my revolutionary enthusiasm. I supposed that the majority of them were the children of Communist parents entangled in the system I despised, and so I lost interest in them. I began attending open meetings to hear candidates for the *Sejm* [Polish Parliament] before the first free elections in postwar Poland. I was disappointed when the other attendees looked at me with the kind of pity reserved for orphaned children.

I wandered through Kazimierz's cafes and bars saying to people, whether I knew them or not, "I'm looking for Jews, maybe you know somebody? Maybe you've got some Jewish roots yourself?" Faith and determination can work miracles.

involved. During my Russian lessons (1989 was the last year for which it was compulsory to start studying this language), I drew the Solidarity logo on the wall, to the fury of my despised Russian teacher (who seemed to me practically the incarnation of Stalin). In retaliation, the teacher compelled me to learn by heart a poem entitled "Lenin Is Luminosity," to be recited in front of a school assembly. Fortunately, the political system changed, and the assembly was irrevocably called off.

When the first free press of the new Republic began to be printed, I took some money from Mama and ran to buy the first issue of *Gazeta Wyborcza*. Since then I have read it every day, educating myself according to the paper's line, and seeking out people with whom I could share a bond of revolutionary ideas. I also shared this bond with my family, of course, but they worked hard and didn't have time for conversation with the eldest of their four daughters.

A few years passed before I found out that my own family had had its share of Communists, both on my mother's and my father's side. In the 1930s they had worked in the Polish Communist Party in Radom. They perished in Auschwitz. In addition, I had a great-grandfather who was an officer in the Soviet Red Army. After the war the part of the family that came to Poland from Belarus after 1946 had worked in the lower bureaucratic levels of the UB (Office of Security). At eleven years old I knew nothing about this, nor was I yet aware of my mother's Jewish roots. I was brought up in the '80s in what I was certain was a world without Jews. I had heard cruel jokes about Jews at school, and I associated them with a mysterious group that the Germans had wiped from the face of the earth. Chiefly, however, I saw Hitler as a cruel fellow and as someone who had caused a lot of destruction to my city – Warsaw.



In 1988 local rabbis were set up in Warsaw, but my family was not associated with the community. In the '90s the official structure of the Jewish Community was slowly reborn in Poland. I found out about my Jewish heritage one June evening when my mother decided that, as a teenager, I was now mature enough to hear the truth. I received the news with the excitement of a young person searching for the shape of her identity. In one night I learned a great deal of family history that I had previously had no clue about. In an instant, Mieszko I – the first king of Poland – ceased to be the one who first set in motion the history of my world, and a measureless, mysterious space opened up before me, in which the past and the future were redefined.

I later found out that not everyone in my generation took revelations of their family's Jewish history with comparable openness and positive identification. For some of them the predominant reaction was fear and a conspiracy to hide this fact, which had been passed down from generation to generation after the war. As for me, the way my mother declared the truth was decisive. It came late, suddenly, from out of nowhere, but in a way that sparked not only interest but commitment as well. (As the eldest daughter, and the one who was learning languages, Mama assigned me the mission of searching out the missing members of her family.)

On that day in the 1990s, which was just as revolutionary a breakthrough as the day Communism fell, I found out that there were still descendants of the Jews who had survived the Holocaust and were living in Poland. Moreover, Mama told me that some of my parents' friends, whom I had known since Solidarity times, were Jews as well. My family wasn't the only one. I then realized that one could be both a Jew and a Pole; Jews were no different in their speech, their appearance or their way of life, except that in some cases they might be less than enthusiastic about the church, or even atheists. You wouldn't know someone was a Jew if he or she didn't tell you.

A few years later, when I founded the Czulent Jewish student organization in Krakow, this conviction led me to wander through Kazimierz's cafes and bars saying to people, whether I knew them or not, "I'm looking for Jews, maybe you know somebody? Maybe you've got some Jewish roots yourself?" Faith and determination can work miracles – this was how I found some of the active members of our organization.



Daniela Malec connecting with her newly discovered roots at a Jewish cemetery.

I met my first Jewish friend when I was a high school student. We got along at once, but our friendship took on a whole new dimension when we skipped class together one day. Walking through the Powazkowski Cemetery near our school, we found ourselves near a neighboring cemetery, a Jewish one. That was when my friend told me he was a Jew. I remember as if it were yesterday the feeling of incredible bonding and closeness that was suddenly formed between us. The earth stopped spinning for a moment, though I myself wasn't sure why. The two of us were bound by a secret, a mystery, a treasure of which our surrounding Warsaw had no concept.

I learned a bit about the Holocaust from my parents, but mainly from history books and Polish wartime literature. The naturalistic short stories of Tadeusz Borowski were the most unsettling. But the emotions I felt from my contact with literature



are hard to compare with the emotions aroused by films. In 1994 I saw a film about the Shoah for the first time: it was *Schindler's List*. The images of groups of Jews murdered in Krakow city streets that I knew myself, under billboards in a language I spoke, and the moving, fact-based story made a crushing impression on me. The most powerful image was the face of a boy hiding in a cellar in the ghetto. I saw my high school friend in his face and was shaken by the awareness that he, too, could have been in that situation. I left the cinema a changed person who would forever powerfully link her Jewish identity with the Holocaust.

For the first time in sixty years, in the 1990s, Jewish summer camps for children and young people were organized, and the Polish Organization of Jewish Students (PUSZ) was also formed. Neither I, nor my friend, nor my parents had any contact with these, however. The word-of-



Daniela Malec and other members of Krakow's youth organization, Czulent, examining historic Jewish documents on one of their field trips to the sites of prewar Jewish communities in Poland.

mouth information did not reach us, the Internet was not yet popular, and perhaps no one from my little Jewish-linked community was interested in this chance to see an organized Jewish community reborn. I only found out after I left the country that there was, in Poland, a communal kind of Jewish life beyond the world of lone Jews.

After I graduated from high school I left the country for a year, first spending a few months in Ireland then going to the United States in search of family members. There, I made my first contacts with Jewish organizations and first visited a Jewish religious neighborhood and saw practicing Jews, who seemed plucked straight from the canvases of artist Maurycy Gottlieb. I kept my ears open while visiting Judaica shops, and I bought my first Hebrew alphabet, a set of blocks for children.

I also met a woman who informed me that in Krakow (where I intended to study), in the Izaak Synagogue at 18 Kupa Street, there was a Jewish foundation I had to visit when I returned to Poland. When I began studies at the Jagiellonian University, the Kupa Street address was one of the first I went to; but my first contact with the local community was not inspiring. I knocked, and the young man who opened the door informed me that in Poland, in Krakow, things weren't like in the States, they didn't have many attractions for young people. He said that if I wanted to I could come for the Sabbath dinner, but the truth was, I didn't even know what Sabbath dinner was. I left, and it took me three and a half years to return.

During my studies I met my second Jewish friend, Tadeusz Wolenski, and together we decided to knock once more (at least for my part) on the door of the Izaak Synagogue in Krakow's Kazimierz, which we had only known for its blossoming nightlife. Tadeusz had already made his first journey to Israel, where he met young Polish Jews, and came back home with the exciting information that there was a Jewish student organization in Poland and he knew how to find it. It was the second time that I had found out from abroad that Jewish life was going on in Poland.

After forging contact with the Polish Union of Jewish Students (PUSZ) and the organization's branch in Krakow, things went very quickly. I was introduced to the community, met its oldest members, celebrated my first Hanukah, made my first visit to the Remuh Synagogue, drank my first vodka at Purim. I quickly learned the local rules and

that, compared to Warsaw, there was almost nothing going on for a young person who was eager to learn. In Warsaw there was already a Jewish school and adults had the opportunity for regular Jewish education. In Krakow, the beautiful old city by the Vistula and under the wings of the Wawel dragon, on the other hand, the local community ensured some much-needed assistance for its elderly members, most of whom were Holocaust survivors. The few young people were left out – they had nowhere to meet, no outside support, no resources, ideas or knowledge. There were no leaders in the older community to inspire or guide them, no teachers or rabbis. Nothing. I recall a meeting in a pub, where we sucked back our drinks and planned our next boring meeting over more beer.

The situation changed a few months later, however, again due to inspiration born in another country. In 1993, during a Birthright Israel trip to Taglit, we met a young Krakovian community in the holy land. After returning to Poland I called together the people I met on the Taglit trip and a few others for a first meeting, and that's how Czulent was born. After going out into the streets to find new members, we grew quickly to 30 people, and soon managed to create a dynamic youth environment, the appearance of which initiated important processes and transformations for the Jewish community in Krakow – and beyond. The young community drew in foreign funders and many well-wishers and convinced them that the development of Jewish life in Krakow was worth investing in.



2007: Rabbi Boaz Pash and Daniela Malec leading Chanukah celebrations for the Jewish community in Krakow.
Photo by Mariusz Frej.



Now, in 2009, as a result of all of these activities, we have a Jewish Community Center in Krakow, which has a Sunday school for children, various educational courses, lectures, meetings, and also belly-dancing and yoga. Czulent still runs meetings for young people, and carries out a few educational and cultural projects. There has been a permanent rabbi in Krakow for four years, as well as a kosher shop and restaurant. Life in Krakow's Kazimierz in no way resembles what it was before the war or

perhaps fewer in number, they were just as creative and full of enthusiasm. In the early '80s another group of young people had also formed to search for a Jewish community. These groups fell apart fairly quickly, however, and did not leave much of a lasting trace on their environment. Communism isolated, impeded and cut down dreams and the early '90s were too fresh a soil to thrive in. Only our group found some firm ground, opportunities born from historical necessity, and the blessing of the times.

It is hard to construct a creative Jewish vision and identity in such close proximity to reminders of the Holocaust. In my case, I was helped by education and discovering the rich intellectual heritage of Polish Jewry.

a neighborhood in New York, but a young person whose parents suddenly decide to tell her the truth about her Jewish roots now has an address where she can get information. If she wants to learn she has a wide selection of choices, and, if she wants to meet others like her, she can get invited to a meeting.

For some time I thought that our group was unique in Poland, at least since the events of 1968, when many Jews emigrated from Poland. Or if not unique in the whole country, then at least in Krakow. Over time I discovered that this wasn't the case and like-minded groups had existed at various times before us. In Krakow, a similar young group had met in the early '90s, and although they were

Building Jewish life in Poland is not easy. It is hard to construct a creative vision and identity in such close proximity to reminders of the Holocaust. I was helped by education and by discovering the rich intellectual heritage of Polish Jewry via field trips with Czulent through the *shtetls* of Galicia, and by reading the books and learning the thoughts of the great rabbis. I now live in Jerusalem and study the commentaries of Remuh, in whose Krakow synagogue I prayed for a few years. I have learned that Jewish life is where Jewish knowledge and books are loved. *Kol ha kavod* to all who share this love in modern-day Poland. ❧

Giving Back to the Jewish People

by Rabbi Michael Schudrich

When I came to Poland for the first time in an official capacity 18 years ago, the question was, “Why are you going there? There are no Jews.” Now people abroad ask, “Is the community viable?” This change reflects the positive developments in the community, but my answer must be, “Who knows?” There is nothing logical about how Jewish communities function and survive. As long as there is a community, I, as a rabbi, feel an obligation and honor to be there to help people connect to their Jewish identity.

The Polish Jewish community I work with every day is a growing one, and the average age of its members is declining. The median age of the Warsaw Jewish community in the last three years

has declined from over 65 to about 45, and new members are all under the age of 40. The parents and grandparents had given up being Jewish, but some of their children are among the number of Jews discovering their Jewish origins and wanting to “do something Jewish.” Membership in the Nozyk Synagogue in Warsaw is now about 550, and a number of new rabbis have arrived in Poland from abroad in recent years.

I could tell thousands of stories about men and women of all ages and backgrounds who are only now returning to Judaism. This year more than a hundred people sought me out to discuss their Jewish roots, while many others went to other



Chief Rabbi of Poland Michael Schudrich conducting services at the Nozyk Synagogue in Warsaw. *Photo by Edward Serotta.*

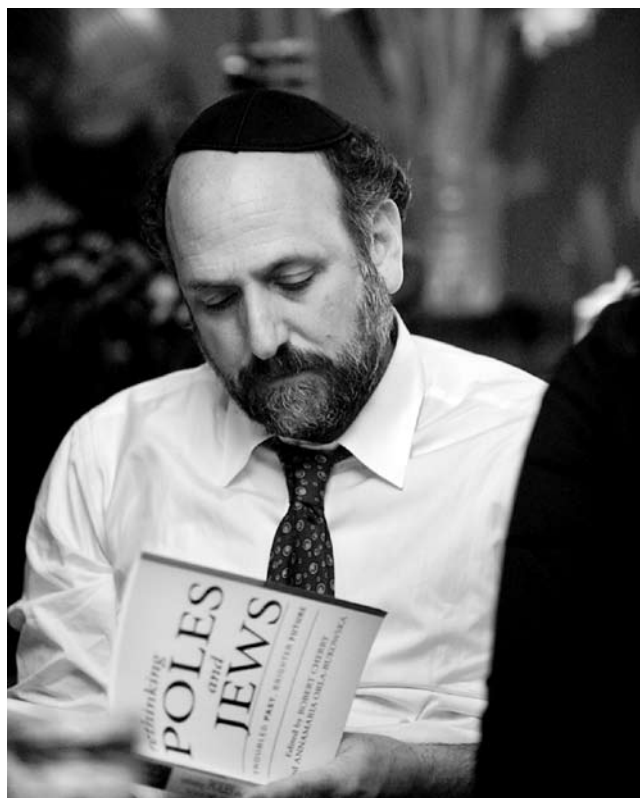
rabbis. This phenomenon is likely to continue. We must always keep in mind that from 1939 to 1989, when Poland suffered under Nazi occupation and the authoritarian rule of the Communist Party, nothing gave a Jew the impression that it was a good idea – or even a safe one – to say that he or she was Jewish.

Poland has known democracy only since 1989. Some people, even those who knew that they were Jewish or had Jewish roots, have needed a long period to conclude that perhaps the time has come to “do something Jewish.” Fear often dissipates slowly. A few months ago a man of about 60 approached me and said that his Jewish mother had died. They had buried her next to his non-Jewish father in a nonsectarian cemetery. He told me that he had never done anything Jewish, but now felt the need to say *Kaddish*. So, on a Friday morning, I taught him this prayer for the dead, then said, “Shabbat begins this evening. Why don’t you come to the synagogue?” He mentioned that his wife was also Jewish, and therefore also their 21-year-old daughter. I invited all three of them. They came and were moved.

Another story: A young woman, now 24, discovered less than four years ago that her mother’s mother was Jewish. She became observant, met a young Jewish man from the United States, and they fell in love. Her mother wants the wedding to be in New York so that the neighbors won’t see that they are having a Jewish wedding. This is more proof that fear doesn’t dissipate easily. This does not so much concern current anti-Semitism, but mainly what might happen again. This is based rationally on what people have experienced during most of their life. As a rabbi I have a major responsibility: I don’t feel I should say that one can be sure it won’t happen again.

People often ask me how I, an American rabbi from New York’s Upper West Side, became the Chief Rabbi of Poland?

In 1973 just after graduating from high school, I was hoping to make my first trip to Israel. A friend was joining a program that first went through Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and then on to Israel, and I jumped at the chance to go along. In Poland,



2007: Rabbi Schudrich reading *Rethinking Poles and Jews: Troubled Past, Brighter Future* at a book party at KlezmerHois, Krakow. Photo by Wojtek Radwanski.

we were told that only a few thousand old Jews were left and that very little remained of the Jewish past. It didn’t make sense; the sums didn’t add up. If, as is commonly believed, about 10 percent of three and a half million Polish Jews survived the war and 90 percent of the survivors emigrated, that would still leave about 30,000 Jews in Poland. Many of these people would now have children and grandchildren. Where were they? I wanted to find out.

In 1976, accompanied by my American-born father Z”L, I returned to Poland so I could check it out for myself. The following year, I became the assistant leader of the program I had taken in 1973. In 1979, after spending my third year of rabbinical school in Israel, I decided to study Polish at the Jagiellonian University for the summer. (I nicknamed it an *ulpanski*.) That summer I met several young Jewish dissidents, such as Staszek and Monika Krajewski, and Kostek Gebert, and realized that there were indeed some young Jews left, and they were asking for my help to gain Jewish knowledge.



The Jewish friends I made in Poland and other Eastern European countries had done nothing to “deserve” to grow up with no Jewish education or experience, just as nothing I had done had brought me the tremendous blessing of a Jewish day school education and a full, rich Jewish life. That gift was presented to me by decisions made by my grandparents and parents. I felt that the time had come for me to give something back.

Yes, this is ironic, because before World War II, American rabbis would come to Warsaw to study Torah with the greatest Talmudic scholars of their time. This city was the heart of Jewish tradition. Now an American rabbi has to come here to help the Polish Jews.

Before World War II, American rabbis would come to Warsaw to study Torah with the greatest Talmudic scholars of their time. This city was the heart of Jewish tradition. Now an American rabbi has to come here to help the Jews of Poland.

Another sign of the Jewish community’s development is that the number of rabbis in Poland has increased greatly in the last few years. There are now ten rabbis: six are traditional, two are Reform and two are Chabad emissaries. Two of the traditional rabbis are Polish-born. Rabbi Mati Pawlak discovered that he was Jewish at age 16. He later studied at Yeshiva University and came back to Warsaw as the director of the Lauder Morasha Day School, which has over 200 pupils from pre-kindergarten to ninth grade. He has a challenging job, because it is problematic to teach Jewishness at a school where only half the children have Jewish roots.

Rabbi Pinchas Zarcynski was born in Warsaw in 1981 and went to Israel with his parents in 1985. He has now returned to Warsaw as a rabbi. The traditional rabbis include new ones in Krakow and Wroclaw, of the Reform rabbis, one is in Warsaw, and the other in Krakow. There also is a new Zionist *kollel* (full time Talmudic study for married men) in Warsaw where young Jewish men study our tradition.

In such a small community we should make great efforts to avoid division among Jews as much as possible. On Israel’s *Yom HaZikaron* (Memorial Day), I invited both the rabbi of Beit Warszawa and the local Chabad rabbi to participate in the ceremony. When Israel’s President Shimon Peres visited Poland in 2008, all of us sat together near the Holy Ark. Part of what keeps the Jews in Poland united is that we don’t want Hitler to have won the war.

