

# Westbury Research Unit

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Research, data, and analysis for Jewish philanthropic organizations belonging to the Westbury group

## **The future of the Warsaw Jewish Community: A Case Study**

### **Part One: The Broader Context**

**Simon Caplan: December 2002**

#### **a)-The broader societal context: background information**

##### *1) National political background*

Poland gained its independence in 1918 only to be overrun by Germany and the Soviet Union in World War II. It became a Soviet satellite country following the war, but one that was comparatively tolerant and progressive. Labor turmoil in 1980 led to the formation of the independent trade union "Solidarity" that over time became a political force and by 1990 had swept parliamentary elections and the presidency.

During the nineties there have been numerous swings, sometimes quite radical swings in party political terms. However, local observers tend to see these changes as more to do with labels and personalities than significant political instability that might indicate, say, an opening for extremism or a danger to democracy. Proportional representation with a high electoral threshold tends to bolster the mainstream parties while giving some room for minority (and even anti-Semitic) voices in Parliament. The overall direction, according these observers is a consistent one in favor of social democracy, a market economy and movement towards partnership in Europe. Poland joined the NATO alliance in 1999 and is due to gain entry into the EU in 2004. Every respectable mainstream political party supports these policies.

The last elections saw a swing to the left, the ruling coalition thrown out, and a new coalition lead by the Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) under Leszek Miller take over. This has not, it is thought, led to any fundamental changes in economic, social or foreign policy. For the first time, two parties with openly anti-Jewish sentiments achieved a parliamentary presence and as much as 19% of the popular vote. Neither form part of the ruling coalition, but clearly their presence is a source of concern. It is generally felt that these parties won their mandate as representatives of the minority anti-European sentiment in society rather than on the back of overt anti-Semitism. One former member of Parliament and head of the inter-parliamentary Israel group,

which boasts forty of the four hundred MP's as members, pointed out that in the last Presidential elections candidates espousing anti-Jewish sentiment polled less than 1% of the popular vote. At least on a national, society wide scale, anti-Semitism is still very definitively "politically incorrect".

With an eye to Poland's past, one cannot say that there are not indicators that give rise to serious worry concerning the potential for anti-Jewish sentiment to make further inroads politically. However, these are balanced by the 'constraint' imposed by a fundamental desire for acceptance into the EU, the strong feelings of local observers that Poland's pragmatism outweighs its potential for extremism and indicators of a much more complex and subtle relationship between the Polish people and anti-Semitism than is appreciated from the outside. The Jedwabne story is illustrative of this point. The publication of Jan Gross's book "Neighbors" in Polish, outlining the Polish committed atrocity in 1941, produced a deep and sincere moment of soul searching at all levels of Polish society that is not dismissed as superficial by local Jewish leadership. It seems prudent not to dismiss some very obvious negative indicators, but also tempting to accept at face value very strong and widespread attitudes on the part of local Jewish and pro-Jewish sources that promote the view that Poland is relatively stable, statistically not displaying signs of growing anti-Semitism and not likely to produce an increase in anti-Semitism in the foreseeable future. At the political level, Poland is unique in having a department of the foreign ministry devoted especially to Polish Jewish relations as well as appointees of the Prime Minister's office and the office of the President devoted to the same subject. Considering the tiny size of the local Jewish population, these are striking features of the national political scene.

## *2) National / local economic situation / prospects*

A "shock therapy" program during the early 1990's enabled the country to transform its economy into one of the most robust in Central Europe, boosting hopes for acceptance to the EU. The likelihood of Poland's entry in to the EU in 2004 has spawned a small but significant phenomenon of Jewish (particularly Argentinean and Israel) applications for Polish citizenship. It is unlikely that this will result in any sizable Jewish immigration to the country from this direction (some immigration from Russia in the medium term is more likely), but may be an indicator of something. Israeli commercial ventures, in Warsaw particularly, are also increasing in volume.

Poland has steadfastly pursued a policy of economic liberalization and today stands out as one of the most successful and open transition economies. It has accomplished most of the reforms necessary for moving towards a market economy. Many state subsidies and controls have been lifted and privatization is taking place on a large scale. The zloty has remained relatively stable since 1998, leading to increasing investor confidence as movement towards entry into the European Union progresses. Warsaw is very much the capital city, hosting major international corporations such as Coca-Cola, General Motors and Proctor and Gamble. Unemployment in Poland is of serious concern, reaching 14% at a national level in 2000, and, according to some reports, as high as 18% today in some places. Warsaw, however, has the lowest unemployment rate at only around 3%. The sight of an occasional young student

begging on the streets belies the general impression of stability and affluence displayed in shops and in the clothes people wear and the cars they drive around the capital city. Banking has been a major growth area for Warsaw, which now hosts the head offices of 206 Polish banks and 27 international insurance and consulting firms. The medium term economic prospects for Warsaw at least, if not for Poland as a whole, seem relatively promising.

