

CELEBRATING 25 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY IN POLAND

# Deep Roots, New Branches

Personal Essays  
on the Rebirth of  
Jewish Life in Poland  
Since 1989



PUBLISHED BY

Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture

Honorary Consulate for the Republic of Poland  
in the San Francisco Bay Area

Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland

“While there are many sites of Jewish cultural renaissance in the world, a **Polish site of Jewish renaissance**, linked with Poland’s democratic renaissance, is a unique opportunity for Jews. It’s a good thing for Poland, it’s a **very good thing for the Jewish people** and for Judaism as well.”

— Dr. Arnold Eisen, Chancellor,  
Jewish Theological Seminary

“Now, after twenty-five years, the **legacy** of Eastern European Jewry can be explored **in the very place where it happened.**”

— Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Director  
of the Core Exhibition Team, POLIN Museum of  
the History of Polish Jews

“In a country that was once the **greatest Jewish community in the world**, we are helping Polish Jews **regain** some of that greatness, and at the same time **link Jews worldwide to their Eastern European heritage.**”

— Tad Taube, Chairman, Taube Foundation for Jewish  
Life & Culture; President Emeritus, Koret Foundation;  
Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland in the  
San Francisco Bay Area

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IN COOPERATION WITH THE HONORARY CONSULATE  
FOR THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND IN THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA AND  
THE TAUBE CENTER FOR THE RENEWAL OF JEWISH LIFE IN POLAND FOUNDATION





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# Ten Years Strong

## The Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland (JHIP)

The Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland (JHIP), founded in 2004 by the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, has three primary goals:

- Strengthen the institutional life of Polish Jews;
- Further awareness and appreciation of Jewish heritage and contemporary Jewish life among Jews and others; and
- Foster positive interest in Poland among American Jews, 85 percent of whom have Polish roots.

The JHIP aims to accomplish these goals by supporting the institutional infrastructure of Jewish educational, communal, religious and cultural programs in Poland. The JHIP also links Poland to Jewish communities in North and South America, Europe, Israel, Australia and the former Soviet Union. The JHIP further emphasizes the importance of understanding and integrating Poland's Jewish history and heritage into a successful civil society; of addressing historical and contemporary anti-Semitism; and of strengthening the democratic values of a multiethnic Polish society.

To strengthen the JHIP's effectiveness, the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture has enlisted philanthropic partners to help co-sponsor JHIP programs over multiple years, with the aim of providing material and intellectual endorsement for a revitalized Jewish culture in the New Poland. Since 2004, the JHIP has disbursed over 300 grants totaling nearly \$26 million to more than 100 cultural and communal programs and organizations, including the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, the Galicia Jewish Museum, Jewish Community Centers in Kraków and Warsaw, the Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków, the Jewish Genealogy & Family Heritage Center and the Office of the Chief Rabbi of Poland. It provides core support to key institutions and funds programs in Jewish studies scholarship, museum exhibitions, archival preservation, genealogy, community and capacity building, and heritage study tours for youth and adults. It supports the arts and media through grants for specific artistic creations and through ongoing funding to selected organizations.

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# A Transformative Journey: *Rebuilding Democracy and Jewish Life in the New Poland* by Tad Taube



**T**wenty-five years ago I watched in amazement as the people of Poland discarded the Communist regime that had misruled them for half a century and embarked on a quest to create a modern democratic nation. Ten years ago I had the pleasure of establishing Taube Philanthropies' Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland (JHIP), a bold investment that is producing incalculable dividends for Jews in and outside of Poland. As someone who was born in Poland, just before the German invasion in 1939, and whose heritage includes both Polish and Jewish culture, I can savor the success both of Poland's new democracy and of the renewal and growth of Poland's Jewish community.

We recognized that the rebirth of democracy had created the potential for a rebirth of Jewish life and culture, and that strategic philanthropy could have an unprecedented impact.

We then set ambitious goals—to increase awareness of the centrality of the Jewish experience in Poland to contemporary Jewish life worldwide and to recognize the millennium of Polish Jewish civilization as a foundational element of Western culture. Over the past decade, our versatile philanthropic strategy has produced remarkable and tangible results. Today, JHIP supports

These essays offer a basis for better understanding both mainstream Polish society and the astonishingly vigorous Jewish community that has emerged from the shadows.