I am aiming for the day when Poland’s Chief Rabbi will be Polish but, as of now, it doesn’t seem likely that this will happen in the immediate future. Developing local leadership remains a slow process, as local people often don’t want to take leadership positions. More people are coming to synagogue and attending activities, but that’s where it ends.

As for the economic and social status of the Jews, there are no philanthropic Polish Jewish billionaires such as the Jewish oligarchs in Russia or Ukraine. If that were the case it would have made the financing of Jewish activities in Poland much easier. At present we remain significantly dependent on Jewish foreign aid. The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee is active in Poland, mainly in welfare but also in community leadership training, as are the Jewish Agency, World Zionist Organization, and Shavei Israel, an organization that reaches out worldwide to people with Jewish roots. Among the private foundations active here are the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and Rothschild Foundation Europe.

My main obligation is toward the living Jewish community: to help them with their identity and assist them in expressing their Judaism. Yet there is a profound Jewish past in Poland, whose memory must be preserved and material sites protected.

This heritage raises many complex issues that call for resolution. For example, how many synagogues and cheders can we possibly afford to restore? Which ones will we rescue, and why those over others? When teaching young and old, the question remains: how much does one focus on what will be and how much on what was? There has to be a balance; neglecting the future for the past is not reasonable.

What, for instance, is the Jewish community's attitude toward the 1,300 unattended Jewish cemeteries? We cannot save all of them because we cannot raise such massive funding. My first priority is that we will not permit their further desecration. It is unacceptable, for example, for somebody to build a road over a Jewish cemetery. In that case we will take action. In Ostrów Mazowiecki, for example, one-third of the Monday flea market is located on the old Jewish cemetery. The mayor told me

that if I said this was wrong according to Jewish laws, he would move the market. Another example: In Sierpc, in order to develop the land behind the cemetery, the town planner wanted to curve the road, and thus it would go over the cemetery. I suggested an alternate route for the road. The mayor agreed. Why hadn't he come up with this idea earlier? He might not have wanted to oppose his city planner, who might have thought it better to have the road curve rather than make a right angle. Or, perhaps decisions were influenced by the fact that in Poland, Christian cemeteries are closed after decades of disuse and one can build over them.

As Poland develops, unused land becomes more valuable. If no one has paid attention to a Jewish cemetery for fifty years, there is an inclination to build over it. This now becomes a matter of public education for us. Over the last five years, I have found increased sensitivity to our tradition



2008: Rabbi Schudrich standing with other religious leaders as he speaks at the annual March of Prayer, organized by the Polish Council of Christian-Jewish Relations, and held at the Umschlagplatz Memorial in Warsaw.



June 26, 2007: At the Groundbreaking of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Left to right: Tad Taube, Archbishop Kazimierz Nycz, Rabbi Michael Schudrich.
Photo by Wojtek Radwanski.

among the authorities. We often do not know why a mayor or town council is ready to be helpful. I only encountered one substantial exception, in Lezansk, where the great Hasidic master, Rabbi Elimelech is buried. Thousands of Hasidim and other Jews visit Lezansk every year, but despite that or perhaps because of it, the town has too often been insensitive to Jewish needs.

In recent years we have learned that there are hundreds of unmarked Jewish mass graves all over Poland. They have various origins. The Germans, as they entered a town, would often take several

I have always believed that our work in Poland is to revive the Jewish identity of individuals. I want to give people the chance to decide to be Jewish.

tens of Jews out to the forest, shoot them, and bury them there. Also, during the deportations to the death camps in 1942–1943, often several hundreds of Jews the Germans didn't feel like bothering to send to the camps were just shot somewhere between the town and the cemetery. Furthermore, during the death marches from Auschwitz and other camps to the west, when the Russian army advanced, many Jews died and were buried on the sides of the roads.

There is a Baptist fellow, a very unusual denomination in Poland, who now travels by bicycle through villages in eastern Poland asking old people if they know where Jews are buried. Since he is a Pole, elderly witnesses speak to him more easily and often are relieved to talk. They may have seen some of the killings at a young age, not having been careful enough to run away. Those who now come forward are often traumatized by these memories, which they have kept to themselves for sixty-five years. We already have information on tens of sites of mass graves. We might, in the future, make a large effort to gather additional data.

A very different issue is that of assisting Righteous Gentiles. We cannot do enough to help these precious people. There is a Jewish Foundation for the Righteous that assists some of them, and there are also some other organizations. The last few hundred remaining in Poland should be enabled to live out the rest of their lives in dignity and some comfort.

Now that there are hardly any Jews left, some Poles miss them. Furthermore, it was taboo under the Communists to talk about Jews, and as soon as something that has been forbidden is again permitted, it becomes interesting in the public domain. There are also those who work towards a new Poland and are proud to be part of the European Union. As a result of all this, small

groups of people want to “do something Jewish” – save a synagogue, celebrate a Jewish festival, teach about Jewish history etc. A few dozen young non-Jewish Poles, for example, work to preserve Jewish cemeteries around the country, even though they often face local opposition.

How do we nurture such a phenomenon? Adept at identifying and fighting anti-Semitism, we are far weaker at identifying potential allies and friends. And yet, when we give them moral



1994: Rabbi Schudrich at left and Stanislaw Krajewski at right speaking at the Lauder Morasha Day School in Warsaw.
Photo by Monika Krajewska.

support, it gives them the sense that they are doing worthwhile work, and they want to do more.

In recent years the number of Poles who advocate for the preservation of Jewish memory has grown significantly. We have to realize that close to six million Poles, three million of whom were Jewish, were murdered by the Germans during the Second World War. When dialoguing with Poles and wanting them to feel our pain, we must feel their pain as well.

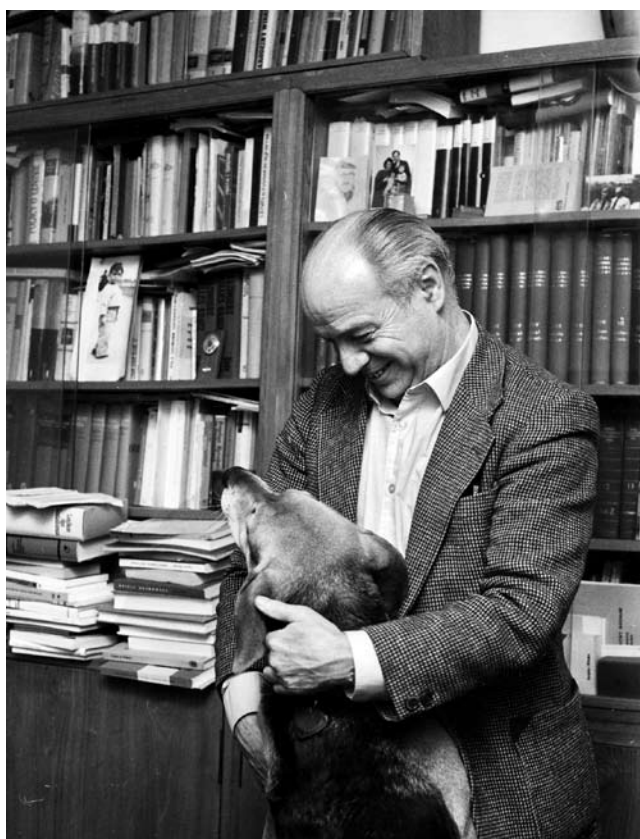
As far as Jews are concerned, I have always believed that our work in Poland is to revive the Jewish identity of individuals. I want to give people the chance to decide to be Jewish.

Until a few years ago the problems in Poland were predominantly post-Holocaust, post-Communist matters. As far as we can look ahead, the Jewish community will continue to live in the shadow of the Shoah. Yet most problems are becoming more ‘normal’ and familiar – in the context, say, of Israeli or American Jewry. A young woman says to me, “Rabbi, I am 23 years old. I know all the boys in the community and don’t like any of them. How am I going to get married?” Or parents will say, “Our son is 15. He has decided to become Orthodox, but he has no Orthodox friends. What is he supposed to do?” These are the typical problems of a quite normal, small community. ❧

A Historical Miracle: Jewish Life in Poland after Communism

by Feliks Tych

Before addressing the condition of the Jews and Polish-Jewish relations during the past twenty years, that is, after the setting up of a democratic Polish state, I would like to briefly return to earlier times – to set a reference point, as it were.



1986: Feliks Tych in his home library, Warsaw, with his dog, Bukka.

Years ago a friend of mine told me how, during the events of March 1968, he witnessed Politburo member Stefan Olszowski, then Party supervisor of the press and main orchestrator of the anti-Semitic campaign, barge into a journalists' meeting, panting and triumphant. He headed straight to the podium, where he declared: "Well, comrades, we've put an end to the Jews". In a way he was right. The March '68 purges and the concomitant

massive wave of emigration from Poland, both of Holocaust survivors and of their children born in the People's Republic of Poland, had administered to the Polish Jewish community what the French call the *coup de grace*, which means finishing off the badly wounded. In the sense of being a significant part of the Polish community, the Jews disappeared from the ethnic landscape of the country in which their ancestors had lived for centuries.

Those who claimed a secular or religious identity and remained in Poland did so for different reasons. Some stayed because they considered themselves part of the country and wanted not only to continue living there, but to fight for democratization. Others stayed because they believed, both in the literal and in the metaphoric sense, that one cannot leave the Jewish graves in Poland without a custodian. They believed that, since the Jews of Poland are no more, one has to assume responsibility – in the name of the integrity of history – for the memory of the ages-long Jewish presence in this land. They believed that they had to bring to popular consciousness the reasons – which included not only the Holocaust – why the Jews had all but disappeared from Poland's once multinational ethnic landscape.¹

The lesson of March 1968 – the student protests and anti-Semitic campaign – made everybody, or almost everybody, of those who remained, realize that there is no escape from Jewishness – and that one can be Jewish while remaining totally immersed in Polish culture.

How many people claiming a secular or observant Jewish identity remained in Poland after

¹ Editor's note: Survivors returned to Poland for numerous reasons, not only to preserve Jewish memory or fight for freedom. Some returned to look for family members. Others stayed simply out of inertia, or lack of options. Still others, particularly hidden children, were not even aware that they were Jewish.



the March events? Presumably, some 20,000. Just a small fraction of the prewar Jewish population, almost 3.5 million strong, and a small percentage of the quarter-million survivors who had transited through, or remained in, the country then called a People's Republic.

The memoirs of survivors who left Poland after World War II show that the main cause of the Jewish emigres' resentment towards their erstwhile Polish compatriots was not so much the shameful behavior of some Poles toward Jews during the war (though that was not negligible). The main resentment was the way the survivors were rejected when after the war they tried to return to a sense of normalcy and to their homes, if still standing.

Among the younger generations of educated Poles, including high school youth, the percentage of those declaring anti-Semitic attitudes has declined markedly, while that of respondents expressing *hostility* to anti-Semitism is on the increase.

It was the wave of postwar pogroms and murders of Jews (committed both by some of their neighbors and by the anti-Communist resistance, and sometimes also by men wearing the uniforms of the legitimate authorities) that sought to complete the ethnic cleansing so effectively conducted by the German occupants. This led to the exportation of the negative stereotype of the Pole that still lingers internationally, to the detriment of opinion about present-day Poland.

As shown in Polish sociological research, the first years after the creation of democratic Poland did not significantly change the attitude of most Poles to their former and current Jewish compatriots. Not only the *ancien regime* or the *komuna* (the Communists) bears responsibility for the state of mind of most Poles with respect to the Jews. This state of mind has deep roots. It took Poland's opening wide to the outside world, and above all a generational change, to generate what has become something of a historical miracle of the last dozen years or so, and especially of the last decade – a miracle, which only to a degree was the result of

the now minute presence of Jews in Poland and was mainly due to grass-roots initiatives of the younger and middle-aged generations of Polish intelligentsia with no Jewish roots. This intelligentsia had taken the initiative to set up university chairs in Jewish history, languages and culture. They now exist at almost all State universities in the country and account for the fact that among Yiddish speakers there are today more ethnic Poles than descendants of Jewish families. These intellectuals had also taken it upon themselves to set up academic centers of Holocaust research in Warsaw and Krakow, which have since earned international recognition. There are always many applicants for Holocaust history training courses

for teachers. It does occasionally happen in provincial centers that high school teachers who show initiative in that regard are frowned upon by their superiors, but such cases are rare. Recently, Holocaust studies have become a quasi-real part of the obligatory school curriculum. I say "quasi-real", for most Polish high school teachers are still not yet sufficiently prepared for this task – but the number of those who have acquired the necessary knowledge is systematically growing through teacher training programs.

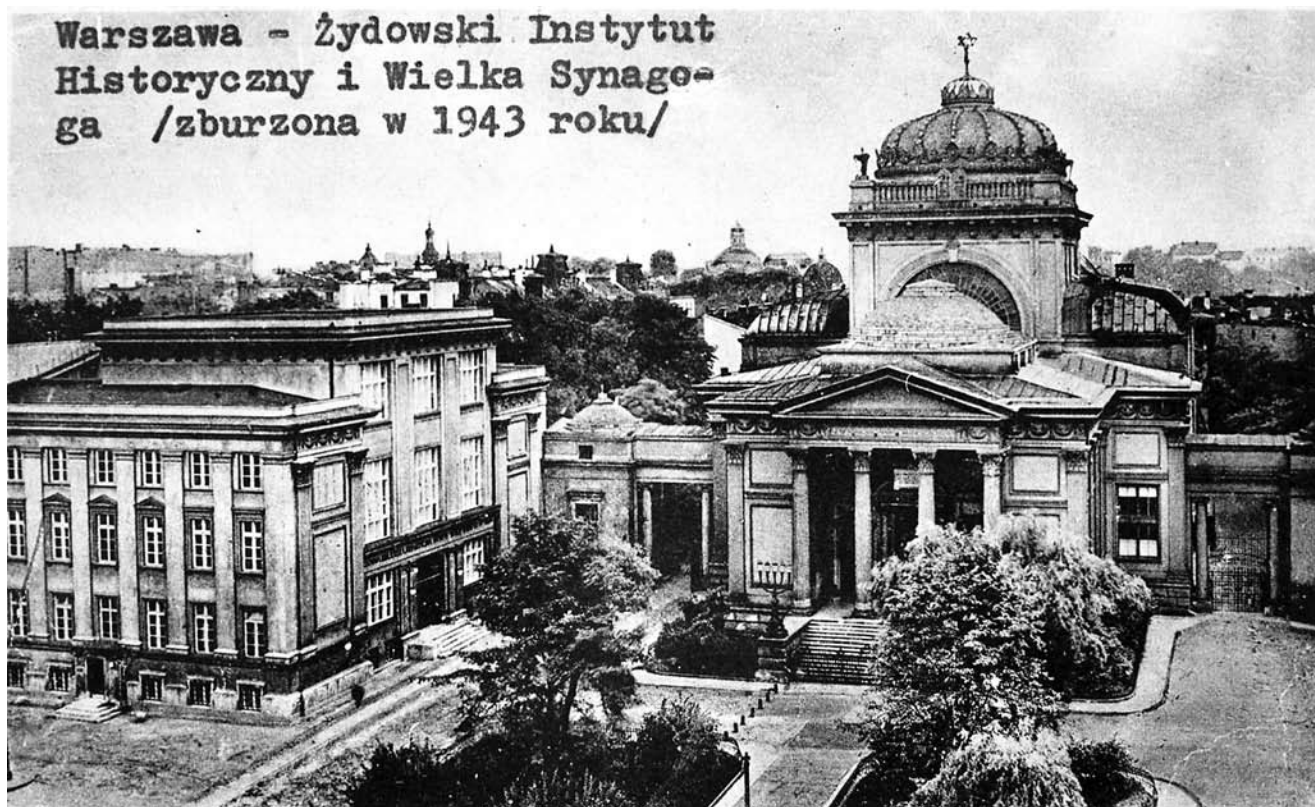
Recent sociological research does show that the percentage of unfriendly attitudes of middle-aged and older people towards Jews does not change much, but it also clearly indicates that among the younger generations of educated Poles, including high school youth, the percentage of those declaring anti-Semitic attitudes has declined markedly, while that of respondents expressing hostility to anti-Semitism is on the increase.

We still remember when tourist guides to Polish cities did not even mention, in their history sections, that before the Holocaust a large percentage

of the population of these cities had been Jewish. Nor, of course, did they mention the Jewish contributions to the development of local industry or of the city itself. Today this would be, by and large, unthinkable. The same had been true of local museums, from which Jews had simply been absent. Now, in most cases, they have reappeared.

Monographs and other publications about the presence and fate of Jews in this or that part of the country are being published with increasing frequency. The authors are local amateur historians, local teachers or archivists. However, information about the attitudes of the city's non-Jewish inhabitants towards the Jews in wartime is not often found in these publications. The approach is more often ethnographical than aimed at a detailed description of the wartime fate of the local Jews and the ways the non-Jewish compatriots treated them. One can assume that this is but a first step in bringing back the memory of the Jews and that other steps, leading into a deeper understanding of the wartime situation, will follow.

At least several books of Jewish interest are being published in Poland each month. These include survivor memoirs, victims' diaries, collections of sources, monographs, proceedings of academic conferences, biographies of eminent Jewish figures, textbooks and methodic guidelines for teaching about the Holocaust, and Polish translations of Jewish or Israeli authors. Never before in the postwar, and even, paradoxically, in the pre-war history of the country had such numbers of books on Jewish history been published – though their number also includes works of a clearly, if not explicitly, anti-Semitic orientation. I shall not delve into the national tours of anti-Semitic lecturers such as Professor Jerzy Robert Nowak. He has no problems finding hospitality in lecture halls, including some Church ones, or in finding eager listeners. There are also in Poland publishers who specialize in anti-Semitic literature, such as Henryk Pajak's publishing house in the Lublin area. Yet today they constitute but a fringe, if a lucrative one, of the publishing market.



1943 illustration of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (building at left) situated next to the Great Synagogue on Tlomackie Street.



Recently we have witnessed gestures seldom, or never, seen in the first 60 years of postwar Poland: local authorities have started erecting monuments to commemorate local inhabitants murdered in the Holocaust. In March 2009 this happened in the industrial town of Radomsko, home to 14,000 Jews before the war. Earlier, if such monuments or plaques did appear, it was at the initiative and expense of a former inhabitant residing abroad, or of his or her children.