It is, perhaps, too early to tell whether the economic progress made in general will, ultimately, produce local Jewish philanthropists and supporters of the development of local Jewish community life. At present, and given the demographically weighted profile of the Jewish community towards the elderly, this is not the case. Local sources see the continued dependence of the community on external financial support as inevitable and as a grave weakness. The idea that the restitution of properties (see below) will make the community financially independent has not taken root and is not believed by the vast majority who are somewhat cynical of the prospects for a variety of reasons (again, see below). Almost no mention is made of prospects of local philanthropy and this indicates that the products of economic reform and growth have not yet percolated fully to the individual / community level. However, the indicators are positive and one cannot dismiss a possible future for the Warsaw Jewish community predicated on at least a "mixed economy" with a proportion of funding coming from within as is happening in centers such as Moscow today.

### *3) Special demographic, historical or cultural features, or social trends*

Poland today is a highly homogeneous society, perhaps more so than at any point in its prior history. Ethnically, and with boundary changes dating from the conclusion of the Second World War, virtually all the extra-Polish ethnicities were transferred out of the boundaries of the country, leaving Poland 97.6% Polish, 1.3% German, 0.6% Ukrainian and 0.5% Byelorussian. These figures from 1990 have altered and will undoubtedly alter in future under the impact of membership within the EU, but they reflect a comparatively very homogeneous national ethnic profile. This is also mirrored in terms of religion, where 95% of Poles are Catholic (perhaps 75% practicing Catholic...although this figure is undoubtedly reducing), with the other categories including Eastern Orthodox, Protestants and, of course, Jews making up less than 5% of the population. The Catholic underpinnings of Polish society and the central role they played in Poland's attitude towards the Jews is well known. Many of the tales told by hidden children of the holocaust (see below) refer to the Catholic roots of help offered in rescuing Jews during the Nazi period, and these are counterbalanced by references made to Church encouragement of anti-Semitism during this period and well beyond it.

The vast haunting presence of the Holocaust and how that played out in the Polish context (which needs no description here) tends to overshadow the relationship of Jews to Poland, stretching back many centuries. The major influx of Jews into Poland took place between the 12<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries in response to the Crusades' and the Inquisition's persecution of Jews in Western Europe and their subsequent wandering eastwards in search of asylum. To say that Poland was a haven in which anti-Jewish sentiment and action was unknown would, of course, be massively incorrect.

However, the environment of Poland supported continuous and expanding Jewish life from the 12<sup>th</sup> century to the eve of the Second World War, spawning many of the features we now associate with Judaism today – Chasidism and Yiddish culture among them. At the eve of the Second World War the Jewish population of Poland stood at around three and a half million, with nearly four hundred thousand Jews living in the country's capital, Warsaw – approximately one third of the total population of the city. In many smaller towns Jews were in a majority. In Warsaw over 60% of all physicians were Jewish. It is impossible to discount the centrality of the Jewish relationship with Poland, or to belittle the impact that this history plays in the life of the current nascent Jewish community.

## **b) The Jewish community in its broader context: background information**

### *4) The National Jewish context*

Estimates of the current size of the Polish Jewish population vary enormously. The most conservative estimates talk of only around four thousand Jews. Affiliation figures, which of course take a broad 'self-definition' of who is a Jew, suggest over seven thousand registered members of the community and local guesstimates of the actual size of the Jewish population range from around ten thousand to double or treble that figure. The classic Polish joke refers to a census in which half of Poland's population are revealed to be Jewish and "we don't know about the other half" – reflecting a societal sense of how prominent Jewish presence is, even if not justified by numbers. On the other hand it is hard not to see Poland's Jewish population as miniscule in the shadow of what was before.

The Association of Hidden Children of the Holocaust, founded in 1991 has over eight hundred core members including two hundred and fifty six members in Warsaw alone. The Lauder Foundation sponsored Jewish genealogy project at the Jewish Historical Institute also deals with over a hundred enquiries a month "off the street", sometimes resulting in confirmation of individual Jewish identity. Views vary as to whether this phenomenon that currently yields new found Jews every week is the tip of the iceberg or a phenomenon that has already peaked.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust the surviving Jewish population of Poland may have been around a quarter of a million souls, but by 1960, after a wave of Aliyah following the establishment of the State of Israel and a further one after outbreaks of anti-Semitism in 1958-9, the population had been reduced to thirty thousand. This figure was reduced to well under ten thousand after the various events of the late sixties, following Israel's victory in the six day war. Following the dismantling of the Communist system and the rebirth of Jewish communal life in 1989, the population was estimated at four thousand souls.

The major centers of Jewish population outside Warsaw are Wroclaw, Lodz, Krakow and Katowice with smaller pockets of organized communities in places like Lublin, Gdansk and Poznan, and individual Jews dotted throughout the country. Warsaw constitutes the largest single community by population count, home to most of the

national organizations serving Polish Jewry, and the central spoke of the Polish Jewish community wheel although not necessarily its most dynamic or successful component (see below re restitution and community organization).

There is a range of national Jewish organizations, all with their headquarters in Warsaw. The body accepted by Polish authorities as formally representing the Jewish people is the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland (JRCP), registered in 1993 and the legal inheritor of the pre-war "Gmina/Kehilla", which was the acknowledged roof organization of Polish Jewry then. The JRCP was restructured and imbued with new leadership in 1997 and has been the address through which restitution issues have been processed regarding the major centers of Jewish population. It works in partnership with the World Jewish Restitution Organization, through the newly established Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland that deals with restitution issues outside the major towns and cities. It is the umbrella organization for eight autonomous local communities and seven other branches and it receives state funding for running cost and projects.