These two remarkable anniversaries are intimately related to each other. Overthrow of the Communist regime gave Poles the possibility of reimagining themselves as an independent nation, and of frankly discussing their own history and values, including the place of Polish Jewish culture. They have gained the freedom to acknowledge the enormous contribution of Jews to Polish history and life, as well as to reflect on the role of Jews in Poland's post-Communist future.

For Jews in Poland, as well as those like me who may live elsewhere but trace their roots to Poland, the overthrow of the authoritarian Communist regime made it possible to re-imagine Poland as a place where Jews are able not only to live in freedom and security, but to recapture the vibrancy that once made Poland the center of world Judaism. That is what motivated us to create the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland in 2004.

more than 100 programs and five educational initiatives in the arenas of scholarship, archives and genealogy, publishing, community building, the arts, educational tourism and heritage restoration. Key components include:

**Strengthening Jewish Institutions.** We prioritized funding Jewish organizations in Poland that had the potential to become sustainable and were essential elements of the Jewish communal infrastructure. Among these were the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, the Jewish Community Centers in Kraków and Warsaw, the Galicia Jewish Museum, and the Jewish Genealogy & Family Heritage Center.

**Establishing a Presence in Poland.** We opened an office in Warsaw in 2006, establishing the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation, making our San Francisco



Bay Area-based philanthropy the only American Jewish foundation with an on-the-ground presence in Poland. In addition to providing technical assistance to our grantees, the Warsaw office offers innovative educational programs and extensive resources for international visitors.

**Impacting Jewish Life and Polish Civic Life.**

By supporting Jewish cultural initiatives that attract both Jews and non-Jews, we have increased recognition and appreciation for Polish Jewish arts, music, literature and cultural heritage. The annual Kraków Jewish Culture Festival, which began in 1988, has grown to be the world's largest, with more than 25,000 participants annually, the majority of whom are not Jewish.

**Creating Firsthand Encounters.** Although according to YIVO 85 percent of American Jews trace their roots to Poland, most know little about their own heritage prior to the Holocaust. In 2005 we began bringing American Jewish leadership groups to Poland regularly for firsthand encounters that challenged preconceptions and opened their eyes to the reality of the New Poland. We

also invested in programs that encourage Jewish youth from the United States and Israel to visit Poland to shift their perceptions of Poland from that of Holocaust site to that of personal heritage connections and vibrant Jewish life. To make this opportunity widely available to other groups and individuals, we created the Taube Jewish Heritage Tour Program.

**Changing the Narrative.** When the new POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews previewed on the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising in April 2013, it was the culmination of a 10-year journey by an unprecedented public-private partnership. The Museum is Taube Philanthropies' largest investment in Poland, and together with our partners at the Koret Foundation, we have been responsible for securing fully half the funds donated from the U.S. to support development of its state-of-the-art core exhibition and education center. The estimated one million visitors annually who will visit POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews following its Grand Opening, which took place on October 28, 2014, will link themselves with a



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



past they may previously have not even realized they have.

As a beacon of Jewish awakening in the new Poland, the Museum is the only major institution to present the millennium of Jewish life and culture that existed in Poland prior to the Holocaust. That millennium comprised the most important center of the Diaspora after the end of the Golden Age in Spain, producing 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.

Tragically, Poland later experienced mounting anti-Semitism under the growing shadow of two totalitarian neighbors — Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia. During World War II it lost five million of its 38 million citizens, half of them Jewish. The Nazis put their camps in Poland as a matter of expedience — that was where the Jews were — not because they expected wholesale support from the Polish population. Hitler's



2013: Tad Taube, right, in POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews with Shana Penn, Executive Director of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, and Jeffrey Farber, Chief Executive Officer of the Koret Foundation.

Polish population — approximately three million of them Jews — had died or been killed. Much of the surviving population had been dislocated. Two million were deported to slave labor camps. As a result of relocation, border changes, or death, the country's other ethnic groups were also gone by 1945: the Germans were expelled, and the Lithuanians, Ukrainians and Byelorussians were forced into the Soviet orb. Instead of providing *lebensraum*<sup>1</sup>, Poland survived Nazism as a barely livable space.