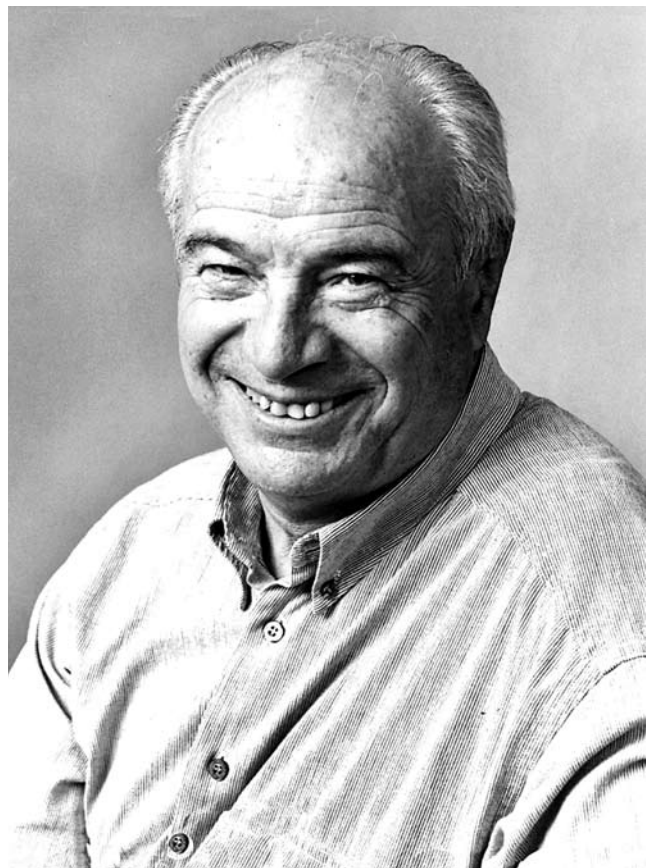
The importance of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum for the dissemination of knowledge about the destruction of Polish Jewry and of Jews from all over Europe, has increased in recent years, especially since Piotr Cywinski, Ph.D., has become the Museum's director. Their work is not limited to sharing knowledge about what happened there and then; it also facilitates an ever-broader perspective on the phenomenon of the Holocaust itself.

Poland's most modern Holocaust museum and memorial site was set up in 2007, with the

programmatic and financial support of the Holocaust Museum in Washington. It is located on the site of the former German death camp in Belzec, which had claimed half a million victims. The Holocaust site at Sobibor, where a quarter million had been killed, many of them Dutch Jews, is becoming more civilized, thanks to substantial help from the Dutch government. It is only in Treblinka, where the Germans and their Ukrainian helpers gassed the major part of the Jewish population of the Nazi General Government territory in occupied Poland, where not much is happening. Treblinka is still merely a section of the regional museum in the provincial town of Siedlce rather than a national museum such as the complexes at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Belzec and Stuthoff. This obviously limits the means available for maintaining this site, so important for Jews and for Jewish memory, in adequate conditions.

Notwithstanding the positive and significant changes in Polish attitudes towards Jewish compatriots, and the growing interest in the Jewish historical presence in Poland among the younger generations of Poles, the goals set by educators in this respect are not uniform. How deep will this educational work go, and to what extent will it unveil inconvenient truths that are often rejected by the national ego? How present, in the educational process, is the entire truth about the reasons for the disappearance of the Jews from Poland's ethnic landscape? To what extent does this process sidestep the difficult, inconvenient issues, including prewar anti-Semitism and the approval of the Nazi genocide by a part of its adherents and the real scope of the denunciations of Jews fighting for their lives in hiding. Postwar pogroms and murders of Jews must be addressed. These acts were committed not only by persons who did not want to return the property of Jews emerging from wartime concealment but also by those who, for example, singled out Jews in repatriation transports and killed them on the spot.

What conclusions should one draw from this juxtaposition of noble and historical truth-seeking academic, educational and cultural initiatives on the one hand and on the other, acts and manifestations



Feliks Tych in Warsaw.



that clearly hurt this process? Much still remains to be done to make the demons of Jew-hatred disappear, or at least be banished to the margins of Polish spiritual life; however, the positive phenomena seem to be much more dynamic than the actions of the still well-entrenched bigots. One of these positive phenomena is the support of the State and of the municipal authorities of Warsaw of such important institutions as the Jewish Historical Institute and the emerging Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

What is especially interesting about all the above mentioned positive developments is that they manifest themselves while the Jewish pres-

We still remember when tourist guides to Polish cities did not even mention, in their history sections, that before the Holocaust a large percentage of the population of these cities had been Jewish. Today this would be, by and large, unthinkable.

ence in Poland, as expressed in the number of the country's Jewish citizens, continues to decline due to biological depletion. The Union of Jewish Religious Communities, the Jewish Socio-Cultural Association, the Association of Jewish War Veterans, and the Association of the Children of the Holocaust are all active organizations, but each year, their membership declines. Biology has its rights.

The overwhelming majority of Jews living in Poland today have blended into society to a hitherto unprecedented extent. One proof is that the Jews have not moved to reestablish even one of the many Jewish political parties that still existed in the first postwar years. This phenomenon is a positive indicator that the civic rights of Jews are being respected. But we also feel, within the community, the lack of charismatic figures such as Michal Friedman, Arnold Mostowicz, or Pawel Wildstein,² who, barely a few years ago, were still among us.

² Translator's note: Respectively, a highly respected translator from the Yiddish, a well-known author and chairman of the Veterans Association, and a former chairman of the Union of Jewish Religious Congregations.

A portion of the Jews remaining in Poland are active in religious life, and all its different options, from the moderately Orthodox through Reform to Chabad, remain vibrant. Each year a certain number of Jews who have discovered their Jewishness late (but not too late) join these activities and treat their new affiliation very seriously. This has been going on at least for the past 25 years.

The fact that almost no Jews return to live in Poland is an important issue in shaping the Jewish community's future. Fortunately, we still have prominent Jewish intellectuals among us whose impact is not limited only to Jewish milieus and issues.

It would appear, however, that for now the effort of maintaining the memory of Polish Jews in Poland remains in the capable hands of the Polish intellectual and moral elites. More and more young Poles also participate in this effort. With increasing frequency Polish schoolchildren take upon themselves the preservation of neglected Jewish cemeteries and other vestiges of the Jewish presence. For many of these young people this is the first opportunity to discover that Jews had once lived in their cities and towns, and it is also the first step towards getting more interested in the fate of Polish Jews and the reasons for their disappearance from Poland.

In the future, it will be these young Polish men and women, who are not necessarily Jewish, who will care about and preserve the country's Jewish history. They will care about it because they want to know Poland's history better, and that is a history where Jews played important roles in all walks of life, though they were only an ethnic minority. ❧

Mosaic

by Eleonora Bergman

Twenty years after the fall of Communism, I think that we are still in search of Jewish ways of life in Poland, but twenty years is not so long, and there have been so many changes.

The fall of Communism (which in fact started with the Solidarity movement in 1980–1981) coincided with the time I became consciously, willingly and openly Jewish; and it marked the beginning of many gradual changes both for my parents and for me – changes in our lives as Jews and in our perspectives on Jewish life.

I was born in 1947 and was raised by parents who were Yiddish-speaking, atheist Communists. My father, a prewar Polish Communist, was convicted by Soviet authorities of anti-Soviet activity and sentenced to imprisonment in a gulag in Siberia in 1936. Accused of being a spy against the Soviet Union, he remained in the gulag until 1940. Following his trial, my mother was arrested and imprisoned in a gulag until 1945. After my father's release in 1940, he volunteered for the Red Army but was not accepted because he was Polish; he remained in the Soviet Union until May 1945, where it was safer than Nazi-occupied Poland. He returned to Poland and succeeded in bringing my mother and my sister in October 1945. Thus, he was far from Poland during the German occupation. He and many like him returned to Poland looking for family, hoping for the future of Communism, and wanting to piece together an understanding of what had happened during the war.¹

However, for both my parents, their family members who remained in Poland during the war almost all perished except for my mother's older sister's two sons (one immigrated to Australia, the other to Israel), and my father's cousin's two sons (they also went to Israel; one is still alive).



1991: Eleonora Bergman with her father, at home in Warsaw.
Photo by Chaim Krolicki.

My parents were intellectuals with strongly political identities. They studied and felt themselves to be part of Jewish history but not its customs or religion, and so as a child, I did not feel particularly Jewish. I always knew that I was Jewish, but it simply didn't mean much and had no religious foundation. When I was about eight years old, a Catholic priest stopped a friend of mine and me to ask, "Are you of the Mosaic faith?" My friend answered yes, and the priest went away. I hadn't understood the question, and my friend explained that he'd asked if we were Jewish. Well, of course we were Jewish: my mother was then an editor of the *Folks-Shtime* (Yiddish weekly) and my friend's father worked at the Jewish Historical Institute. But although my friend knew the term "Mosaic faith," neither of us understood what it actually meant.

I still did not feel particularly Jewish in 1968, or even later. It came as a surprise in the mid-1970s when my department at the Institute of Architecture and Urban Planning was accused of being a "Catholic-Polish nationalist-Zionist group." The Polish nationalists were former members of AK (the Home Army),² and the Zionist factor was

1 Her father passed away on October 14, 2000; he was 96 years old; her mother, on June 20, 2005; she was 99.

2 The WWII underground loyal to the government-in-exile in London, and persecuted by the Communist regime after 1945.

just me. (The words *Jew* and *Jewish* were not used officially in Poland at that time). The truth is ours was the only department in the institute with no connection to the Communist Party. In the 1980s I worked at the Workshops for Conservation of Historic Monuments (PKZ), which proved to be almost ideal for me, both in terms of work and the people I worked with. There were 15 branches of PKZ in Poland, some 1200 people altogether. We had to make cost estimates, negotiate with regional conservators of historic monuments, and coordinate various professionals (architects, art historians, historians, archaeologists, conservators, etc.) for every project undertaken. It wasn't very different from the Western system and was good preparation for employment after 1989, when many Polish institutions were restructured and westernized. Also, because the projects were for internal use for urban planning, there was no censorship, and neither the employers nor the government intervened in our archival research. This enabled me to feel uninhibited in my research and projects. Another reason I felt I had relatively easy access to informa-

tion was that my home, like those of my friends, was full of books from all over the world, brought legally or illegally, from the West and from the Soviet Union. We never felt completely cut off from the world, even though traveling was not easy.

I did not think that the fall of Communism would bring a lot for me if I continued to work at PKZ. Perhaps I would be less stressed, or the reasons for my stress would be more understandable, and my life would certainly be different. But this state-owned institution did not survive the political change-over and so I began to explore other positions. For me personally, everything seemed to happen at once – the fall of Communism, the fact that I couldn't stay at my job at PKZ, my growing interest in things Jewish, and eventually, the opportunity to be hired by the Jewish Historical Institute. This Institute is the largest repository of Jewish-related archival documents, books, journals, and ritual and art objects dating back ten centuries and the only one of its kind to be established after the Nazi occupation of Poland.



Eleonora Bergman and Feliks Tych cataloguing documents from the Emanuel Ringelblum collection at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. *Photo by Edward Serotta.*



My professional life began and evolved in Communist-dominated secular institutes where Jews were “Zionists” and Jewish identity was not yet a concept. But as Solidarity formed and grew stronger throughout the 1980s, I began to notice changes. My father’s own return to Jewish causes may be illustrative. I think his path exemplified certain trends that were common among Jews whose identification was more political than religious. Until he retired in 1975, and perhaps not until the time of the Solidarity movement he was not really involved in Jewish subjects. He read and wrote Yiddish (letters, at least, but also *Folks-Sh-*

he decided to read more about the Holocaust, and especially about the fate of the Jews of his beloved native Vilna (Vilna, Vilne, Vilnius). He read Mark Dworzecki’s diary⁶ and was overwhelmed and terrified by it. He started to translate it from Yiddish into Polish and insisted that I read it. I tried to explain to him that I could not read it, that I had already read more about the Holocaust than he had, that I had already read well beyond my ability to be resilient. But he could not understand.

My father left the Communist Party in December 1981, just after the introduction of martial law, in protest against the massacre of miners by the

My home was full of books from all over the world, brought legally or illegally, from the West and from the USSR. We never felt completely cut off from the world, even though traveling was not easy.

time), but only as a personal activity. But by 1981 he had become active in the struggle to name one of the Warsaw streets or squares after the wartime Jewish politician Szmuel Zygielbojm,³ and then he grew deeply involved in the monument project at the Umschlagplatz, which was completed in 1988.

My father was active in the 80s in his contacts with YIVO, the New York-based Yiddish Scientific Institute,⁴ exchanging letters with Dina Abramowicz, their famous librarian. He also corresponded with editors of *Yiddische Kultur*⁵ and published articles there. Also starting at the time of Solidarity,

ZOMO riot police. My mother, however, remained in the Party until it was dissolved in 1989. She remained because she was afraid of losing access to the Soviet archives, in which she conducted research for her work. Her membership in the Communist Party was regarded as “proof” that she could be trusted. Like my father, she had an intellectual’s approach to recent history and both of them did good research. In the mid-1980s, for example, my mother was deeply involved in researching the history of Belarus, and somehow she decided to write about Jewish writers and journalists whose roots were there. She found almost 350 of them in the famous Zalman Reisen’s Lexikon. Because I liked to work on maps, she asked me to help her solve a problem for the project: how to show all the relevant localities and their names within the various historical borders, including the present ones, and still have a legible, small scale map. My mother was convinced that my solution would not pass the censorship review because I had written Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia, and not the Lithuanian Soviet Republic, etc. Despite her skepticism, she submitted the article at the end of 1988, and it was published in the 25th volume of “Studies in the History of the Soviet Union and Central Europe” in January

3 Zygielbojm (1895 –1943) was a Jewish-Polish socialist politician, leader of the Bund, and a member of the National Council of the Polish government in exile. He committed suicide to protest the indifference of the Allied governments in the face of the Holocaust.

4 YIVO was founded as the Yiddish Scientific Institute (Yidisher visnshaflekher institut) in 1925 by scholars in Berlin and Vilna, Poland. The scholars, who envisioned an academic institution dedicated to the study of Yiddish and East European Jewish culture, chose Vilna, then an important center of Yiddish culture, as its site. The new institute soon became known by its acronym, “YIVO.” Today, YIVO is formally known as the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research and has been based in New York since its collections were rushed out of Eastern Europe on the eve of WWII.

5 Yiddish review published in New York by the Yiddish Culture Association since the 1940s.

6 A Jewish physician in Vilna, he survived the ghetto and published his memoirs in Yiddish in 1948 in Paris.

1990. I was proud that the names of our neighboring countries appeared on my map (dated 1988) earlier than they were officially re-introduced! Her article is a pioneering piece in the field and should be translated into English and published in a more “visible” periodical. Her most important book, on Bronislaw Taraszkiwicz,⁷ was eventually translated into Byelorussian, but when the book appeared in 1996 she was already too sick to understand that her dream had come true.

In January 1988, between the fall of my favorite workplace and the formal fall of Communism, I went to Israel for the first time.⁸ This was a very important experience, in many ways – both for me, and by extension for my parents, as the ideas and experiences I brought back to Poland became integrated into all our lives. It was notable that we, a group of about 80 people from Poland, were given official passports despite the lack of diplomatic relations with Israel. In Israel I was astonished that so many people were interested in the history of Polish Jews, and I experienced a most enjoyable new feeling of acceptance and belonging. I remember a conversation with Professor Moshe Altbauer, formerly of the Jagiellonian University, during which he called me a *Yidische tochter* (Jewish daughter). When our group returned to Warsaw in mid-February, the officer handing me back my passport said, “Next time, you will have no problems with your passport.” Was she a prophet, I wondered, or did she know something others didn’t?

After a conference in Jerusalem on the history and culture of Polish Jews, I decided to learn Hebrew. My father was not very happy when I told him of that decision, but he understood it. Certainly he had feelings of guilt about my not having learned Yiddish because he hadn’t allowed my mother to teach me. I returned to Israel for the Ulpan in July 1989, soon after the famous elections.⁹ The officer had been right; it felt as if I were



Eleonora Bergman’s parents, Stefan and Aleksandra, in their Warsaw apartment.

departing from a different country. The three-plus months I spent in Israel, learning Hebrew, traveling and visiting my family in Haifa, were both enjoyable and in a way depressing. For example, at a large celebration with perhaps 200 guests, most of them from the family, I found myself wondering what things would be like in Poland if more relatives from my parents’ families had survived the Nazi occupation.

I returned from Israel and not long after began my ongoing tenure at the Jewish Historical Institute. I did not know the Jewish Historical Institute very well before joining the staff, even though my father was a member of the board, and I think he was glad when I joined. We only worked together there one time, however, when I was invited to Oxford to speak about Yiddish in Poland after 1945. My father found, explained and translated articles for me, he suggested books to read, and we discussed several questions. He seemed to be very interested in putting all the material together, and he prepared much more than I was able to address in my short paper. It is all still waiting to be used.

I took Yiddish courses while I was at the Institute, taught by teachers from YIVO. They were baffled by how easily we Poles could correctly

7 An interwar Communist Belorussian activist in Poland.

8 After Poland, together with the rest of the Soviet block (except Romania) broke off relations with Israel in the wake of the Six-Days War, legal travel to and from Israel became impossible.

9 After a power-sharing agreement between the Communists and the Solidarity underground, partially free elections were held in Poland on June 4, 1989. The opposition won all of the

35% Lower House seats allotted to it, and 99 of the 100 Upper House seats, elections for which were completely free. This led, in very short order, to the peaceful dissolution of the Communist regime in Poland, followed by all other Central European countries.



translate some of the most complicated phrases, not understanding that they were composed following the rules of Polish grammar. I also must have absorbed something from my parents' secret conversations, my mother's songs and the sayings she used so often when she could not find an appropriate expression in Polish. My father helped me study and proposed that I read some of Y.L. Peretz's¹⁰ stories, which he helped me translate.

At a family celebration in Haifa, with 200 guests, I found myself wondering what my life in Poland would've been like if more relatives from my parents' families had survived the Nazi occupation.

This collaborative teaching lasted a very short time, unfortunately, and I never learned Yiddish well enough to speak though I read it from time to time. A few years ago, I took some text in Yiddish to read on the bus, and realized that it was a real sign of change that I was not afraid of doing so openly, and nobody paid attention to the language my book was written in.