The Social and Cultural Association of Jews in Poland (TSKZ), founded in 1950, with some three thousand members nationally (four hundred in Warsaw), spread over some seventeen branches was the secular body that maintained continuity of organized Jewish presence throughout the Communist period. It houses and runs the State Yiddish Theater and provides a variety of social, cultural and now educational activities.

JRCP and TSKZ exist in a relationship of tension and strife, with occasional nods in the direction of cooperation, as each seeks to stake out the territory as THE national organization for the Jews of Poland. The impact of the tension affects both the national and the local community scene. There are, of course, ideological tensions between a secular body and a synagogue-based body. Restitution issues also provide a very immediate arena for tensions since the two bodies are competing for a crucial piece of property on the central 'campus' of the community in Warsaw where both sets of headquarters are situated. TSKZ established a forum of Jewish organizations to be a roof organization and failed to invite JRCP (defining JRCP as a 'State', rather than a 'Jewish' organization). JRCP would welcome TSKZ as a component of its structure, but not as an equally significant national organization. Personality clashes also play a significant role here in heightening tension and hardening attitudes. A generational change in leadership within both organizations, and particularly within TSKZ which is still led by its Communist era leader, might well see many of the tensions dissolving.

Other national as opposed to purely local organizations include The Association of Holocaust Children, the Polish Union of Jewish Students, the Jewish Historical Institute and the Jewish Combatants organization. There are also two national journals, *Jidysze Wort*, a bi-weekly communal newspaper published in Polish and Yiddish, and the more intellectual "Midrasz" journal. A body that is becoming more significant on a national scale in recent years is the Central Jewish Welfare Commission, funded largely by JDC, but managed professionally and locally and with the formal incorporation and involvement of all the major national organizations – including JRCP that houses the commission and administers the finances, and the TSKZ. The model of the Welfare Commission might well be one for the future as

Polish Jewry moves from an emergency footing to a more autonomous, self-regulating mode.

5) *Connections with Israel / Jewish world / international bodies*

Since Polish Jewry was weakened, almost to the point of extinction, by the twin blows of the Holocaust and the repression of the Communist era, its initial revival was stimulated, in large measure by external means. The Joint has been a very major player in the current phase, since 1982, providing considerable ongoing financial support as well as expertise in the welfare and educational sectors, and in the nineties the Ronald Lauder Foundation has established an office in Warsaw and developed and maintained a Primary through Junior High day school which now has 256 students. The school and the foundation in conjunction with local community leadership (through the JRCP) are actively considering the establishment of a high school in one of the city's restituted properties. Chabad is not officially represented in Warsaw, although the current director of the Lauder Foundation is a Chabad rabbi. The Jewish Agency has closed its office in Warsaw, having assessed that the prospects for further wide-scale Aliya from Poland are remote. The Claims conference is also active in supporting individuals and projects.

As in other Central and eastern European locations a state of emergency following the fall of communism and the reopening of the potential for organized Jewish community life, is slowly being replaced with a need to empower local leadership, and transfer leadership, management and also fiscal responsibility to the local community. This is the will of both the JDC and the Lauder Foundation as articulated by their local representatives.

In the case of Warsaw in particular and Poland in general this transitional process is hampered by a number of significant factors. First and foremost, the demographic facts are daunting, with a small and ageing population in which the level of ongoing health and welfare support is extremely high. The Welfare commission, for example, has over seven hundred cases on its books and over two hundred in Warsaw alone, and these represent only the most severe financial and other basic problems. In such a small community a high level of welfare need represents a fundamental barrier to the prospect for greater independence and self reliance in the medium term.

The restitution of communal properties is seen as a potential path towards stability and, ultimately, self reliance for Polish Jewry. However, restitution is a double edged sword, yielding massive responsibilities for the upkeep of unprofitable assets such as cemeteries etc. The sheer scale of the restitution process is also a major strain and source of instability – with over five thousand claims being submitted by a community of not much more than that in population size. In Warsaw alone the Kehilla (a branch of JRCP) has submitted over two hundred claims and might anticipate the return of several substantial properties over the next four to five years. Warsaw is, in fact, the poor relation in terms of the communal restitution issue, since much of the capital was destroyed, leaving less standing property to reclaim. This is a strategic issue for Polish Jewry as a whole since Warsaw is, at one and the same time, the capital city and leading Jewish community and also the least well endowed of the major cities in terms of returning property / capital / assets.