My father continued to expand the scope of his own interest in Jewish history while I worked at the Institute. Around 1990, he became interested in the Jewish Socialist Bund,¹¹ which I found as shocking as his admission that one of his best teachers at school was a Bundist. What an evolution from a communist focus on getting rid of ethnicity to research on a strongly Jewish socialist organization!

Together with Jan Jagielski we organized the department for documentation of Jewish sites,

¹⁰ Yiddish author Yitzhak Leib Peretz (1852-1915), born in Zamosc, Poland, was a founder of modern Yiddish literature.

¹¹ The Jewish Bund (Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund in Lite, Poylin und Russland - General Jewish workers union of Lithuania, Poland and Russia), founded in October 1897 in Vilna by Alexander (Arkadi) Kremer, was a Jewish social and labor movement that sought to preserve Jewish culture and nationality in the context of socialism through the speaking of Yiddish and perpetuation of Yiddish culture. The Bund was liquidated in the USSR soon after the 1917 revolution, but enjoyed a large following in Poland, where it set up schools and social services and ran in elections. The Bund was anti-Zionist and advised Polish Jews against leaving Poland to go to Palestine in 1937-1939.

started to collect files for every Jewish community in prewar Poland, made the photographic collection of the 1950s and 1960s, surveyed synagogues and Jewish cemeteries (in cooperation with the World Monuments Fund in New York), and established connections with conservators of monuments and with volunteers. Working at the Jewish Historical Institute I have used my professional skills to document monuments, but at the

same time, I have had opportunities to learn more about Judaism, and, moreover, to get involved in Jewish life. Despite having had so much connection with the Jewish world(s) at home, I was never taught even basic things about Jewish customs or religion. I had studied Jewish history, Hebrew and Yiddish, but this was an intellectual approach to Jewishness. Still, though I felt no less Jewish than my colleagues and friends who had started to learn about Judaism in the mid-1980s, it was not until perhaps 1992 that, thanks to the Lauder Foundation, I went to my first seder. It is definitely thanks to my American Jewish friends that I have learned and experienced more of a Jewish life, which, paradoxically, I find is more natural than in Poland.

And so, twenty years after the fall of Communism, searching for ways of Jewish life in Poland we are trying to refer to some prewar local traditions and at the same time to follow the Western patterns of communal and social life. We have not yet found the proper way to deal with reclaimed properties, especially synagogues. We have not yet found the proper ways to preserve the memory of our former Jewish life (we focus more on the memory of destruction and death). We are still setting patterns for cooperation with local authorities, schools, and cultural institutions in order to preserve the memorials and monuments of Jewish culture. We have a lot of work ahead, much more than we ever realized before the fall of Communism. 🕯

We've Got It Made

by Konstanty Gebert

One should never speak to the media. No, I mean seriously. The words you say will return to haunt you. The only comfort is that almost nobody bothers to read the papers anymore, even on the day they are published, let alone years later. Unless your journalist is writing a book, not just a report, you are probably safe. So make sure they do not write books.

But back in the early 1980s, I had no understanding of this. I was just becoming a journalist myself – in the democratic underground, that is; no self-respecting person would serve as a mouthpiece for the military regime that was running Poland at the time. So my problem was how to acquire paper and printing ink, how to organize underground distribution without my people getting caught, how to gather the scattered bits of information: a demonstration here, an arrest there, someone seriously beaten in jail. I was hardly bothered by what would become of my words years later – especially if I was discussing not the problems of the underground political struggle, but something more simple and personal. Like being Jewish.

My interviewer was herself a former Solidarity activist, and almost certainly, I thought, involved in the underground as well, but of course we did not discuss that either. But she was writing a book about contemporary Polish Jews, so she wanted to talk to me.

“How do you see the future?” she asked.

“I believe we are the last ones. Definitely”

“And there will be no Jews in Poland?”

“In the sense of a religious, national group, no.”¹

¹ Malgorzata Niezabitowska, Tomasz Tomaszewski: *Remnants. The Last Jews of Poland*. New York 1986, Friendly Press.

Recalling my state of mind at the time, I might have added that Poland might one day be independent and democratic again, and no longer a Soviet satellite – even if I did not expect to live to see the day – but Jews in Poland? No way. It all ends with us.



Konstanty Gebert was an activist in Solidarity, the non-violent, pro-democracy movement, formed in 1980, which helped unseat Communism in Poland.

So here I am, a quarter century later, sitting at my desk in Warsaw, the booming capital of a country which is a NATO and EU member. I have lived to see the day – indeed, I have seen the days and years, and even grown used to a free Poland as if it were the most natural thing in the world. One impossibility has been duly accomplished. And what about the Jews?

Well, there is a bar mitzvah in my shul next week. The yearly Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow is just around the corner. *Midrasz*, the Jewish magazine, comes to my mailbox regularly late, as always. My younger son graduated from the Jewish school. My older son was press spokesman of the Warsaw kehilla for some time. The invitation for the Israeli Independence Day reception just came in. “We are the last ones. Definitely.” Ugh. Never talk to the media.

So why had I been so sure then that it was over?

Maybe it was loneliness. There were so few of us then, Jews trying to do something Jewish. All right,



there was the shul – but it looked and felt like a geriatric ward; I was the youngest congregant by two generations. There was the Jewish Socio-Cultural Association, officially sanctioned and controlled by the Ministry of the Interior – but it mainly served to lay down the Party line, even if in Yiddish. A friend of mine had asked why the Association does not observe the Jewish holidays. “We did have a ceremony for the anniversary of the October Revolution, didn’t we?” came the somewhat puzzled reply. There was the Yiddish theater, but all it did was stage the classics, from Goldfaden onwards, in a caricatured, pseudo-folkloristic way, which put us all off. And that was it.

Oh yes, there was the anti-Semitism too, from official statements to snide comments made by people who otherwise were on our side. When a leading underground activist was arrested, the minister of police proudly announced it on TV, adding that “all he had in common with Poland was that he was born and raised here” – and of course everyone understood he was Jewish. And among the underground publications, printed and distributed at risk, one would encounter tracts denouncing the Jewish enemies of Poland and her Church. Between that, the desolation of tolerated Jewish life, and the number of Jews I knew being easy to count on two hands, (even give or take an amputation), there seemed not much to build hopes on. “Do you think your grandchildren will be Jewish?” an American visitor once asked. My worry was – will they be allowed to be Jewish. Or will they even want to. Or will they live to see the day.

To have a Jewish life, you need Jews. And a little bit of freedom. Forget it. “We are the last ones. Definitely.”

But there were Jews around us; we just did not see them. The old gentlemen at shul – OK, it’s no crime to be old – who were terribly concerned that our involvement in the underground will bring terrible reprisals against the community as a whole. Not that we confided in them about our extracurricular activities, but when you had survived Nazi or Soviet camps – or both – you did not need verbal confirmation to realize what

young bearded men in their twenties were up to. And there were those who would never show up in shul, never admit their origins outside of the four walls of their rooms, and sometimes not even there. They never thought to contact us, the tiny unofficial Jewish Flying University, let alone the underground movement. They had seen their share of *tsures*, and considered it stupid to go out searching for more.

And then it was all over. The regime went, not with a bang but with a whimper. The underground press went aboveground. The elections were contested. The Communist Party was out of the government coalition, and soon dissolved. The Soviet army left Poland. Poland left the Warsaw pact. With everything that we knew would never happen happening all at once, with the impossible becoming yesterday’s news – well, why not try to be Jewish? For all you knew, Messiah could be just around the corner.

And so they came out of the woodwork, by the hundreds. Coming to shul for the first time in their lives, and standing at the entrance, unsure about how they should comport themselves. Should one



Konstanty Gebert in the Warsaw offices of *Midrasz* magazine, the Polish-Jewish monthly he founded in 1997.
Photo by Edward Serotta.



make the sign of the cross? Probably not – but in this Jewish church where is the altar, so that at least one could kneel? Attending lectures about Jews in Poland, standing up to ask a question, hesitating, and then blurting out: “Well, I’m Jewish...” and then looking around in vain for the lightning bolt they had spent their lives trying to avoid. Society at large reacted favorably. It was a time in which everything was possible.

We were woefully unprepared to meet them. The Jewish institutions had to be reorganized from scratch, reoriented and redefined. And most of these Jews, fresh out of their closets, could not

is supposed to do with the rest of his life. “Should I get circumcised? (His Jewish parents had evidently decided not to brand him with the mark that spelled death.) Should I leave for Israel?”

We had no answers. This was beyond us. So he returned to his village, to try and pick up what remained. We had failed him. And we had failed others. By the time we got our act together, the shock which had made everything possible was over. People were again settling in the new Poland which, for all the earth-shattering changes, was not that different from the previous one. The sun still rose in the East, for one thing. And adopted identities

So we set up the [Jewish] school. Today, it has over two hundred students. They all came from somewhere, from some closet their parents had decided to leave. To make sure their kids will never need one.

contribute. They needed certainties on which to root their identities, not arguments about whether the shul should remain Orthodox, hotly debated between people who knew no Hebrew and ate *treyf*: there were no Jewish schools and no kosher shops. And anyway, the scale of the problems would have daunted *gedolim*, let alone poor us.

One day a middle-aged Polish peasant showed up at shul. His father had passed away a few days earlier, and on his deathbed had told him: “Stas, you know that of all our children you are the one whom I love most – but you have to understand: you will not inherit the land. You see, you are not our blood. You are a Jewish orphan from the ghetto, whom we have rescued and adopted. We could not leave you to die: God would not have forgiven us. But you understand that you cannot be my heir.”

Sure, Stas understood: a Jew cannot inherit the fields of a Pole. Problem was, that Jew was him. He had lived all his life as a Polish peasant: elementary grade education, very Catholic, vaguely anti-Semitic. A good and decent man, by all appearances, and the child of evidently very brave and righteous people. But his entire world had just collapsed around him. He had been told he is somebody else. So he came to those of whom he was told he was to ask what he

remained familiar, even if the reason for which they had been adopted was no longer there. The wave had crested before it could reach the shore.

And yet we did manage to do some things right – with a little help from our friends. An extraordinary young American rabbi came along to help us on our way. Today Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich has left his mark on literally hundreds of lives. A kindergarten was set up, with funds provided by the R.S. Lauder Foundation from New York. American Jewry, itself, like us, a descendant of the great Polish Jewry of before the war, came to assist its long-lost relatives. Soon the Taube Foundation joined the fray. With that aid, both spiritual and material, we grew.

And it was probably the kindergarten that did the trick. Initially, we never expected it to grow into something more. A kindergarten is just an institution of convenience; it leaves no trace on those who attended. A school, on the other hand, is an institution of commitment: it is supposed to leave traces, in the minds and hearts of the students, and on their certificates. So when the first batch or two of the graduates of the Jewish kindergarten of Warsaw entered the regular school system, we thought we had seen the last of them

– institutionally, that is. They were all children of friends and acquaintances, to be *kvelled* about for years. But we hardly expected the parents to return to us and say that the kids were missing out. That they needed – and deserved – something more. A Jewish school.

But we were supposed to be the last ones, remember? Well, these parents – even if they had shared the same experiences we did – did not seem to think so any more. Until you have kids, the future is just a word. With kids, it becomes an everyday presence. And you want to shape that future, to make it all that it could be. I know: my younger boy was one of the four first kindergarten graduates. So we set up the school. Today, it has over two hundred students. They all came from somewhere, from some closet their parents had decided to leave. To make sure their kids will never need one.

This commitment could be expressed only because the country was now free, because assistance and support was at hand, and because there were people around who wanted to be Jewish, even if they had thought of themselves as the last ones. Yet these conditions, though necessary, would not have by themselves been sufficient. They opened the way – but did not create the will to start walking. That will had come from somewhere else.

The parents. The grandparents. Emerging bloodied and numb from the greatest disaster our people had ever seen. Trained in survival, in assimilation, eagerly grasping for ways of living that would conceal the mark of death. Doggedly and determinedly raising their children not to be Jewish, to know nothing of their heritage and past. Raising them to be safe. And yet, in the middle of all that, against the strategy of survival, possibly without knowing it, often assuredly not wanting it, they had planted in their children the guilty knowledge. The giddy knowledge. The secret Yiddishkeit to be concealed – but preserved. This is what had made their children and grandchildren want a Jewish school for the children they themselves now had. We were so busy filing for construction permits, renting premises, setting up curricula, that we had been oblivious to the miracle we were witnessing.

Sure, on two Upper West Side blocks there are today still more Jewish children than in all of Warsaw. So what?

While some were busy with the school, others brought the shul back to life. Today we have congregants' children running up the aisles, and I am counted among the *alte kakers*. Others still, uncomfortable with our shul's Orthodoxy, set up a Reform congregation. Fine, the more the merrier. Jewish organizations started springing up, more chiefs than Indians, as usual. A youth association was created, went into crisis, split, reemerged. Jewish summer camps would start with davening *shaharit*, and end with fierce discussions of just how much religion can a normal Jew stand. A normal Jew. As if it were normal to discuss normal Jews.



1987: Konstanty Gebert, at left, celebrating Purim in Warsaw. Photo by Monika Krajewska.

And yet, twenty years later, this is what we have become. A normal Jewish community, with people attending one kind of services, and certainly not the other kind, or *dafka* never going to pray. Not because there is no shul. Not because they are afraid. Not because they would not know what to do once they are there. Just because it is their Jewish pleasure to do it their way.

We've got it made. Never speak to the media. 🐼

The Year Before 1989

by Helise Lieberman

In 1988, two major events took place, which, at first glance, seemed totally unrelated; they were, in fact, worlds apart. In May of 1988, the general workers' strikes in Poland paved the way for the country's return to democracy in what Timothy Garton Ash aptly called a "refolution" (reform + revolution). In September of that same year, 1988, our daughter, Nitzan, was born in New York City.

significance and the implications of the political events of 1989 did not fully register at the time. I certainly had no notion of the challenges that lay ahead and no inkling that I would be invited to help strengthen Jewish communal life in Poland.

Twenty years later, as I share these thoughts sitting in our Warsaw home of the last fifteen years, Poland is celebrating twenty years of

And there, among a group of Polish men and women who were hidden children during WWII, despite an almost total discontinuity of the transmission of Jewish knowledge, a *pintele yid* seemed to reside in each of them.

My husband, Yale Reisner, a dedicated student of Eastern European history and languages, was sporting a "Solidarity" T-shirt in those days while avidly following the *New York Times* and broadcast networks' daily reports of the momentous events unfolding in Poland. Yet, even with all of the news coverage, I continued to relate to Poland as a land of "dead Jews, Auschwitz and the Shoah" and acknowledged the developments by buying updated atlases, which changed almost weekly as the Eastern Bloc gave way to newly democratic Baltic and Central European states and as the Polish People's Republic became, simply, the Polish Republic once again.

freedom and our twenty-year-old Nitzan is writing her bachelor's thesis at a Polish university on identity development among young Polish Jews. I marvel at the intertwining of what had begun as such disparate events back in 1988 and at what has transpired in between.

I am convinced that, if you give Jews who have never been to Poland a box of crayons and ask them to draw a picture of it, many will use black, grey and red, or perhaps the sepia tones of old, fading photographs. I, too, would probably have chosen those colors 20 years ago. But I have learned since that Jewish life in Poland is multifaceted and multicolored. I have learned that life is not lived in extremes of black and white and that, to my surprise, there are more than 200 distinct shades of grey that reside between black and white. Grappling with the troubling issues that lie in the grey zones provokes us to think and to challenge misperceptions and preconceptions.

We rejoiced at news of the June 1989 elections in Poland, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the lifting of the Iron Curtain. However, like most of my Jewish contemporaries who had been deeply involved in the Soviet Jewry movement, I paid no particular attention to Poland, unaware of the very existence of Jews there. I did have some vague sense that the situation for Jews in the former Communist bloc would somehow change for the better, but the

Through my personal and professional experiences in Poland, I have been constantly challenged to take a closer look and I feel obligated to encour-

age others to do the same: to rethink and reexamine how they view and understand Jewish life in Poland. I have also come to expect and accept contradictions and have learned that true understanding is often to be found between the lines, in the silences and among the spaces.

I remember walking into a friend's kitchen during Passover many years ago and seeing a half-eaten box of *matzah* and half a loaf of fresh bread on the table side by side. I was extremely confused: This, to me, was a clear contradiction. Did the communally-sponsored classes lead to this? Had she not just participated in a communal seder? Her Jewishness had always been important to her. How, then, could she choose to continue to straddle two distinct traditions? How could she find a comfortable space between two seemingly divergent, yet compelling identities?

I don't know what is on her kitchen table during Passover these days. I am, however, no longer con-

fused. Then, as a less experienced Jewish educator, I understood that having access to Jewish experiences and knowledge would allow people to make informed Jewish choices. I have since learned that the informed choices that result might not be those we had originally anticipated. Access and freedom empower people to resolve conflicts and reconcile contradictions in their own ways. They allow people to synthesize and fashion their personal Jewish identities and enable communities to formulate and construct their own Jewish modalities. Having partaken of the *matzah* and the bread, people will reach their own conclusions. Sometimes they will opt for one, sometimes for the other, and sometimes for both.

Even having been raised in a house full of friends and students from all over the world and having lived in Europe and in Israel, I would never have imagined living in Poland. I don't think I ever considered visiting, even though my grandfather's



July 2007: Jewish educator Helise Lieberman leads a community discussion at the KlezmerHois in Krakow.
Photo by Wojtek Radwanski.

family came from what is now the Polish city of Bielsko-Biala and I live with a genealogist. Poland was the “old country” – a place Jews came from, but did not live in.

My first encounter with contemporary Polish Jews was at a Shabbat dinner for “Hidden Children” in New York City in 1991. I had never heard of Hidden Children, but was immediately captivated by their stories and their vitality. In the early 1990s, the conversation among Jewish educators was all about the importance of continuity. And there, among a group of Polish men and women, in spite of the war, their hiding and being hidden, despite an almost total *discontinuity* of the transmission of Jewish knowledge, a *pintele yid* (a small, yet undiminished, spark of Jewish feeling) seemed to reside in each of them. This experience was my wake-up call to the nuanced nature of Jewish history and Jewish life.