Another restraining feature in terms of the transition from external to internal leadership and responsibility is the ambivalent to negative attitude of world Jewry to the whole idea of recreating Jewish communal life on the very site of Jewry's worst ever destruction. Local community members and leaders are very conscious of the fact that their very presence is questioned by many, and their motives for remaining in Poland the subject of suspicion. The Holocaust 'industry' and the March of the Living program are thought to foster a negativism towards Poland, the Polish people and the very idea that Jews should tie their future to this homeland of destruction not sixty years ago. This plays out distinctly in terms of the involvement of private sponsors in the quest to revive the Jewish community in Warsaw and elsewhere in Poland. The JDC, Lauder and the "Atara" learning project sponsored by private foundations aside, there have been almost no successful attempts to raise funds for projects in Warsaw. The chairman of the Shalom foundation which has been established specifically for this purpose spoke of the difficulty of persuading Polish / Jewish ex-patriots to contribute. American Federations which are keen to establish twinning arrangements in Belarus or the Ukraine, shy away from similar connections to Warsaw or other Polish communities. The JRCP official dealing with restitution claims talked of the necessity for and difficulty of obtaining development funds, essential to translate one off property opportunities into an ongoing source of income for the community.

At very least, Warsaw and Poland in general needs a well constructed marketing campaign to sell itself to the Jewish world as a legitimate and worthy cause. In reality there is probably a very deep seated conceptual and psychological problem here in terms of world Jewry's ongoing attitude to what happened and, at present, the Warsaw Jewish community is an actual and potential loser in terms of its capacity to attract project funding from major family foundations in the Jewish world.

#### 6) *Jewish relationship with society and visa versa*

Most of the elements in this unique situation have already been referred to above. Given the extraordinary nature of Poland's relationship with Jews and of the Jewish people's relationship with Poland, any prognosis about the future would have to be highly provisional. Irrespective of the tiny numbers of Jews actually present in modern day Poland, the Jewish question still remains central in the national psyche as witnessed in several ways as described above. And for Jews, especially in current times with the wave of connection that has come through projects such as March of the living, Poland is, once again, becoming central to the Jewish experience, identity and self-understanding.

The future of the Warsaw Jewish community should be set in this context.

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## **The future of the Warsaw Jewish Community: A Case Study**

### **Part Two: Narrative account of a visit to the community in October 2002**

**Simon Caplan: November 2002**

*Friday*

Although I was in the process of preparing to make a case study of the Warsaw Jewish community, this first visit came at very short notice in order to take advantage of a learning seminar taking place under the aegis of a private foundation project. My thoughts had been to visit only once in early November. However, background reading convinced me of the complexity of this intriguing community situation, and the need for a 'pilot' or a more informal orientation before launching into the formal case study research.

While some preparations had been made to ensure that contact time was effectively utilized, I had given no real thought as to visas. The thought occurred to me only during the flight from London that I may have needed to have obtained a visa prior to travel as is a customary part of the bureaucratic core of former communist regimes in so many places today. Unwittingly I had set my first informal test of the character of post communist Poland!

In the event the passage through Warsaw airport was as smooth as any I have encountered. No wait at passport control, no forms to fill in, no papers to sign, just a cursory glance and a stamp in the passport. No long wait at baggage return, no sign of any concern going through customs, no threatening experiences with would be taxi drivers – in total a user friendly forty minutes from landing to arrival at the obliging reception desk of my hotel.

Is this country really so open and non-threatening so soon after the demise of Communism? Is Poland already practicing to be a member of the European Community even though that privilege is two years in the future? I began to attune my expectations to the evident culture of western style country rather than a latter day Eastern bloc state. Evident affluence on the streets – some expensive cars and well



stocked department store windows, passers by in decent winter clothing and so on, further bolstered these comforting immediate impressions. Talk of a long lasting economic crisis and high unemployment rates was belied by the impressions of the street – but then this is the capital city and not, perhaps, representative of the economic status of Poland as a whole.

“Poles were never terribly enthusiastic communists”, said a local intellectual / journalist, reinforcing my initial cultural and economic impressions. The country is in the throws of economic difficulties and unemployment had reached as high as 18% before elections last year (regarded as a reason for the entrance of two political parties with anti-Semitic leanings into Parliament for the first time). However, whereas Poles love to grumble, the economic climate and forecast is basically favorable. Membership of the European Union in January 2004 beckons. The harbingers are there. Israeli’s and Argentinians are queuing to acquire citizenship based on parental ties. A Polish passport will shortly be a key to unlock the door to the whole of Europe in the eyes of the entrepreneurial. Certainly the signs on the street – other than the presence of some rather young student beggars in the city center - are that some measure of relative prosperity is assumed by the majority.

I begin to settle in to liking this place. The hotel is grand, sumptuous, if run down. Apparently, it was the state run expensive hotel that is now contested in a restitution battle by private original owners, and so has received no investment funds for some time now. Restitution. A relatively small word for a concept that engulfs this country – not only for the Jewish community but also for the losers under Communism. I succeed in collecting my email – a triumph not always achieved even in London. The phones work, the staff are obliging; training is evident. After a very short period of acculturation one has to stop to remember that this was a Communist country, just as, at so many moments during my short visit, I had to stop to remember that this was a slaughterhouse for Jews only a generation or two before today.

But of course the memory is always there. Imprinted by the knowledge of what occurred and reinforced by conversation after conversation. It is impossible to converse with a Polish Jew without the haunting vista of the past inhabiting at least some space in the room. This inevitably plays on the senses. It is like a raw exposed nerve just waiting to hurt. An innocent shower – a passing ugly thought. A walk in quaint, almost Disney like, reconstructed old town brings this home to me. Accompanying the slightly too authentic ambience of architecture, the cobbled stones and latticed windows is a faint, but pervasive rotten smell. The instinctive association is unjustified but potent and I retreat hastily back to the hotel.

The plan for the weekend was to participate in a ‘shabbaton’ organized by an American educator, Joy Rochwarger, under the name of project “Atara”. Thirty five locals invited to a private home for Friday evening, to join in a creative prayer service led by a scholar-in-residence from the USA. This privately sponsored project is an ‘alternative’ non-establishment route into Jewish identity for its participants. The establishment options for participation, as of today, are, perhaps, somewhat extreme. One can affiliate to / attend the synagogue and that means joining a somewhat forlorn half empty ceremonial hall for activity, dominated in its leadership by apparently neo-charedi individuals, many of whom were imported or recruited to service the Lauder

educational institutions including the community's one and only day school. Alternatively one could sign up for the TSKZ, the social and cultural organization that functioned throughout the communist era, definitely secular and non Zionist, though of late showing signs of making some concessions to more modern expressions of Judaism. Neither of these options present an overtly attractive route into Jewish participation and neither show signs of picking up the new pool of potential community members and activists created by a combination of the day school and the phenomenon of 'hidden children of the Holocaust' that throws up new potential adherents every day.

But before Shabbat, I meet, for the second time after a brief encounter in Jerusalem the week before, Eve Anderson, the non-Jewish but highly philo-semitic wife of an American diplomat, and relatively newly appointed director of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage. This is a partnership, forged in blood, almost, after years of disputation between Polish Jewish community leadership and the leadership of the World Jewish Restitution Organization, over how to tackle and disburse the benefits of the Restitution of communal property process that started with legislation in 1997. With the deadline for claims (May 2002) looming and relatively few prepared, the WJRO and the local Jewish community belatedly agreed to work together on this issue. Eve Anderson is the result of that agreement and she has succeeded in increasing the number of claims to well over five thousand in total ahead of the extended deadline of January 2003. But then nothing is quite that simple in Poland. Eve Anderson's writ runs large over the shtetls and other rural parts of Poland, but restitution in the major towns and cities is under the aegis of the religious Jewish community organizational framework. Later, on Sunday, I manage to see some of the properties in question in Warsaw. There are two hundred claims in from Warsaw but of these only forty-seven are within the city itself. Of these, perhaps ten are serious attempts and, ultimately, perhaps four buildings will actually return to the Jewish community. Nevertheless their significance should not be underrated since the buildings include a huge hospital campus and another children's medical facility in a fashionable quarter of town. Both very significant capital acquisitions and challenging to the community in terms of medium to long range community planning.

Is restitution a side-bar issue, a parenthesis, carrying as much cost as profit (perhaps more) to the local Jewish community? Is it a potential opportunity for translating the bridge-heads of Jewish life re-established primarily with the external support of the JDC, Lauder, the Sochnut, Chabad and others into a viable, internally driven modern diaspora Jewish community? Does the burden outweigh the opportunity? Is the Warsaw Jewish community capable of embracing the outcome of restitution as an integral part of its community planning? Answers to these very open questions hold the key to the survival and future development of Warsaw Jewry.

Friday evening – Kabalat Shabbat. A creative home prayer service and Shabbat meal is the program, courtesy of project Atara. A 'scholar-in-residence' has been invited from America and, as much as his latter day 'meturgeman' (traditional translator of biblical texts) style is interesting, the real interest lies in the character of the participants. These are a combination of individuals who are active in the community, but who seek more meaning and spirituality than the establishment can provide, and

assorted fringe members. Joanna, a mother with her two teenage boys in the Lauder school, looking unfamiliar with the ritual but glowing while her boys pretend to look less familiar with the ritual than they really are. Slawek, avowedly not Jewish but with a mounting fascination with Judaism, an eye on a political career and finely tuned sense of spirituality as it transpires later in conversation. Leszek, the host, who in other circumstances, as a “hidden child” not long out of the closet, would be on the fringes of community life but who here is already a past establishment leader and local coordinator of the Atara project. Karina who works for the JDC, Anya, another “hidden child” recently discovered – and a psychologist, and Monica a smart property lawyer. An unlikely cast of players in an unlikely situation finding an American style way through a traditional Jewish prayer service in a private home on the fringes of what was the Warsaw ghetto.

Discussion floats between the mundane and the existential. One of the participants is asked whether she carries the memory of what happened in Poland with her always and it is clear, not only from the words but also from the body language, that she does in the deepest sense. But then the topic moves to the message conveyed by the “March of the Living” project that brings teenagers from all over the Jewish world to the concentration camps and then to Israel. The view seems to be unanimous – and this seems to be repeated in later discussions with others from leaders to ordinary community members. March of the Living is resented. It conveys a message that Poland symbolizes death and destruction and that Israel is the legitimate – the only legitimate – response. Warsaw Jews feel that their efforts to reestablish Jewish life on the physical and conceptual skeleton of what was, is also an inspirational message and should be recognized as such.