That summer, we were invited to spend two weeks staffing a Jewish retreat, sponsored by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation, not far from Bielsko-Biala. The retreat was attended by individuals and families, young and old, among them some of the participants from the New York gathering, this time along with their families. There were no organized trips to Auschwitz and no formal discussions about the Holocaust. The program focused instead on offering the participants, who had been denied any access to formal Jewish learning, the opportunity to explore Jewish sources and (re)connect to Jewish tradition.

The experience was extremely moving. There were few participants with any positive memory of or experience with Jewish life, and yet a collective Jewish *neshama* (soul) pervaded the atmosphere. It was a confirmation, in spite of personal loss, communal tragedy and decades of Communism and repression, of the unbreakable links in the chain of Jewish peoplehood.

Captivated and intrigued by that summer’s experience, we returned in December to celebrate Chanuka and the launch of the Jewish student publication – *Jidele* – with the Jewish community of Warsaw. We were greeted warmly, as if we were

old friends returning from a long journey abroad. I returned once again at Purim with Pizmon, a Jewish *a cappella* group from Columbia-Barnard, and spent six weeks at the next summer retreat. Once again, the welcome was warm and friendly.



Taking a break from the crowds at the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow, Helise Lieberman shares a laugh with her husband, Jewish Historical Institute chief genealogist Yale Reisner. Photo by Wojtek Radwanski.

Intrigue and curiosity were soon replaced by a compelling sense that we wanted to contribute to Jewish life in Poland in a more substantial way than just from retreat to retreat or from summer to summer. Offered the opportunity by the Lauder Foundation to help create a Jewish day school in Warsaw and to assist people in searching for their Polish Jewish roots, we packed up our Manhattan apartment and moved into a flat in central Warsaw in 1994.

In retrospect, I now realize how naïve, but well-intentioned, we were, in spite of my longstanding tendency to jump first into uncharted Jewish educational waters and my husband’s fluency in Polish and academic background. Nitzan at the time had just started K-1 and was lured by the promise of a bunk bed. We had no idea then that rather than just being *shlichim* (designated short-term emissaries), we would all become members of the community ourselves and co-travelers on a journey of Jewish discovery.

I had a series of school-planning meetings with community members, educators and interested parents soon after our arrival. While I am sure that many things were “lost in translation,” a strong sense



of commitment to our shared goal transcended any experiential, linguistic or cultural differences.

Everything needed to be done, including looking for Jewish educators in a place where there had been no formal Jewish education for decades. It was a challenge but, by the time the school year opened in September, we had assembled a phenomenal group of Jewish and non-Jewish teachers and staff members ready to take a leap of faith and an historic step together.

We had gathered the basic blocks and were ready to start building our own curriculum. We all agreed that if we knew at least *aleph* and *bet*, then we were at least prepared to teach the first year. We were committed to an adapted version of the whole

After one of the many meetings, a representative of the group faxed me a copy of ten requests. I accepted them as our school's "Ten Commandments." They did not reflect my vision of a Jewish school, but rather the fears and dreams of parents and teachers who themselves had never had a formal Jewish education, yet were committed to creating the opportunity for their children.

I still have the first list of students, parents and teachers, but regret that the fax, like memory, has faded with time. However, among the guidelines that I remember were the following: the school was to serve only kosher food; each door should have a mezuzah; Hebrew would be optional and Jewish religion per se was to be presented and discussed, not taught; and, most importantly, the

Those who have grown up in post-Communist Poland, with access to Jewish knowledge and to the wider Jewish world, will take on the responsibility of creating sustainable models of Jewish life for Polish Jewry.

language approach for ourselves and for our students. However, while the school could incorporate elements from Jewish schools abroad, our school would have to reflect the unique realities of Jewish life in Poland. And like many other newly created or reemerging Jewish institutions, the school paid respect to the rich legacy of Polish Jewry while building a foundation for the future.

Among the founding parents were some of those who had established the Jewish kindergarten in 1989. Some of those involved did not have school-aged children. Some who did were ambivalent at best about enrolling their first grader. But it was clear that the school was more than just a Jewish school – it was a Jewish institution essential to building a normative Jewish community. In fact, having a Jewish school seemed to be almost as important to those parents whose children were not enrolled as to those who had signed up. The school was a symbol – a source of communal pride, an integral piece of the Jewish communal puzzle – that represented permanence, stability and an investment in the future.

school was to be open both to those with Jewish roots and to those without. Learning and doing together, teaching acceptance and respect, were of paramount importance.

Guided by these "commandments," the Warsaw Board of Education, colleagues from abroad and a group of pioneer parents and creative educators, the Lauder Morasha School opened its doors on September 1, 1994. Fifty-five years to the day after the Nazi invasion of Poland, eighteen children, our daughter, Nitzan, among them, began their formal Jewish education.

The year was filled with firsts: the first taste of school-baked *challah*, the first blowing of the *shofar*, the first student-decorated *sukkah* in the backyard of the villa which housed the school, and the first family Passover *seder* with 85 people crowded into the school's main room. A framed photo of 18 handmade *chanukiyot*, their candles burning long after the children had gone home, has a special place on my desk as a reminder of the dedication of all those who made that first Chanuka celebration, with all its symbolism, a reality.



The children's first school Chanuka was indeed a *nes*, a miracle. But *their* children's first Chanuka will already be a tradition. And, as Jews have learned over thousands of years, tradition ensures transmission and transmission ensures transition.

Nitzan's classmates and their slightly older peers represent a generation of Jews with an energetic, transmitted Jewish identity. Whether from home or school, summer camp, Birthright Israel trips, the Jewish students' association or one of the synagogues, this generation has a sense of pride and ownership.

The transition has begun as the new generation takes on the responsibilities, as well as the privileges, of this inheritance. They are leaders in the Jewish student associations, they are producing Jewish-themed music, art, theater and film, creating and participating in Jewish learning programs and cultural festivals, writing theses on Jewish themes, studying in Israel, and working in Jewish institutions in Poland and abroad.

They are not allowing themselves to be defined by others. They do not define themselves by the past

or by who they are not, but rather by who they are, with a respect for the past informing their present and helping them plan for the future. They identify naturally with *klal yisrael* and fully intend to engage in Jewish life in Poland and take their rightful place at the global Jewish table.

Having been privileged to see the first fruits appear of the seeds we planted almost twenty years ago, as well as seeing what has not taken root, I appreciate this opportunity afforded me by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture to take stock.

There is no doubt that extraordinary things – miraculous things – have been achieved in Poland through the efforts of many passionate and dedicated individuals with the support of committed sponsors, foundations and agencies from around the world.

Individuals have found their own Jewish identities; families have found lost relatives or, at the very least, finally learned their fate. For the first time in decades, there are identifiable and identified Polish Jews representing three generations.



October 2005: Students gather around then-School Principal Helise Lieberman at the Lauder Morasha Jewish Day School in Warsaw. Photo by Edward Serotta.



Communal narratives have been restored and Jewish institutions renovated or created anew. Jewish Poles and non-Jewish Poles are beginning increasingly to acknowledge a shared past and to explore a common future, the European Union is offering numerous possibilities, and a globalized world provides a greater sense of Jewish peoplehood.

The short and simple answer to the question of whether Polish Jewry, as individuals or as communities, is where I might have expected is: “It’s complicated.” Not all of our efforts, individual and institutional, yielded the expected or intended results. There have been gratifying responses as well as some humbling lessons. Both new challenges and new opportunities have arisen: strengthening

become – dreamers and doers, writers, social workers, historians, philosophers, artists, teachers, rabbis, and leaders with the advantage of having the sage advice and support of the founding generation to guide and encourage them.

I feel extremely privileged to have participated in the “refolution” thus far. I am awed by those who started and nurtured the process, the founding generation, and am grateful to those who allowed me to join them – as my guides, my teachers, my students and my friends.

I carry three passports – American, Polish and a third, invisible Jewish one. I am blessed with a fairly well-integrated set of identities which together offer me a prism through which to examine Jewish

There is no doubt that extraordinary things have been achieved in Poland through the efforts of many passionate and dedicated individuals with the support of committed sponsors, foundations and agencies from around the world.

Jewish home life, developing new leadership, reaching across communal divides, encouraging inclusivity and offering more educational, cultural and spiritual gateways.

Indeed, it’s complicated. But, a profound sense of *naches* (deep satisfaction, pride and pleasure) comes from knowing that the new generation, the result of an extraordinary collective endeavor, is poised to meet these challenges and ensure that Jewish life in Poland will evolve as Polish Jewry continues to reclaim its heritage and its place in the Jewish world. They will succeed in confronting the prevalent stereotype that Poland is the place of “dead Jews, Auschwitz and the Shoah” and will break through old barriers and worn out prejudices.

Those who have grown up in post-Communist Poland, with access to Jewish knowledge and to the wider Jewish world, will take on the responsibility of creating sustainable models of Jewish life for Polish Jewry. They will be us – as many have already

tradition, better understand the rich legacy of Jewish history and appreciate the diversity of Jewish life.

My extraordinary experiences – including as an occasional *mikveh* attendant, a Torah reader in a women’s *tefillah* group, a member of the women’s *chevra kadisha* (burial society), talking with friends and colleagues, spending time in the school or in encounters with Jews from abroad, working for various Polish and European Jewish organizations, and now on behalf of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture – have given me unique insights and perspectives. Now, I cannot imagine looking at the world without these special lenses.

Twenty years later, I am reassured, encouraged and hopeful as I listen to Nitzan explaining with great eloquence and confidence how she and her peers navigate and appreciate their Polish Jewish lives.

Sometimes I worry and sometimes I wonder, but mostly I *kvell* and look forward, with anticipation and curiosity, to the next twenty years. 🌟

Genuine Czulent

by Anna Makówka-Kwapisiewicz

I was born in 1981, the year that martial law was imposed in Poland. The years of my adolescence were an era of political instability: Solidarity, the deliberations of the Round Table,¹ the collapse of Communism, the opening up of borders, all kinds of change, the coming of democracy.

But what did this mean for a little girl? In principle, nothing. Only that my mother brought me a Barbie doll from the West. I still went to school with my backpack, passing through the whole city with all the local attractions. I knew that once, between the evangelical and the Catholic Church, had been the Synagogue. Already at a young age I knew a lot about the history of the Jews. In my house we still talked about the history of Poles, Jews, Polish Jews and the Poles against the Jews.

Most of the inhabitants of the town did not differ from each other; we all looked the same, had the same problems, went to church. I, like them, did not differ much. However, from time to time, while walking with my mother, some ladies might remark to us. They admired my, as it was said, “Gypsy” beauty — As pretty as a small Gypsy! What nice black eyes and hair! She looks like a little Spanish girl!

At that time I was proud to be unique and different from all my colleagues in class. But I did notice that unlike any of the others I was literally set apart. Our teacher sat me with Lukasz Somerfeld, who also had black hair like me. All the other girls sat with girls, and boys with boys. Only we two, the “Spanish,” sat together.

After school I always went to visit my sick grandmother. I brought her lunch every day. My grandmother always taught me prayers — “Aniu, it

is useful! You have to pray very nicely! When they return [Ed. Note, the Germans] and they ask you to pray then you will pray.” So I prayed and waited, and no one came. Each year we went to Grandma’s less and less, because how much can one pray? On Saturday and Sunday, I traveled with my dad and his parents to their village. It was a lot of suffering. Grandfather still spoke about hiding in the forest. Grandmother never allowed us to waste any food during the meal. I told Dad about it. He told me that people of a certain age can speak nonsense so not to listen to the grandparents’ stories. How he had stopped listening too. I talked less and less with my grandparents, and we no longer visited the village; we only went on foot to the park.



Anna Makowka-Kwapisiewicz was four years old in 1985.

1 Reference to negotiations between the Communist authorities and the Solidarity opposition in 1989, which led to semi-free elections and the peaceful dismantling of the regime that same year.



I started high school. As a rebellious young girl, I chose “general” and expected the economic consequences to anger my mom. The first year, I met some new people who, like me, were also rebelling. We liked to have fun, laugh, just play around being teenagers. One day one of the boys began to tell jokes about Jews. When I reacted one of my colleagues said, “My grandparents hid Jews during the war, and when they left Poland after the war and went to America, they didn’t send my family any packages!” Amazingly, none of the group stood on my side. After returning home I told my mom one of these jokes. Mom attacked and turned on me. She began to shout. After the storm of her anger had passed she said to me: “Anna, your father is a Jew! And you’re part Jewish!”

It was amazing. At the beginning I was so shocked that I did not know what to say. After a while all these memories started to fill in the whole picture. That same day I went to visit all my grandparents and my father. I went to my grandmother. Finally, I understood why my grandfather had to hide in the forest, why my grandmother did not waste any food. I realized why I needed to know the whole catechism by heart, I understood why my grandmother cried

The first Friday dinner was very moving. My colleagues showed me how to light candles and pray before the Sabbath. Women young and old did the same thing with dignity and emotion, learning from each other.

when she spoke about her friends. I understood, too, that when my grandparents wanted to say something that I could not understand, it had not been German they were speaking, but Yiddish.

What has changed in my life? That revelatory news convinced me that my family and I were among the last Jews who lived in Poland. I decided that I would devote the rest of my life to the history of the Jews by analyzing the origins of anti-Semitism, which had been used to commit the murder of the Jewish people. I decided that my work would serve to construct an objective and true history of the Holocaust, which would close the mouths of those who denied it, and consequently make people realize that they cannot allow this past to repeat itself. As a result I began to study history.

At university I studied Hebrew and Yiddish. I devoted a lot of time to research in the State archives. One day in the stacks in the archives in Bydgoszcz, I noticed a girl wearing a necklace with Hebrew letters suspended on her neck. I was surprised and happy at the same time to meet a Jew my own age. It turned out that this girl was a Polish student of Jewish studies in Krakow. She told me about the Jewish community in Krakow, as well as about a new Jewish association of young people named Czulent.² My reaction to this news was immediate. I decided to begin Jewish studies and engage in the activities of the Jewish Association in Krakow.

In 2005, as a second-year student of Jewish studies, I was invited to a meeting organized by the March of the Living. I was asked to speak to young Israelis and Americans about why I decided to pursue Jewish studies. One of the members of the audience was Daniela Malec, who, it later turned out, was the Chair of the Jewish Association Czulent. We started to talk, and seeing my enthusiasm and desire to join Czulent, Daniela told me about the organization and invited me to the Thursday meeting.

I went to the first meeting full of concerns but within a few moments all were dispelled. It turned out that the association had been running for years, at the beginning as an informal group of friends who met in Taglit. They then decided to establish a network of organizations for young Jews in Krakow. The first meetings were held in an apartment rented by Daniela. After some time, Czulent received a small room with a bathroom from the President of the Jewish Community in Krakow, Mr Jakubowicz. This small studio on Dietla Street (an omen, as the building had once been an orphanage for Jewish children) turned into the association. With help from the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, the American Jewish

² Polish transliteration of *chulent* (a stew).



Joint Distribution Committee and the World Jewish Relief, the room was furnished.

This environment nurtured me, as everyone brought a friend or an acquaintance who had Jewish origins. This group from the very beginning acted as a support group for people who had any inquiry into their Jewish origins and who wanted to define their Jewish identity. We could talk honestly amongst ourselves about our traumas, plans,

can Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. We met on Friday mornings, we went shopping and within a couple of hours we were cooking. In fact, none of the girls could cook so we all learned cooking from the cookbooks of Jewish cuisine. After a few dinners we reached a point where we could cook without the books. A characteristic sign of my cooking was to over-salt everything and Daniela added a huge amount of pepper. However, this did not prevent anybody from

Not so long ago it seemed to me that I was the last Jewish girl in Poland. Now I live in Krakow with my husband and our daughter, and we are creating a Jewish home and family.

and concerns. And, most importantly, within this specific group, we were deeply understood. It was awesome sitting with a handful of diverse individuals from all over Poland: students from Krakow universities, feminists, anarchists, atheists, religious people, who, despite their personal differences, found the same association and decided to create a framework for people to connect via their Jewish origins. Genuine Czulent.

At the beginning our meetings were limited to talk and play. But, meeting by meeting, the conversation transformed into plans on how to make up for lost time and what we could do in some way to regenerate Jewish life in Poland. We started to organize meetings of people interested in religion and in studying Torah. Others prepared papers for meetings about Jewish culture, art, and history. We started to come every Friday for Sabbath dinner, organized by the municipality, and prepared by Mrs. Zosia Radzikowska.³ The first Friday dinner was very moving for me. My colleagues showed me how to light candles and pray before the Sabbath. Women young and old did the same thing with dignity and emotion, learning from each other.

After a few months, Ms Zosia asked us for help in preparing dinner, and from then on, Friday dinners were prepared by Czulent with the aid of the Ameri-

enjoying the meal. This communal atmosphere was an important part of our Sabbath.

We started to organize around the Jewish holidays, bringing together a lot of people. All the organization and preparations were tiring and time-consuming. Sometimes the preparation for the celebration of the holidays could take several days. However, we were aware that many people who would attend had not celebrated Purim for many years, if ever. The excitement and emotion were complete compensation for us all. Every year the association developed and began to implement major projects, including the Remuh Library, the Jewish Film Club, *Mifgashim be Polin*, "Polish women, Jews – Krakow suffragists. The history and the present for equality and diversity."

Since 2007 I have been involved in organizing and conducting the Jewish Literary Salon. My main objective as the coordinator of this project is to educate people that there are still Jews in Poland and that they are people who contribute to Polish culture. I wanted to bring the great heritage of Jewish culture to light by inviting distinguished guests and moving them towards different and sometimes controversial topics. More and more people are coming to the meetings. I have ongoing participants who ask about future months' programs.

Czulent, from a group of friends, turned into a well-organized and active association. However, some members of the Jewish community in Krakow regarded Czulent as non-Jews who could not be trusted. This

³ Holocaust survivor and Solidarity activist, she had been a member of the Krakow City Council from 1994 to 2002.

situation hurt me very much, because I most wanted to unite and integrate the community. At the end of 2006, to the joy of both religious and nonreligious people, Rabbi Boaz Pash came to Krakow. Since then I have worked for the rabbi, and we have devoted a lot of time to building a more integrated environment. I believe that we have shown the older people from the community that we are wholeheartedly working together to create a Jewish community and regenerate Jewish life in Krakow. Over time, we have established cooperation and friendship. Now the JCC also organizes a Shabbat dinner and holiday celebrations. All the Jewish associations continue to cooperate and remain friendly. The Jewish community in Krakow is growing. Young members have children. The granddaughters and grandsons are starting to take part in Jewish life.