This reminds me that reactions to my impending visit, and subsequently my relating the story of it in social circumstances, generally brought negative expressions ranging from distaste to disgust. The instinctive reaction of many (most?) Jews is to consign Poland to a kind of reverse “cherem” (religious ban). It seems to many to be not legitimate to think of rebuilding Jewish life in this place. It is seen as somehow an act of willful ignorance or of disrespect to the dead. That is how the typical Jewish outsider views it. And of course the story seems so different from within. Insiders appreciate that one thousand years of continuous Jewish presence, and more than that, a vibrancy of Jewish life that spawned much of what we today recognize as the roots of modern Jewish people-hood and religion, stems from this place. The story of anti-Semitism in Poland is more complex than the Holocaust gives it credit for. There is a familial familiarity here that is very striking: or, as one senior JDC official put it “I recognize my mother all the time on the streets here”. So is the rebuilding of Jewish life in this place an abomination? An inspiration? A simple fact that has to be accepted and nurtured? A phenomenon that has to be addressed in other ways, such as Aliya? Local Jews feel the eyes of the world staring at them, and not always sympathetically. They feel that they are hampered in their efforts at rebuilding by the disdain of the Jewish establishment. They are slightly bemused and frustrated by the lack of understanding they perceive all around them.

And this is connected to another unexpected emotion I encountered as I strolled through the place and encountered its people. My assumption was that I was looking at a small community, albeit a very special one. However, in some important respects Warsaw, psychologically, is very far from being a small community in spite of the

relatively small numbers of community members (maximum three thousand by a liberal definition of who is a Jew?). In fact, rather like Jerusalem, New York and perhaps London, Warsaw feels as if it is at the center and not at all on the periphery of the Jewish world. That is the strong feeling one gets in this place. It is borne out both practically speaking in the sense that so very many young Jews now find their way here on a voyage of discovery, and also emotionally, the place exudes a sense of being central and not at all peripheral to the Jewish experience. So, in addition to being a capital city - which also affects the whole question of what is a small community - Warsaw feels more like a place, out of joint, waiting to return to being a large community than like an outpost of Jewish life.

Nevertheless, on the other hand, there is a pervading sense of abandonment and 'remnant' about the community that is in distinction to the sense of its being central to the Jewish experience. Objectively the numbers are small: dwarfed by its history. The community is fragmented and somewhat argumentative within itself. Themes of various personality clashes and turf issues already started to surface in conversation, even with a complete outsider and newcomer to the scene. Physically the place is somewhat gray and cold.

### *Saturday*

These feelings were very much reinforced by a visit to the synagogue for Shabbat morning prayers. These take place in the only functioning synagogue in town, a survivor of the tribulations of the past century, a large, somewhat barn-like and slightly run down structure, half empty (or half full depending on how you look at it) of praying customers. The front benches are occupied by black hat Jews. The average member of the congregation on the back-benches looks, perhaps, out of place and certainly uncomfortable since the bench-like seating becomes an exquisite torture after anything more than half an hour. For a small community, the congregation does not have the air of a friendly, welcoming setting, even though the appropriate courtesies were extended to visitors, myself included in terms of 'honors'. This feeling was reinforced at the kiddush after the service when a community leader was unable to name a fellow attendant at the service even though he admitted that the gentleman had been coming along for more than a year now. The communal rabbi, a flamboyant and charismatic American, was out of town that weekend and this may have lessened the sense of cohesion and reduced the warmth of a normal Shabbat experience here.

In the afternoon of Shabbat I walked to the ghetto memorial with a young Polish doctoral student, herself a relative latecomer to awareness of her own Jewishness. Natalie's story, commonplace enough in the context of Poland but remarkable nevertheless, was of a religious Catholic upbringing, interrupted only when, by complete coincidence, she encountered anti-Jewish sentiment and, in enquiring of her parents with the innocence of an adolescence, uncovered a family history she had not even suspected. Natalie is, today, an observant, knowledgeable Jew after a long journey during which she translated her (originally Catholic) religious impulses into a love of Judaism.

And Natalie's story is echoed again and again in this place. An anecdote relayed by a JDC official about a President of the Jewish Students' Union who attends church every Sunday. An excellent documentary, "The Secret" about the paths that lead many individuals back to Jewish roots they never knew they had until their adulthood...a Christian priest talking about fulfilling the promise made by his Jewish birth mother that he would become a good priest (such pathos and irony!)...or Leszek Pizweski himself, now a leading figure in Warsaw Jewry and with parents who are still embarrassed to relate in public to their Jewishness....

.....The ghetto is an extraordinary feature of Jewish life, and life in general, in Warsaw. It no longer exists in practice. Only a few buildings dotted here and there remain, although among them is what is now a school but was then an overcrowded overnight hostel for victims awaiting transportation. The memorial is moving, simple and sparse. An overwhelming impression is made that the ghetto is physically gone, but can never really disappear. Where once there were walls, now there is the need to point out that once there were walls. One can see nothing except the merest traces, but everyone knows, at least every Jew knows, whether they live within, adjacent to or outside what was once the ghetto. The best view is obtained, ironically perhaps, from the "Palace of Culture" a grotesque thirty five floor tower / office block, presented to the people of Poland as a present from Stalin in the immediate post war communist period. From the top of the tower, in freezing temperatures and high winds, one can see the full panoramic expanse of where the ghetto once was. It is, perhaps, symbolic, that even in Warsaw itself, the true experience of the ghetto cannot be touched, only observed from a distance.

This leads naturally to the subject of modern day anti-Semitism. The facts do not look too promising. Poland has a track record almost unparalleled in Europe. The economic situation is threatening, and almost twenty five per cent of the popular vote at the last election went to parties espousing anti Jewish sentiment. Restitution is very much in the public eye and the first scandal over Jewish misappropriation of funds just hit the national newspapers immediately before my visit (a senior Jewish community leader in Katowice committed suicide under a cloud of accusations over the misuse of property compensation for private gain). And yet, there are omens in the other direction. Poland is only one of two countries in the world (the other being Japan) that have a special "ambassador", in this case to Polish Jewry throughout the world. The Government is relatively positive. The push towards membership of the European Union provides a break on possible institutionalized anti-Semitism even if it cannot thwart the feeling on the street. But even in terms of popular sentiment it should be noted, not only that Polanski's "The Pianist" was playing to full cinemas during my visit, but also that the impact of the publication of Jan Gross's book "Neighbors" about the massacre at Jedwabne seemed to have had a quite profound emotional and psychological effect on the whole of society. One can always quote the parable of the frog in boiling water to critique local Jewish optimism, but it has to be said that local Jews are optimistic. Konstanty Gebert, one of the community's most serious and thoughtful intellectuals and no naïve dilettante categorically dismissed the prospect of the revival of any serious wave of anti-Semitism in the immediate to medium term future.

*Sunday*

My last day in this all too brief first encounter with Warsaw was an opportunity to meet a few of the characters in this community, to wander around town and to experience the main center of community life, the synagogue and the adjacent “white building” housing most of the community’s offices and so on. I am well aware that I will leave having missed the majority of the community’s leadership – including its rabbinical leadership, and the heads of the religious community and of the TSKZ. I am acutely conscious of the fact that I have not encountered the Lauder contribution to this community that is huge. No description could be complete without that piece and it is simply missing. These encounters will have to wait for my return visit in a few weeks. The picture of them comes strictly second hand and I do not want to fix that too firmly in my mind, preferring to reserve judgment for a first hand encounter. Clearly some absolutely vital pieces of the jigsaw will have to remain missing for the present, but that is in the nature of things in this work.

Breakfast with Konstanty Gebert, or “Kostek” as he is known throughout the community. In many ways a larger than life character. Central player in the Solidarity movement and colleague of Lech Walesa, founder of the “flying university” a Poland ‘refusnik’ equivalent type project to teach Judaism and never be caught by the communist authorities, founder editor of *Midrasz*, a scholarly journal, burly, kippah wearing and infectiously enthusiastic and optimistic. A popularist intellectual. I hear criticism of Kostek later on that he talks well but has never really committed himself to community leadership, in which role he might have, and still might, exert a critical influence for good. Kostek preempts this criticism and accepts of himself that he has never been prepared to take on a central role within the community. (Perhaps that is why he is still smiling?!) This reminds me again just how fragile the future of a small community can be. Images of a community planning process, of priority setting, of proper use of the opportunity created by restitution, proper use made of the good will of the government, flit through my mind with Kostek in the leadership picture...but without him? Can the future rest on the involvement or non involvement of one person? In a community of this size it is possible. Fragility.

Kostek’s optimistic views on the place of Jews within Polish society have already been noted above. He does recognize the worrying trends. We talk about the Lipman suicide in Katowice (see above) and whether another such scandal, combined with continuing economic problems, the presence of anti-Jewish forces in Parliament and the media attention being given to the restitution issue, could lead to another outbreak of prolonged anti-Semitism here. Kostek cannot see it. Poland’s interests in Europeanism make the likelihood of institutionalized anti-Semitism extremely unlikely. The Jedwabne episode, for Kostek, illustrated a very deep emotional revision of Poland’s self image in this respect (but is this just in the urban settings as I heard from someone else the previous day?). No, Kostek just cannot buy into the latent anti-Semitism theory. He sees a glass half full in which an opinion poll after the public debate on Jedwabne showed that 34% of Poles would support the idea of an official governmental statement of apology to Jews for the Polish collaboration in the Holocaust.