But most important for me is that I met the love of my life, Piotr, at the first meeting of Czulent after I decided to become a member and attend meetings. The second meeting was an event organized in honor of Piotr on the day that he returned from Israel. We had similar histories, similar passions. Piotr is also a Jewish activist and, above all, we both wanted to create a Jewish home with a Jewish partner. First we got engaged, and two years later decided to get married. It's important to us to create a Jewish home, a house in which we cultivate Jewish traditions. We decided that our children would be raised in awareness of their origins and the history of their nation.



Anna Makowka-Kwapisiewicz at home in Krakow with her husband, Piotr Kwapisiewicz, and their daughter, Nina.
Photo by Katarzyna Czerwonogóra.

In 2007 the National Organization of Jewish Youth – ZOOM from Warsaw – along with Czulent, organized a trip to the mountains for their members. We felt it would be an ideal place for a wedding. We visited three cities trying to persuade the clerks to marry us on Sunday; we were denied every time. We drove to Bialka Tatrzańska, and we pleaded, on our knees, with the clerk to come on his day off from work to the Registry Office and give us a wedding. “The Real Wedding” was held the night before the marriage in a mountain inn. The next day we drove to the office. I suspect that this clerk will remember for the rest of her life our large group of friends singing in Hebrew.

A year later our daughter, Nina, was born. The birth of our child and being parents radically changed our lives. It changed our expectations and objectives relating to the Jewish community in Krakow. Now I spend Shabbat at our home with Piotr and our wonderful daughter. Now we are busy addressing the question of what to do, so that our daughter can grow up to be a woman involved in the life of Jews in Poland. Therefore, we want to establish a Jewish nursery in which Nina can know her Jewish peers. We want our daughter to be able to attend a Jewish kindergarten and school, where she will have the opportunity to learn about the history, tradition, and the language of our nation and be able to have Jewish friends.

I believe that this is possible. I believe because not so long ago it seemed to me that I was the last Jewish girl in Poland. Then, I wanted to devote my life to the history of a nation that seemed to me as only existing outside of Poland. Now I live in Krakow with my husband and our daughter. We are creating a Jewish home and family. We meet on walks with the other Jewish moms, talking about our common concerns and the future. I have a Jewish Literary Salon, in which we have heated discussions about literature. I believe also, that more and more people will come to our association, or to the JCC, because those who wish to create Jewish life and strengthen their Jewish identity must have places to go, but most importantly they need to know that there are people who live not only on the pages of history books. 🕯

I Don't Remember Communism

by Jan Spiewak

I don't remember Communism. I can't — because I was born in the year 1987 — two years before the “Round Table” and the first partially free election in Poland. The time of my childhood was also a time of great transformation of the governmental system and of lightning-like changes in our surroundings.

It is a fact that the shelves in the stores were full, and that on television you could see American series or politicians arguing various subjects. On the streets of Warsaw, people were driving expensive Western cars. All of it was obviously familiar to me — as familiar as attending a Jewish preschool every Monday morning. My earliest memories are of this school. It was the first Jewish preschool in Poland in many years. Then I remember when my parents moved me to a new public regional preschool located near my house. I remember my tears and upset being in these new surroundings. It was very near my home, but I did not want to accept the change.

A few years later I found myself in another Jewish School — this time an Elementary School run by the Ronald Lauder Foundation. It was located in a small villa in a well-to-do part of Warsaw. Every day a school bus would pick up the children on Plac Zbawiciela in the center of Warsaw and drive for half an hour to the school in the south of the city. A school bus! This was only a dream for kids in Warsaw!

Being a Jew from the beginning of my life was connected with something special, in a very positive way. It was a taste of the West, because all Jewish aid was arriving from the rich United States or exotic Israel. Sometimes it would be a Rabbi from New York speaking funny Polish, or summer camps in the south of Poland with a pack of Jewish kids from friendly Warsaw households. Those were the days when Jewish society in Warsaw was developing quickly.



Jan Spiewak in San Francisco, 2008. Jan served as a Humanity in Action intern with the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture in Fall 2008.

As I grew older and changed public schools again, my connection with the Jewish world stopped being so immediate and daily. But I went back to this world after a couple of years and got involved in creating the Jewish Youth Society. Well, by this time, from our pack of kids, barely half were still interested — the rest were far away from Judaism. They were still Jewish, but their arguments were: “Other people are Catholics or Germans and they do not advertise this, so why should I?” It is hard to beat this argument. I think of it often myself. You could say, “We are first of all Polish — that’s our language, our way to dress, our way to act. All of it proves that we are part of this nation. We do not observe Shabbat, we don’t keep kosher. Really only one slim stream of memory separates us from the rest of the Polish people — the consciousness that we belong to a very special group of people and the understanding that this belonging was once a barrier to education, professions, and even our survival.”



And this leads my story to the life of my grandparents.

In my room I have hundreds of my grandfather's books. They were there as long as I can remember. Some of them I couldn't even read. They were in all different languages: German, Russian, Hebrew. This library of my grandfather (who died when I was two years old) is still intact to this day. Every time my grandfather read a book, he would put his signature and date on the margin. He spoke several languages, was an avid historian, alpinist, Doctor of Philosophy, Zionist, partisan, and physical educa-

Free Poland has given us the freedom of self-description. Today we can place accents on our identity as we choose. All the options are possible: you can be a Pole who follows Moses' teachings, a Polish Jew, or a Jewish citizen of the Polish Republic.

tion teacher. During the war he lost his wife and two daughters. Against all odds he stayed in Poland and to the end of his life was very active in the life of his Jewish Community (Gmina). He is alive in me through my Mother and through his books.

My grandmother deeply believed in the "Dictatorship of the Proletariat." She was a Communist, a leader of the Women's Chapter of the Polish Workers Party, a delegate to the Polish Parliament and a member of the Polish Communist Party since the year 1918. She also chose a way of social engagement, like my grandfather's. Recently I read the memoirs she put together in the 1970s. What strikes me in them is her total belief in the socialist system. The history of my grandmother and grandfather is an interesting metaphor for the destiny of Polish Jews. After the war, my grandmother came back to Poland from the Soviet Union to start work to rebuild – in principle – a better Poland. Grandfather went to Israel, but returned after a brief stay of two years. Together they started a new family. Grandfather became a historian, researching the murderous history of the German Wehrmacht Army in Poland. The Communism of my grandmother and the Zionism of my grandfather are two different answers to the prewar anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

Regardless of this rich family tradition and history, I always had a feeling that a bomb fell on us and shattered everything. I asked myself what kind of family is this — just the four of us? No grandparents, no aunties, no uncles, no cousins. The Second World War took the first wife and children of my grandfather. Later, when my mother was born, her parents were almost fifty years old. She was the only child. On my father's side, the family situation is not much better. I miss having a large family with its likes, dislikes, and arguments — only to put them aside once or twice a year to sit together at the table, to be a family.

In my home, as in the houses of my friends, we openly discuss — without problem — the so called "Jewish question." Never in my life have I felt a victim of anti-Semitism (except when I provoked it by going to right-wing demonstrations!). Living in the biggest city in the country, and having friends from similar "intelligentsia" families, the subject of prejudice is not a problem. Moreover, probably one-third of my Warsaw friends have some Jewish roots. In my house, we freely talk at the dinner table about the Holocaust, anti-Semitism and Poland before the war. We try to talk about these matters – if it's possible – in a scientific, sociological, or historical manner. We can keep an emotional distance from the subjects. But it is easier for me than for my parents.

I never was forced to answer the question "Who are you – Pole or Jew?" Destroying this dichotomy – regarded by most Jews as a falsehood – is in my opinion one of the most important differences between Communist Poland (PRL) and the present Third Republic. When somebody asks me "Who are you — Jew or Pole?", I always have a problem. Being Polish for me is to have my imagination and my language, which helps me understand reality. I would say that being a Jew is a specific kind of sensibility. Both of these criteria constantly intertwine. I do



not like these types of questions, and when I try to answer them I always have the feeling that I should have answered differently. Free Poland has given us the freedom of self-description. Today we can place accents on our identity as we wish. All the options are possible: you can be a Pole who follows Moses' teachings, a Polish Jew, or a Jewish citizen of the Polish Republic.

The fall of Communism and success of Democracy has resulted in providing a space for Jews in Poland. The idea that Poland has to be homogenous – that a Pole has to be a Catholic – doesn't fit with a democratic society. Space was created for the Jewish community. The question is now: can we cultivate and keep this space?

The fall of Communism also resulted in freedom of expression in conversations about Jewishness – not only in people's homes, but also in public spaces. My mother was very deeply engaged in organizing the rebirth of Jewish life in Poland. She was the first woman in the Union of Jewish Religious Congregations in the Republic of Poland. Later, in the years 1997–2000, she was vice-president and then the president of Warsaw's Gmina. But quick disappointment followed after the first wave of enthusiasm. Yes, Communism fell, but the people's mentality was deeply scarred. People who used to come

We have a large infrastructure with means and sympathy from the local government and from the West. We have to come up with fresh new propositions for the young people – open new groups focused on education and culture.

to Gmina quickly stopped coming. The membership rotated so much that obviously it weakened the inside connections of small groups. You can say that after the change of the system, lots of people were looking for new identities. In situations when all of the values and authorities fail, people look for places that can offer them a new way of living. Those were the ones who came to Gmina. Time quickly verified their engagement.

Some of them went to search further and realized that in Poland they would lack the possibilities and means to realize their dreams. Those people emigrated to Israel and to the United States of America.

Today the time of transformation of the Polish system is nearly complete. The market for new ideas is much more peaceful. Most Poles – no matter who – are preoccupied with rushing after the “Western Dream.” Sadly, it is mostly about its superficial form – consumption and lifestyle. After the time of transformation, we were left with only a small number of Gminas that function well as institutions and have some financial independence. The main question is how to rebuild society and the Jewish family in Poland? There are a lot of questions for us to face and we can't run away from any of them. One question is how much the success of Jewish society in Poland depends on us, and how does it reflect the situation outside of Poland? Maybe their function should only be “cleaning up” the society's mess to leave a clean card behind it. Cleaning up cemeteries and remodeling old synagogues will not revive life. We have to attract young people who have life.

Unfortunately, it might not work because there are too few Jews left in Poland. It is a simple question of scale. On the other hand, we are dealing with deep assimilations of Polish Jews as an effect of fifty years of Communism. We also compete here with non-religious lives. These are only a few problems we have to face. There is a very similar situation in other Gminas in Central Europe and Western Europe,

except, maybe, for Hungary. It looks like the fight against assimilation is the biggest threat for Jewish life in the whole world.

Even the biggest Diaspora in America has to fight this problem. Religion, which is most important in the Jewish tradition, is definitely declining among the rich and well-educated Jews. They grow more individualistic and go about their lives by themselves. Some people say that the problem is in mixed marriages, which do not provide traditional upbringing for Jewish children and don't guarantee their identity as Jews. But we have to understand that in Poland, practically all of the Jews are from mixed

marriages. If somebody has a mother and father who are both Jews, the family has very strong tradition. Talking about Polish Jews in the context of religious law doesn't make any sense in Poland.

The last full Jewish families were those formed after the Holocaust by the people who survived it. Anti-Semitism had existed before the war as part of the Government's ideology and policy – for example, the law that created “bench ghettos” and “numerus clausus” at the Universities. After the war, in the 1940s and 1950s there was hope for a chance of rebuilding Jewish families in Poland. In those days there were plenty of schools, newspapers, cooperatives, etc. With a lot of grief, we have to admit that the chance was destroyed by the Polish government and the Polish society. A horrible example of this was the 1946 massacre in Kielce – when some 46 Jews who had returned home after surviving the concentration camps, exile or hiding were massacred by the hateful mob – when the Polish government was two-faced and the Polish Church didn't act.¹ That was a warning sign for the Jews who tried to start a new life in Poland. In the mid 1950s, people with Jewish backgrounds were thrown out of work. The ones who emigrated were those without emotional connection to the Jewish movement or too much love for the country and its people. It is hard to say that Judaism went underground – it simply evaporated. Some people lasted in this mess. None of them talked much about it, and tried not to relive it.

After Communism fell we regained our citizenship. The authorities became neutral and sometimes friendly. Soon after the structure of the country changed, many Western and American organizations started to support Polish Jewish life with money and know-how. What's next, then?

The Gmina is like an orphan who lost its parents very early on, but can read about them in books and scientific papers. The ones who could teach us how to bless the bread and keep an eye on us, to go to the synagogue on Yom Kippur or make a Shabbat sup-

¹ Most of the victims of the pogrom, which raged in Kielce and the surrounding area July 4-6, 1946, were in fact killed by pogrom mobs or individual murderers. Units of the police, secret police and army also participated in the killings.

per are gone. They are all dead or they don't remember how to do it. We could say that in Poland there are quite a few individual Jews, but there are none from multi-generational families. How do we rebuild this life? The best way to do it is through education. The Lauder Foundation did just that. They opened the first Jewish Elementary School and then the first High School. They started seminars for adults, lectures about culture and history, and had classes of conversation in Yiddish.



Jan Spiewak and other members of ZOOM, the Polish Jewish Youth Organization, attend a world music festival in the harbor town of Gdynia, near Gdansk.
Photo by Judyta Nekanda-Trepka.

After the first wave of excitement from the 1990s, it's time to reassess what we have achieved. First of all, in our Gminas there are not enough children and marriages. We achieved a certain stabilization and stable participation in our movement. But demography is against us. We have a large infrastructure with means and sympathy from the local government and from the West. We have to come up with fresh new propositions for the young people – open new groups focused on education and culture. Gminas have to become centers of innovative culture that will attract different participants. We would like to be attractive to the Polish public.

If we could revive this quickly aging Gmina, our success could be symbolic and important for the whole Jewish diaspora. That would be the success of the Jewish spirit, which tells us to survive in tradition and belief – even if everything is against us. 🌱

I Was Neither a Jew Nor a Catholic

by Janusz Makuch

I was born in a small town, actually in a *shtetl*, into an ordinary Polish Catholic family.

My religious consciousness took a long time to emerge and it was not inherited from my forebears. I went seeking, and I found it.

From the moment when I discovered my own path to my religious and cultural self, I never had any problem with self-identification. Moreover, I never felt the need for such identification. I was neither a Jew nor a Catholic. The overwhelming majority of “the Catholic world” defined me as a Jew,

religion, can have serious identity problems. These are people who feel a powerful, spiritual bond with Jewish religion and culture. They are people who feel that converting to Reform Judaism is not sufficient to make them Jews. Yet they are aware, at the same time, that they have not yet matured sufficiently in religious terms to undertake the long procedure of classical conversion. These people live in their own, often neurotic world. They are ready to make sacrifices that Jews themselves are often not prepared to make. These people are frequently very lonely. They have neither an envi-

Please remember that Jews lived in Poland for centuries. These many centuries of connections are still vital, because something that lasted for whole centuries cannot perish that suddenly.

because no one could even conceive of a non-Jew being the director of one of the biggest and most important Jewish festivals in the world. The majority of the Jewish world, for its part, looked on me, with amiable wariness, as being *meshuga*. Here’s a Pole bending over backwards to be a Jew – something nobody in his right mind would do.

In Poland, anyone whose mother is Jewish is a Jew; anyone who belongs to the Jewish Religious Community is a Jew; anyone who converted is a Jew; anyone who regards themselves as a Jew is a Jew; anyone whom others regard as a Jew is a Jew; anyone who has leftist views is a Jew; anyone who is a liberal is a Jew; anyone who is gay or lesbian is a Jew; anyone who is not a fan of the right soccer team is a Jew; anyone who is an editor or reader of *Gazeta Wyborcza* is a Jew; anyone who has no opinions is a Jew; every second Catholic priest is a Jew. In Poland, there are hardly any Jews.

People who are not Jews in the *halakhic* sense, but who at the same time do not confess any other

ronment of their own that they can identify with, nor institutions to provide them with elementary knowledge. They feel like pariahs, or a particular variety of *marranos*. They know that they are not and never will be Jews, and yet their lives, in some uncanny, inexplicable way, are irrevocably interwoven with Judaism. I have met such people in Poland. I talk with them frequently.

Their role in the process of the renewal and revival of the Jewish culture in Poland cannot be underestimated. I am talking about many people, frequently unknown and anonymous, who, with great sincerity and perseverance, are systematically building an authentic Polish-Jewish dialogue. The enthusiasm of the Poles can produce tangible benefits: it can spread an awareness of the role and significance of the Jews in our shared history over the centuries, and even more, it can contribute to reducing the level of anti-Semitism in Poland.

For as long as I can remember, the interest in secular Jewish culture in Poland was always

connected to an interest in the religious culture. I cannot actually recall these two issues ever being separate from one another.

This interest arose in my consciousness somewhere in the early 1980s, or perhaps even slightly earlier. In any case, I first encountered secular Jewish culture in the early 1980s. That was when I came to Krakow to enroll in the university. The first thing I did was to begin attending observances at the synagogue. I soon met several other people who were interested, just like me, in Jewish culture. In our group, there were Jews, half-Jews, quarter-Jews, and, finally, non-Jews. We numbered seven, or at most, ten people. We organized Hebrew and Yiddish language lessons for ourselves, and lectures about the Jewish holidays. We began keeping the Sabbath. We tidied up the Jewish cemetery in Krakow and finally, on the anniversary of the liquidation of the Krakow ghetto, we organized the first March of Remembrance, attended today by over a thousand people. Back then, we were living the Jewish life without any sharp division between secular and religious culture.

The 1980s in Poland were a period of increased opposition activity for many of us. One result of the opposition political life was the re-examination of official history. Underground publishing was very dynamic in Poland. We were starved for information about recent Polish history, and it obviously followed from this that we should learn more about the contribution of Polish Jews to that history, as well as to culture broadly understood. A great many publications on this subject came out at the time. Films were made, theatrical productions mounted, and exhibitions about Jewish art opened. There was increasingly bold discussion of the problem of Polish anti-Semitism, and also of fruitful Polish-Jewish links. In a word, this was a period when the Jewish heritage was being explored intensively. The people who carried out this exploration were both young Jewish and Christian Poles.