A session with Agatas and Kasia, two workers with the Joint, and two more stories of voyages of self discovery. I receive the official description of their work at the pedagogic center that services students in their academic work, deals with the telephone enquiries coming into the community, produces and trains in the use of pedagogical material, does a certain amount of outreach into the non-Jewish community at the schools level, devotes its time 50/50 between Warsaw and the other communities and manages a web-site that, for many, is their first encounter with their own Judaism. Afterwards they warm to the conversation and reveal a little bit about how they, as relatively young people and committed to a future within the local Jewish community, see the trends. They talk of the privatization of religion, expressed through projects such as Atara (see above) rather than the organized community. One senses that they are not comfortable either with the Judaism of the *syngogue* nor that of the TSKZ, although they understand the need for such structures. They highlight the very limited nature of family connections that are usually so important in a small community. They talk of "uprootedness" of the fact that very few individuals are born and die in Warsaw. They refer to children growing up without a sense of the intergenerational connection with Judaism that is so basic in many other settings. Their feelings of dislocation, of isolation and of uniqueness are both a force that drives their Judaism and a very real disability in terms of connecting to the totality of the Jewish experience. They too, see the chances of a return of virulent anti-Semitism as being extremely slim. They see the community as potentially viable, although they recognize the lack of so many institutions that would be necessary for a real future: a high school, an old age home, outreach projects, rabbinical and educational role models and mentors. The list is extensive.

The rest of the day is fairly uneventful. A visit to the center of community activities yields an impromptu Kosher lunch put together in the sparsely stocked kosher delicatessen / general supplies shop. A second encounter with the experienced Yossi Erez, the Joint's senior man on the ground is more of a social than a learning experience though I do check in with him to confirm some of the impressions I have gained from my various encounters.

After lunch I was fortunate enough to get a brief but very instructive tour with Piotr Rytka-Zandberg. Piotr is another Warsaw character. A streetwise Mr Fixit who is working, on commission, principally with the Union of Jewish Religious Communities who have the franchise on restitution claims in the major cities including Warsaw, but also with Eve Anderson's Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Culture. He is the man who knows everything that is happening. He negotiates with local and national government and he prepares documentation. He knows where the gold is buried and he has a huge personal vested interest in success. He showed me a few of the sites under negotiation at present and it was an invaluable insight into the dimensions of the challenge and the problematics of the situation. Piotr is a fixer. Can he be trusted? Could someone in Poland who could be trusted be adequate to the task of weaving through power and bureaucracy to secure concrete gain? Can he be the broker in such sensitive situations, not only in terms of external negotiations with the authorities, but also in terms of long-range community planning and management. My feeling was one of unease, of a sense that the potential to get it wrong outweighs the potential to get it very right...but I may easily be misreading the character and cultural map here. Piotr's tour was certainly instructive. His accounting is that the community may gain several, but not more than several properties. These, as

mentioned above, include a parts of a hospital campus, including buildings that look as if they could swallow a fortune in restoration and still surface for more. I felt that Piotr was sizing me up as much as he was relating a story. Was I the key to outside financial support? Our tour was too brief to be concluded and we resolved to continue the adventure during my next visit to the community.

Back at the hotel, waiting for a taxi to return me to the airport Leszek Pisweski came by. Could I deliver a present from a mother to a young daughter in Israel turning eighteen? The present turned out to be money and a camera. Thoughts of Eastern Europe in a previous decade caused me to hesitate, but quickly I decided to go with the new modern Poland, the Poland in which espionage is restricted to the movie theatres, in which the barriers are open to enter and exit, in which the optimism of a Kostek supercedes the instinctive suspicions of many others in the Jewish world outside Poland. I took the gift, made it my own and exited from Poland with as much ease and sense of freedom as I had arrived three short days previously.

My next visit will offer me a longer sojourn and an opportunity to meet all of the community's major players, as well as a site visits to all of the community's physical resources. I cannot say that I leave fully "knowing" the Warsaw Jewish community, but the way is open now to a more sophisticated analysis of what the community is and what is might become.

#### *Key issues for further thought*

- How will restitution work for this community: as a strength, weakness, opportunity or threat?
- Accepting a liberal definition of who is a Jew, will this community continue to grow or decline in numerical strength – bearing in mind the hidden children issue, the European Union entry issue and the centrality of Poland in the Jewish experience?
- What is the truth about Polish anti-Semitism and where lie the real prospects for the future – are we seeing a new dawn or old warning signals?
- In a small community that walks with history on its shoulder, can Polish Jewry stake a claim for its own survival and growth, internally as well as among the community leadership of world Jewry?
- Who will be tomorrow's leaders of the community? How radically will they or can they differ from the leadership of yesterday and today?



- Can the community overcome a culture and history of fragmentation, argumentativeness, personality and ideological clashes to forge a community strategy with a clear sense of vision, mission and priorities that can compel the support of ordinary members and of the world Jewish community?
- Can this community ever be self-sufficient or close to self-sufficient either financially or in terms of human resource?
- Can this community teach its young? Without strong family ties or long lasting ties to place, and without depth of Jewish tradition in the home, without a core of observant / knowledgeable Jews, and without high school, from where springs the commitment necessary to produce Jewish leadership?
- Can the current community organizational and physical infrastructure open itself to greater diversity of Jewish expression that can attract and satisfy the needs of the new Jews in its midst?
- Within the context of a large capital city, no single geographical area of residential concentration of Jews, few community buildings and organizational fragmentation, how can Warsaw engender enough cohesion to engender a 'sense of community'? How can all the pieces be made to add up to "a community"?
- What is the role of Warsaw as a Jewish community in Poland servicing the needs of smaller outlying centers of Jewish life?

SC: November 2002