Interest in secular Jewish culture also resulted from the obvious fact that it constituted an integral

part of Polish culture and, in the wider perspective, of European culture. Please remember that Jews lived in Poland for centuries. These many centuries of connections are still vital, because something that lasted for whole centuries cannot perish that suddenly. Jews were present in a creative way, in every domain of community, political, and economic life, and in the culture, as well. The Holocaust sundered those many centuries of connections. It sundered them irrevocably.



Janusz Makuch, co-founder and director of the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow, enjoys a concert inside the splendid Tempel Synagogue. *Photo by Pawel Mazur.*

For me, however, this is above all a country where Jews were present for almost a thousand years. It is a country of Jewish religion, Jewish culture, and Jewish life. I cannot accept life in the shadow of death – which does not mean that I treat that death lightly. I live in the shadow of 750 years of Jewish history in Krakow, and the almost 1,000 years of Jewish existence in Poland. This is my space. This is my world.

This Jewish world was extraordinarily diverse and multicolored. From the times of the Haskalah, it interpenetrated ever more deeply with the Polish world. It is clear that that many elements of secular Jewish culture are rooted in Polish culture. This also made it obvious for us, back in the 1980s, that we should treat this secular Jewish culture as a natural element in our own culture – that is, in Polish culture.

Aside from this, another reason for interest in this culture was a particular kind of void. I would



call it an axiological void. I, and my generation – the people born around 1960 – had been told over the years that Polish culture was national – that is, the culture of a single ethnic group—and also that it was monolithic. We were told that the history of Poland had been created exclusively by Poles, and not by Jews, Lithuanians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, Germans, Russians, or anyone else. In the light of this, our discovery that Polishness was not monolithic led us to begin seeking an answer to the fundamental question: Where do we come from? What is our true cultural identity? Where are we going? And it was obvious that we would begin discovering our cultural Atlantis—in other words, the world of Polish Jewry.

The choice of secular Jewish culture surely depends to a large degree on the identity of the person making the choice. For many Jews who do not feel a connection with religion, it is a perfect supplement to, or even a substitute for that religion. Above all, however, it makes it possible to define yourself clearly in regard to the world and in regard

For many Poles, including Catholics, the Jewish Culture Festival is a place and a source for learning about Jewish culture. What is more, it is also a place and a source for rediscovering a more profound cultural, historical and religious identity.

to tradition. Yes, I am a Jew, a non-believing Jew, but one who acknowledges the values that clearly constitute my Jewishness. And I am neither better nor worse than those Jews who are, to a lesser or greater degree, religious.

I think that an interest in secular Jewish culture also results in a natural way from the priceless value of pluralism. “Pluralism is the will of G-d,” Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel said, and Jews are excellent at realizing that will.

What is the significance of this interest? For me and my children, it is fundamental. Pluralism has enormous significance for the younger, postwar generation, which is slowly freeing itself from stereotypes and prejudice. It also is significant that the door is open for them to acquire authentic knowledge

about Jewish culture understood as an integral element of Polish culture. This, in turn, allows them to look upon the many centuries of Polish-Jewish relations as a natural historical-cultural landscape. It makes it possible to perceive and better understand the organic links between the two cultures. And, finally, it shows that Polish culture, like European culture, is no monolith; it is pluralistic, and that is the source of spiritual and material riches.

Several years ago, I read an article from the Israeli press on the phenomenon of interest in the culture of the Jews in Poland. There was an interesting comparison there, which indicated that there are more books on Jewish themes published in Poland, more films produced on Jewish subjects, more exhibitions mounted on Jewish topics, more recordings of Jewish music, more academic research on the Jews, and, finally, more Jewish festivals organized—including one of the largest in the world, the one in Krakow—than in all the other countries in Europe put together.

I have been organizing the Jewish Culture Festival since 1988. What does it mean to carry on a culture? Where does that culture come from? It comes from Poland. From Poland, from East Central Europe, and partly from Russia. Where else could it possibly come from? I am not importing foreign culture into Krakow. I am merely creating the conditions under which that culture can return to the places, and the spaces where it arose, flourished, and was enriched. That is why, in a cultural and historical sense, the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow is our common celebration of Polish-American-Jewish-Israeli culture. And, in that sense, it is an event without precedent on a global scale.

I want to state that, for many Poles, including Catholics, the Jewish Culture Festival is a place and a source for learning about Jewish culture. What is



more, it is also a place and a source for rediscovering a more profound cultural, historical and religious identity. Let me give you one eloquent example of what I am talking about.

The Festival would not be possible without volunteers. I recently accepted 50 young volunteers aged 15 to 20. When asked about their motivation, their most frequent reply was that they wanted to find out more about what Jewish culture is, from the inside. The second most common response was that they wanted to learn how the Festival is organized. They said that they wanted to get to know real Jews, not picture-postcard Jews, not the ones from *Fiddler on the Roof*, but Jews the way they are today. I tried to discourage them. I told them that it was very hard work and involved a lot of responsibility. I said that they could be exposed to anti-Semitic taunts, and that a scenario involving a terrorist attack was not out of the question. I told them that I wouldn't hold it against anyone if they resigned. Nobody resigned.



1989: From left to right: Krzysztof Gierat, co-founder of the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow; Mordechai Palzur, then-Israeli Ambassador to Poland; and Janusz Makuch.
Photo by Jacek Ginda.

Several volunteers who have worked at the Festival in recent years have gone on to write master's theses about the Festival. Others have become tourist guides in Kazimierz, and others still have enrolled in Jewish Studies at the university.

People say that the Festival is organized by non-Jews, for non-Jews. That's part of the truth, but it's

also not the truth. The Festival is created each year with advisors who are leaders in the world of Jewish arts, academia and religion. In addition, at least 90 percent of all performers, lecturers, teachers and artists whose works are showcased at the Festival are Jewish. Moreover, every year, there are more and more Jews who come to Krakow from all over the world. But the most numerous groups, at the present time, are non-Jews: Poles, Americans, Russians, Germans, Scandaniavian, French, and even the Japanese.

In what way, then, is the Krakow Festival a source and place of Jewish culture and identity?

1. The Festival reconstructs the image of a cultural world that was created without interruption, for almost a thousand years, by Polish Jews and the Jews of East-Central Europe.
2. The Festival is a forum for the living Jewish culture, both traditional and contemporary, being created today by Jewish artists from North America, Israel, Europe, and Poland.
3. The Festival is not an open-air museum of Jewish culture. It is the living reflection of that culture and workshops for its continual development.
4. A majority of the Festival performers are Jewish performers.
5. The Festival reflects every possible aspect of cultural life, from the traditional to the avant-garde and the quasi-heretical.
6. The Festival reflects every possible aspect of religious life, from Orthodox, through Conservative, Progressive, and Reform, to agnosticism.
7. The Festival is held in the space of Kazimierz, Krakow's historical Jewish district. This is the best place for learning the culture and going more deeply into the identity. Physically Kazimierz survived the Holocaust. The majority of concerts, lectures, workshops, exhibitions, films showings, and meetings are held in synagogues or former

synagogues. Seven beautiful renaissance and baroque synagogues still stand in Kazimierz. This place provides a feeling of the continuity and endurance of tradition.

8. The Festival is not a collection of random cultural events. Its ambition is universal education. The purpose of all the concerts, films, meetings, lectures, and workshops is to teach—in both the religious, historical and the cultural aspects. Knowledge is of fundamental significance. We supply knowledge. Knowledge gives a sense of belonging to a specific ethnic and religious group, but also, and above all, it makes it possible to take a broader view of where we come from, what we have lost, what we can recover, and where we are going, no matter who we are.

I am convinced that Jews and non-Jews need the Festival to an equal degree. We should concentrate our activities on showing the world the enormous contributions that the Jews have made and are still making to the development of culture, art, and democracy – and that it is precisely democracy that is a condition for our continuing survival and growth. There are still many people in Europe, in America, and all over the world who need to learn what an enormous and significant contribution Jews have made and continue to make to the development of Polish, European and world civilization—and also, how very great a price has been paid for this.

During the Festival we show our authentic, uncompromising, consistent desire to develop on the basis of the many centuries of Jewish culture in Eastern Europe, and our faith, upon which our identity is founded. ❧



The closing night concert of the Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow draws over 15,000 revelers to Szeroka Street in Kazimierz, the historical heart of Jewish Krakow. *Photo by Pawel Mazur.*

Why I Returned to Poland to Help Build the Museum of the History of Polish Jews

by Sigmund Rolat

I realize that I am a somewhat unusual Holocaust survivor; in fact I have always held onto happy memories of my life in Poland before Nazi Germany invaded my country. I never held Poland or its citizenry responsible for Hitler's genocide of the Jewish people. After surviving the war, I immigrated to the United States, married and raised a family in New York and built a business there. I observed from afar the suppression of Poland's liberty under Soviet Communism, and it was during the historic final days of its Communist system, which was overturned by Lech Walesa and the Solidarity movement, that I grew eager to return to Poland.

Since the victory of democracy in 1989, I have worked to help Poland build a strong civic society and Jewish community. Though this new life's chapter was wholly unanticipated, my now 20-year involvement in business ventures and cultural initiatives in Poland remains deeply fulfilling. My



Sigmund Rolat is Co-Chair of the North American Council of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

Years ago I took my son and my daughters to Poland to see their ancestral land and Czestochowa – once a wonderful microcosm of Polish municipalities. I wanted my children to see the site of Czestochowa's Old Synagogue, the beautiful Mirowska, where traditionally, with a Torah in his arm, the Grand Rabbi would greet the Polish President when he visited. The synagogue boasted ceiling and wall frescoes by the renowned Professor Peretz Wilenberg, and for over a hundred years it preserved a battle flag entrusted to it for safekeeping by a Polish troop detachment retreating with the Napoleonic Army. The flag became the inner lining of the plush cover of the Holy Torah ark sanctum. This and other information was available to my children from my own experience, but how wonderful it would have been to take them to a full-fledged museum of our history, if only one had existed then.

Throughout its postwar history, Poland has struggled with the memory of its Jewish past. Human societies do not witness genocides in their homeland and then carry on as usual.

most significant commitments are to reviving Jewish life in the city of Czestochowa, where I was born and raised, and to my role as board co-chair of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, a world-class educational institution that will present and teach the thousand-year history of Polish Jewry on the historic site of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in World War II.

I was born in 1930 and fondly remember my childhood. My grandfather operated a small school at Stary Rynek, where all subjects were taught in the Polish language. My older brother Jerzyk and I attended the Hebrew Gymnasium, a most prestigious old school once headed by Daniel Neufeld, who first translated the *sidur* Hebrew prayer book into the Polish language.



Czestochowa, famed for the Black Madonna icon at Jasna Gora, is the most Catholic city in Poland. One third of its prewar population was Jewish, a very important and productive third. Jews built the first textile mill and paper mill; a concert hall and theater were funded by Jewish philanthropy. I was a Pole whose religion happened to be Jewish. On High Holidays, we attended the handsome New Synagogue but we also celebrated Polish Constitution Day on May 3rd.

We who lived in wartime Czestochowa – in the ghetto, in hiding, in the Hasag camp where I survived with some 30 other youth – carry with us some harrowing memories. My parents and my older brother, Jerzyk, were killed during the war. At 18, Jerzyk was the youngest in a group of six

and granted them privileges and special charters – even as Spain and Portugal persecuted and expelled Jews and onerous restrictions were commonplace elsewhere in Europe. For hundreds of years more Jews lived in Poland than anywhere else in the world. The Va'ad Arba' Artzot, the (Jewish) Council of the Four Lands (of Poland), was the only Jewish executive political body that existed between the destruction of the Second Temple and the creation of the Jewish Agency in Palestine.

The Kingdom and the Commonwealth of Poland, where Jews lived for nearly a millennium, was much bigger than the territory of the present Polish State. At their maximum, they stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea, from Germany to the borders of Asiatic Russia, coinciding broadly

I was a Pole whose religion happened to be Jewish. On High Holidays, we attended the handsome New Synagogue but we also celebrated Polish Constitution Day on May 3rd.

partisans. My father was killed in the Treblinka death camp uprising.

After the war, I was lucky to immigrate to the United States, where I proved, as did millions before and after me, that a young, penniless, orphaned boy willing to apply himself can receive the best education, prosper and secure a solid place in society for his family and himself. America made it possible for me to return to Poland in a position to help strengthen its Jewish community and tell the long suppressed story of their history. The Museum of the History of Polish Jews will magnificently portray, in multimedia narrative exhibitions, the centuries of Jewish life and accomplishments in the early settlements and during the Middle Ages.

The history of Polish Jews is almost as old as historic Poland. The earliest mention of Poland is on the first coins ever minted there – by Jewish minters – and we also learn about Poland from Jewish medieval chronicles. More prolific are later accounts of the great Golden Ages of the Polish Commonwealth, when Polish kings welcomed Jews

with what we call today Eastern Europe and housing a very diverse array of people and cultures. Under Polish rulers, the peasantry was largely Polish but also, at various times, included Lithuanians, Latvians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians. The cities and towns, populated predominantly by Poles, Jews (often 50 percent or more of the population) and Germans, also housed Armenians, Greeks, Kazakhs, Tatars and other groups. In the largely agricultural economy, Jews cultivated commerce and crafts. They helped shape the country – not as tolerated guests but as proud builders. A strong minority, they managed to maintain an identity rooted in a clearly defined Jewish way of life. Hundreds of magnificent wooden and masonry synagogues became the backdrop for Yiddish, the vernacular language of Polish Jews. Born was Hasidism, the revivalist movement that wished to serve God through song and dance. Countless Talmudic study centers spawned great sages and teachers – Baal Shem Tov and the Vilna Gaon, other *gaonim* and *tsaddikim*. The intellectual ferment brought about

the Haskalah movement, the precursor of Zionism and Israel.

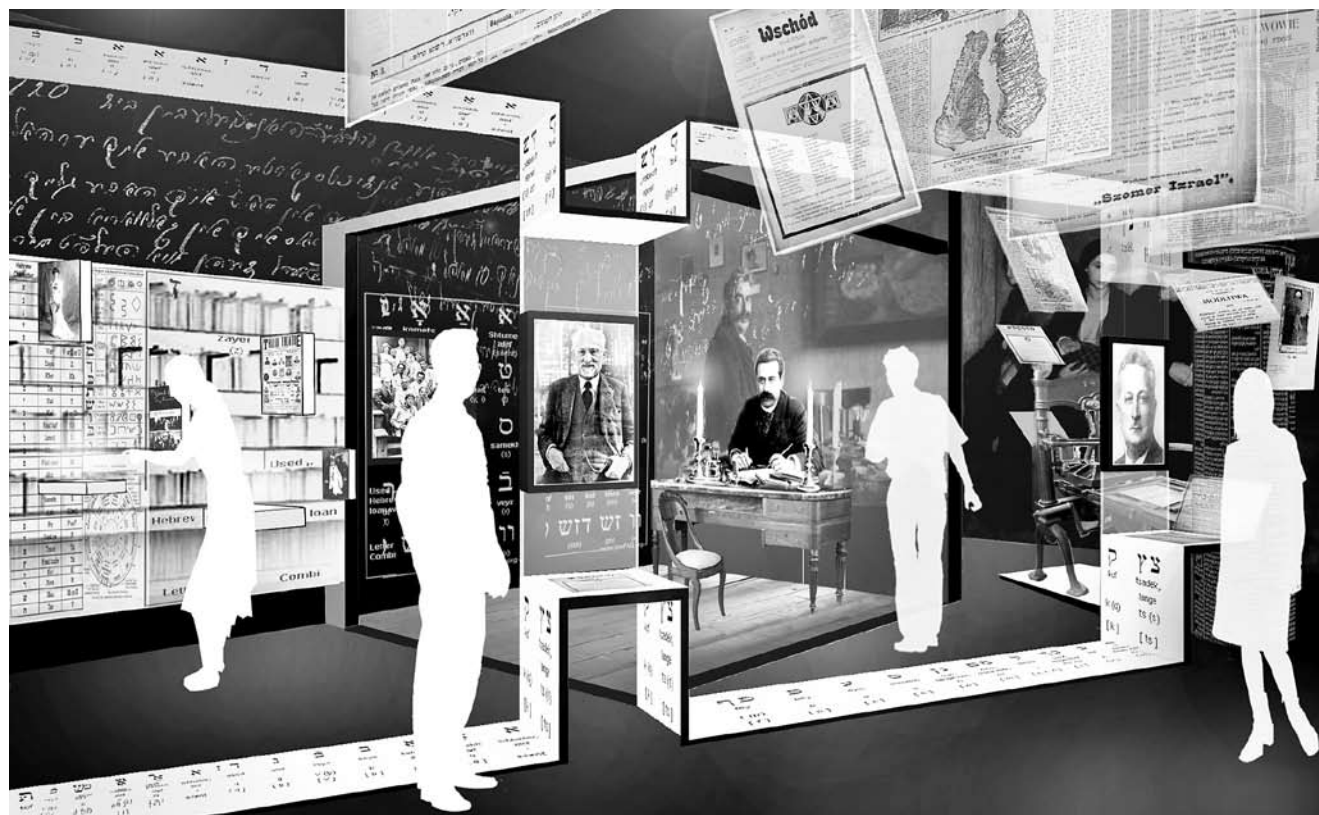
Through the millennium, while Yiddishkeit (Jewishness) thrived and was preserved in Poland and the world through the descendants of Polish Jews, Polish Jews also played an integral part in enriching the culture of their homeland. The poetry of Julian Tuwim, the prose of Isaac Bashevis Singer, the art of Bruno Schulz, the music of Artur Rubinstein, the greats of theater and film – all are proud elements of Polish culture. Jews also fought in Poland’s wars and in uprisings to reclaim Polish independence – from that great cavalry commander Berek Joselewicz to the over 800 Polish Jewish officers butchered by the Soviet Red Army at Katyn in World War II.

Throughout its postwar history, Poland has struggled with the memory of its Jewish past. Human societies do not witness genocides in their homeland and then carry on as usual. The burden

of these memories alone would have been hard to bear; but it was compounded by the fact that while many Poles risked their and their families’ lives to save Jewish neighbors, others collaborated with the occupiers.

The advent of Soviet Communism precluded any meaningful discussion of Polish Jewish history – whether of the wartime years or of the nine hundred years preceding them. Poland lost 6 million dead (more than half of them Jewish) or over 15 percent of its population, and then it fell victim to the Soviet’s brutal Communist regime. The country was too traumatized to engage in much intellectual introspection, and when on occasion it tried, the Communist censor would intervene.

Communism not only stifled debate but twisted and perverted history. To be fair, some prominent Polish Communists were of Jewish origin, but this only further complicated Poland’s postwar “Jewish question” – at least until the “anti-Zionist”



The Museum of the History of Polish Jews, to open in Warsaw in 2012, will use the latest historical research and the most innovative exhibition design to allow visitors to explore the thousand-year history of Jews in Poland. The 19th century “Encounter with Modernity” gallery will feature not only the history of the Haskalah and Hasidim, but also cultural creativity in Hebrew and Yiddish and the rise of Zionism and the Bund. *Drawing courtesy Event Communications.*

purge of 1968. By then, Poland's small and shrinking community of Jewish survivors was too weak to provide any counterweight as their history was erased. Apart from perhaps a brief mention, Polish Jewry disappeared from Polish history textbooks and even from guidebooks for once largely Jewish towns. The Jewish origins of many outstanding figures of Polish science, art and letters became unmentionable. Remaining Jewish monuments gradually decayed; cemeteries became dumps or construction sites; synagogues were converted to other uses.

The Communists considered the new ethnic unity of Poland to be one of their main successes. As the history of the war was rewritten, its Jewish

produced an impressive array of works, scientific monographs, journalistic debates, memoirs and local commemorations of neighbors lost. Jan Gross' seminal work *Neighbors* has been read or read about by a stunning 85 percent of Poles. Public debates about the iniquities of the past – honest now and daring – attract widespread attention and passion. Through its recovered and rebuilt synagogues, schools and organizations, and events directed to society at large, the nascent Jewish community is very much part of this vibrant scene.

Beginning in those heady days in 1989, I became a frequent visitor to my native land, and on one visit to Czestochowa I was offered a wonderful opportunity. Professor Jerzy Mizgalski asked for my

The history of Polish Jews is almost as old as historic Poland. For hundreds of years more Jews lived in Poland than anywhere else in the world.

victims became anonymous "Polish citizens"; the Shoah was merely a footnote to the – only too real – "suffering of the Polish nation at the hands of the Hitlerites." The Auschwitz site was officially named "Museum of the Martyrology of the Polish Nation and Other Nations." In that list, Jews were mentioned last, as the Polish word for Jews begins with the last letter of the Polish alphabet. (I well remember my heated argument with an Auschwitz guide in 1967 when a 3-hour tour ended without him once mentioning the word Jew). The only remaining visible sign of nearly a millennium of history – Nathan Rappaport's towering Monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Fighters – stood on the central square of a new housing development, which had grown around it out of the ghetto's ruins.

Much has been done to change this sorry state of affairs since Poland recovered its independence in 1989, became part of Europe and proudly a friend of the United States and Israel. Literally hundreds of books of Jewish interest have been published in Poland. The Jewish culture festivals in Krakow and Warsaw have become the European continent's largest. Hundreds of Polish scholars, writers, journalists and community activists have

help in organizing an exhibition in which original archival information, artifacts, photographs and multimedia presentations would present, for the first time, the long history of Jews in that city.

I decided to sponsor the exhibition for many reasons and they have much in common with why I support the Museum. We wanted young Poles to learn the long history of their fellow countrymen. (In my meetings with Polish young people, I



2007: Sigmund Rolat and Rabbi Michael Schudrich affix a mezuzah at the dedication of a new Jewish Community Center in Czestochowa, the city of Sigmund Rolat's birth. Photo by Ron Shipper.



invariably encountered almost total ignorance on this subject, though without exception, they were eager for knowledge. Prof. Mizgalski told me over 300 students applied for his Jewish history course, which had been assigned a 35-seat classroom.) We also wanted Jewish visitors to shed their own stereotypes and misconceptions. We wanted to kill the terrible lie that Jews went to their death like sheep, and we wanted to clean up the Czestochowa Jewish cemetery, which had become a jungle.

We persuaded the city authorities to start the cemetery clean-up, and by several weeks prior to the exhibi-

and sadness, drama, emotion and nostalgia. There was not one untoward incident – quite the contrary, even from Up High the verdict seemed favorable, for the weather was just glorious.

Israel's ambassador to Poland, Shewach Weiss, succinctly described the exhibition as "Przyklad Czestochowy," the Example of Czestochowa. The largest national newspaper judged it the best cultural event of the year. Perhaps, its most important consequence was a program at a local college of fine arts entitled "From the Inspiration of Jewish Culture." After Czestochowa the exhibition was shown at the National Library in Warsaw and then

America made it possible for me to return to Poland in a position to help strengthen its Jewish community and tell the long suppressed story of their history.

tion's opening, they had done an incredible job that set the stage for the rededication of the cemetery. This was done not only with a Kaddish and El Maleh Rachamim but also with a stirring Military Roll Call. For the first time, at a Polish Jewish cemetery Jewish resistance fighters were given their due by a Polish Army Honor Company in a ceremony broadcast by nationwide television.

Hundreds of Jews and Christians, young and old from around the world attended these events, replete with joy

incorporated by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage into nationwide curricula. Art from this program also accompanied the "Jews of Czestochowa" exhibition on its travels throughout the US. (A condensed version was shown in 2006 at the Rotunda of the Russell Senate Office Building).

This then is the milieu and the need and the spirit in which our Museum of the History of Polish Jews will rise. It will shine like a phoenix risen from ashes, a paragon of excellence. 🕯️

Twenty Years On

by Marian Turski

In the late 1980s, Rabbi Michael Schudrich had just begun his work on reanimating Jewish life in Warsaw. One of his early initiatives, a conference held at the first Jewish summer camp in Zaborow near Warsaw, was convened to discuss whether there is a future for Jews in Poland. The panelists were the late Arnold Mostowicz, then chairman of the Union of Jewish War Veterans, younger generation intellectuals Stanislaw Krajewski and Konstanty Gebert, and myself. Mostowicz, a charismatic figure and a powerful thinker, was completely pessimistic. “No, there is no future,” he said. “We are the last remnants, and no reanimation can change this. All the young people will jump at the opportunity to emigrate to Israel or to the West. When the old folk die out, the last chapter of Jewish history in Poland will come to an end.”

Mostowicz’s prognosis was entirely realistic and well grounded in the economic, social and political conditions of the time. The remaining panelists, however, disagreed with our veteran mentor. I, too, was among his opponents, even if my own arguments were based mainly on intuition and wobbly historical analogies. But truly substantive arguments were then few and far between. After all, those were the times when I, a non-believer, was repeatedly asked to remain and make the *minyán* because services could not have been held otherwise.

I also remember a debate in the late 1990s on regaining Jewish identity. It was held in the Jewish theater and pitted Konstanty Gebert against Shoshanna Ronen. He was a symbol of the younger *chozrei b’tshuva*, and she, a young Israeli academic teaching philosophy at Warsaw University, was a classical sabra with a secular outlook. The audi-



Marian Turski: editor, author and Jewish activist.

ence, overwhelmingly non-religious, or even anticlerical, rooted passionately for Shoshi. Partially out of contrariness but mainly reaching out for new arguments, I took Kostek’s side. Before the war, I argued, there were different ways, religious and secular, towards Jewishness, and the secular way was itself variegated, from Bundist to Zionist and more. If in the Poland of the ’90s religion was the way toward a recovery of Jewish identity, one should appreciate it even if it is secular.

If today, twenty years later, we were to count our assets, what would the balance – both external and internal – be?

Externally, we are surveying a landscape after the battle, as it were. It has by now become a cliché that the fall of Communism enabled the return of a not insignificant number of people to Jewishness. This, incidentally, does not apply only to the Jews: the children and grandchildren of many a former party activist had returned to their family’s political roots, including Christian Democratic or even National Democratic roots.¹ Why would the Jews be different? And let us not forget that the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968 had already led to the reclaiming of a Jewish identity by thousands then forced to emigrate abroad.

Twenty years ago the optimists were convinced that democracy, freedom of association, freedom of speech and the anticipated access to the European Union would accelerate the process of overcoming xenophobic prejudices. The results of professor Ireneusz Krzeminski’s sociological research in the early ’90s indicated that up to 17 percent of the population still harbored prejudice toward the Jews. This was not pleasant but seemed

¹ References to, respectively, right-wing and extreme right-wing political orientations in prewar Poland.



understandable. For over a decade, Polish society tried to cope with the victims of the violent post-Communist transformation: people who paid for it with unemployment, loss of social stability and status. It is only natural that this initially huge group could easily fall prey to the populists. Polls taken ten years later proved to be much more worrying: the percentage of those harboring anti-Semitic bias had increased to 27 percent. On the other hand – and this needs to be stressed – the percentage of the so-called “philo-Semites” had increased as well. I reject this term, however, preferring to speak of “anti-anti-Semites,” people who try to understand Jewish memory and the Jewish point of view. Their

Empathy for and a genuine curiosity about the emptiness of the post-Shoah Polish landscape have become immensely important, turn of the century Polish phenomena. They are exemplified, for instance, by the activities of the Brama Grodzka Center and NN Theatre in Lublin,³ and by academic research centers and university chairs on Jewish culture and history, which have sprung up not only in Warsaw and Krakow but also in lesser centers such as Wroclaw, Poznan, Lodz and Lublin. Almost every university now produces masters and doctoral theses of Jewish interest. A good friend of mine, who teaches cultural studies and history of

It would be interesting to find out how many people, then and now, called themselves “Poles of Jewish origin,” “Jews of Polish origin,” or “Poles and Jews,” and how the relative proportions changed.

presence was, in particular, revealed through the debates surrounding Jan T. Gross’s books, *Neighbors* and *Fear*.² In a nutshell, by the time of the second poll there is clearly much more empathy for Jewish memory, as illustrated by “Compassion,” a recent poem by the eminent poet Boleslaw Taborski (in my own translation):

The most important thing is compassion
for everything on earth.
People, animals, and plants too,
rocks, seas, and again I say – people.
It makes life bearable,
and its absence dehumanizes.
Take the perpetrators of the Holocaust,
the devil’s servants on this earth.
They pretended to be humans,
nay, superhumans.
They were nothing,
they knew not what compassion is.

art at a number of universities, has shown me her students’ papers, which reflect the trend. While she does present Jewish topics in her lectures, they represent only a fraction of what she teaches; yet apparently her students are both receptive to these topics and, more importantly, are aware that this is an under-researched area, for they volunteer to write about it. I should also mention that there is a high school competition for papers of Jewish interest organized by the Shalom Foundation, a Polish Jewish NGO. What I find most fascinating there is the authentic, fresh and truly youthful penetration of local, regional, small-town and village history. These papers often reflect the last attempt to reach out to the oldest surviving local eyewitnesses to the Jewish presence. We have enjoyed the Krakow Jewish Festival for many years and continue to do so, but nowadays it is supplemented by similar events in Lodz, Lublin, Poznan, Gdansk, Wlodawa and other localities. Not to mention Warsaw, where the Isaac Bashevis Singer Days, a Jewish cultural event held each autumn, are set to rival the Krakow Festival in their scale and diversity.

² Ground-breaking works by an important émigré Polish-Jewish historian, dealing with the persecution of Jews by Poles during and immediately after WWII.

³ Translator’s note: A cultural center animated by non-Jewish Poles, and a theater attached to it, which for years now have been bringing back to life, and to the attention of the city’s residents, Lublin’s Jewish past.



I also see this empathy and curiosity reflected in the public interest in the construction of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. It is also reflected in the progress made in understanding the Shoah – even though “genocide envy” is still strong and even took on a new form as the State authorities began promoting, over the last few years, what is called “historical politics.”⁴ This progress is most vividly seen in what I call the reversal of the trend to de-Judaize Auschwitz. Anyone who visited the exhibition at the former death camp at Birkenau before the mid-’90s would, if visiting today, find that the positive difference is colossal, almost impossible to grasp. This is not only due to the opening of the

⁴ An attempt to gain international political credit from the recalling of Poland’s past suffering.

sauna building, which now houses a collection of family pictures found in the effects of Jewish victims from the Zagłębie Dąbrowskie region, but to the attention and concern for documenting the fate of the Jews in general.

I would especially like to stress the role of the staff at the Auschwitz State Museum. The evolution of their attitudes could serve as material for a research paper on progress in overcoming the process of the de-Judaization of this site of memory. The work on the museum’s new exhibition, now in progress, would further exemplify this.

These changes in the general landscape have entailed changes in the mentalities of “people of Jewish origin”; I intentionally use this unhappy expression, which originated in a now happily



Architectural rendering of the planned exterior of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, being built on the site of the former Warsaw Ghetto, opposite the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising Memorial.
Design by Rainier Mahlamaki of the Helsinki firm Lahdelma and Mahlamaki.



bygone time. Please note that the new climate now enables people of such origin to “come out.” This is probably the most interesting phenomenon of the post-1989 years! It would be interesting to find out how many people, then and now, called themselves “Poles of Jewish origin,” “Jews of Polish origin,” or “Poles and Jews,” and how the relative proportions changed. It would be no less interesting to find out why only 1200 people gave their “ethnicity” as Jewish in the census of 2002. Was it only due to defects in the polling method? Have we Jews not succumbed too easily to an opportunism of sorts?

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A few bittersweet reflections to round this off. It is beyond doubt that there would have been no “comings out,” had those who decided to reveal their origins not felt a favorable climate for investigating one’s own roots. It would even be legitimate to say it has become something of a fashion, and not just in reference to the Mogen David pendants adorning the necks of young women. But at the same time, important Jewish organizations still send out mail in envelopes marked by cryptic acronyms: SKŻ instead of Union of Jewish Veterans, SDH for Association of the Children of the Holo-

caust, GWŻ in lieu of Jewish Religious Community. A high official of the GWŻ told me that many of its members would prefer that the mailman and the neighbors not know who the sender is; and I am aware that some still conceal this knowledge from family members as well. I neither praise nor condemn – I simply relate. Though I cannot conceal my sadness at this.

Do I see a future for the Jewish community in Poland? Intuitively – yes, I still do. Why? Lessons from the past, for one. Since the Babylonian exile the Jews have never completely abandoned the

diaspora. Globalization will enhance moving around. Maybe we should give up on the concept of permanent residence in favor of sojourn or current address. Whether permanent or long-term will depend on economic and political developments regionally and worldwide, especially in Europe and the Middle East, on relations between Europe and the developing world, and Islam in particular. If, in two or three generations, we are able to speak of a new Jewish community in Germany, with a residual presence of the descendants of the German Jews, why should I be pessimistic about Poland? 🐼

CONTRIBUTORS

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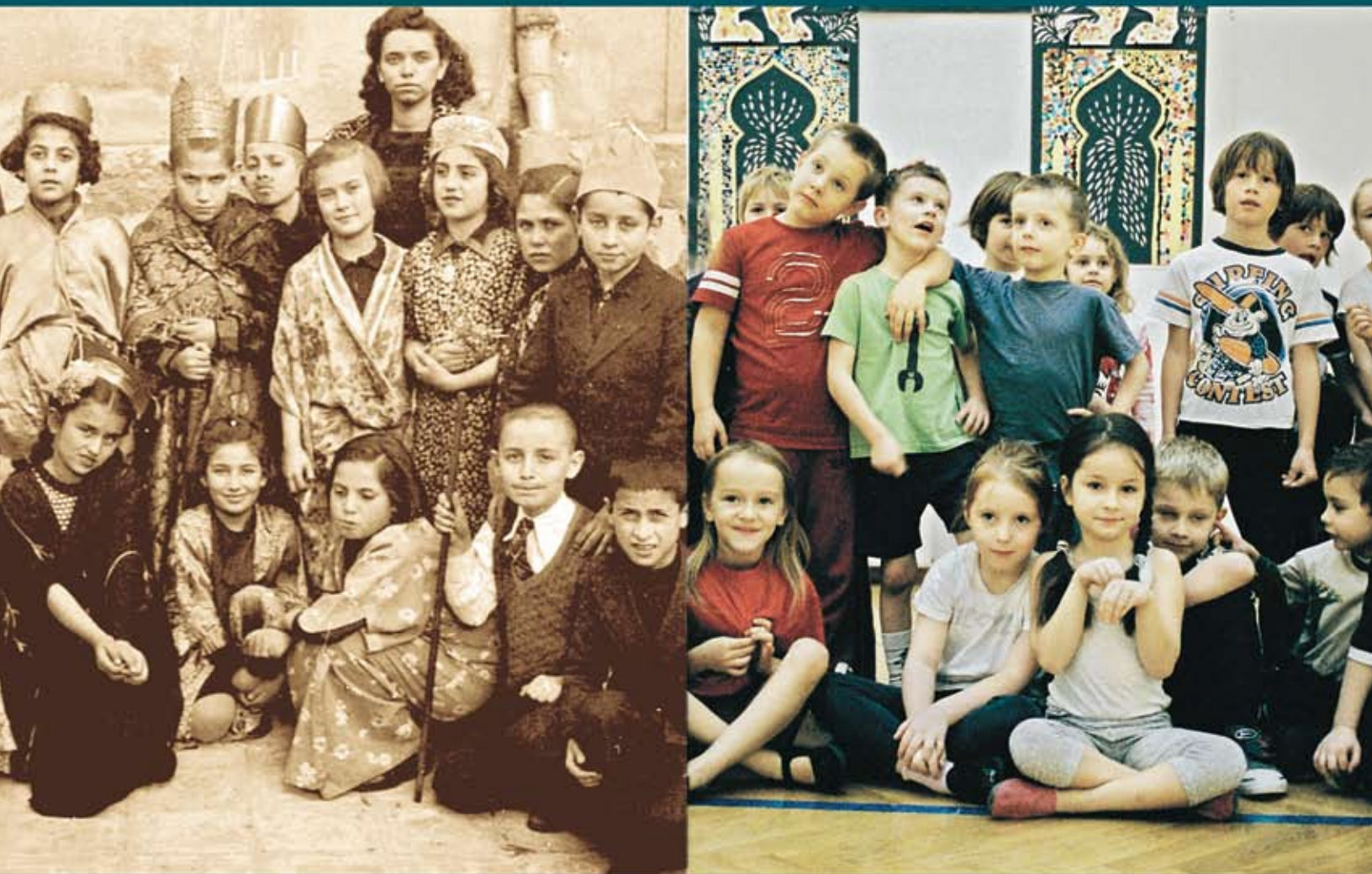
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