When we think “post-1939 Poland” today, we not only think of Nazi sympathizers who helped the German occupiers, but also of brave partisans like Irena Sendler, who rescued children from the Warsaw Ghetto, and of the Polish underground's Council to Help the Jews (*Żegota*), the only body of that kind to emerge in occupied Europe. But most of all, we think of Jewish suffering 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



2009: Tad Taube, left, with Christopher Kerosky, his co-Honorary Consul in the San Francisco Bay Area, signing documents establishing a sister cities partnership between Kraków and San Francisco.

plan for the Slavic Poles was to decimate them, and then turn the remainder into slaves. The devastating experience of Poles in World War II is only beginning to be understood. Sixty percent of Poland's industrial base was demolished, as was every major city, save beautiful medieval Kraków. About 12 percent of the country's

<sup>1</sup> In German, literally “living space,” a term used by the Nazis to indicate a vast territory necessary for the expansion of the Nazi empire and economic independence.



communal life in a shattered Polish nation under Soviet occupation. As the Communist government lurched from crisis to crisis, Jews were made the scapegoats. 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 only a couple of decades 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 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 was gradually incorporated 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 against the Soviet regime. And, many of the 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 proven 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. Highly divergent in their personal and generational experiences and in their assessments of the present and expectations of the future, they are nevertheless united in a commitment to the welfare of the Jewish people in Poland. Persevering against unimaginable odds,



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

the authors refused to believe that Jews could be eliminated entirely from the makeup of a country to which the Jewish people had 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 — including the Jews — could be free. They believed then, and continue to affirm, that the past should never be repeated.

This publication is part of our effort to link our living heritage to the Polish past. In this twenty-fifth anniversary year of Solidarity's victory over Communism and the anniversary of the first democratic election in Poland, we are proud to reissue this expanded collection of essays (first published in 2009) with several new contributors. The essays offer a basis for better understanding both the mainstream society and the astonishingly vigorous Jewish community that has emerged from the shadows. Free, democratic Poland is today a member of NATO and a rising leader in the European Union since its entry a decade ago; Poland is 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 Roots That Survive Through Us

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 Grupińska, Holocaust researcher, 1989



Photo of Shana Penn  
by Paul Milne.

When I first interviewed Anka Grupińska 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.

When the Allies defeated Nazi Germany, Polish Jews emerged from hiding or returned from Hitler’s camps, leaving genocide behind only to face Soviet domination. In the 1960s, Jews helped to spearhead the democratic opposition that fought to regain Poland – although most did so as oppositionists, not self-consciously as Jews. In 1989, 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 remains, 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 in 1990 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 histo-



2012: Tad Taube and Shana Penn examine blueprints inside POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews during its construction.

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

ries 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 Grupińska, 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 *białe 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 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 fight for democracy and for the reinstatement of Jewish experience into Polish history. In the course of their strug-



gle 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 emigration from Poland to Israel by distributing 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 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 Łuczywo, Bronisław Geremek, to name a few?

Why did the 20,000 to 30,000 Jews who remained in Poland after 1968 stay? Some stayed



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 Madeleine Albright, Undersecretary of State Barbara Labuda, President’s Chancellery.

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 commander of that uprising. Dr. Edelman’s first-ever blow-by-blow account of those events broke the 33-year silence, and the *białe 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 Grupańska 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 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

and assumed that after them there would be no Jewish life in Poland. "I believe we are the last ones. Definitely," as Konstanty Gebert told the press.

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 and cultural programs

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

unheard-of scale, and 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 1960s 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 four contributors to this collection — Piotr Wiślicki, Eleonora Bergman, Konstanty Gebert and Stanisław 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

in Warsaw, Łódź, Wrocław and Kraków. 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 Kraków 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 and 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 Madeleine 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 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.

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.

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, thriving JCCs

in Kraków and Warsaw, 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 Konstany Gebert mused.

Since the early 1990s the number of Poles to 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 children and grandchildren. This phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the “deathbed confession.” In response to this unexpected though now common occur-

rence, several psychologists and Jewish community organizers, including essayist Stanisław Krajewski, organized a weekly Identity Crisis telephone hot line in the 1990s to take calls from people wanting to know their options as they explored 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 dissimulation 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 the 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 during martial law or at the end of the 1980s 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 "Third Generation" and "Coming of Age" sections of this book, 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 youth 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?

Born in 1987, Jan Śpiewak's Jewishness is neither discovered nor invented. Both his parents are Jewish. His grandfather was the revered Jewish historian Szymon Datner. Determined to



2013: Shana Penn being decorated with the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland by Minister Jacek Michałowski on behalf of President of Poland Bronisław Komorowski.

build a meaningful Jewish future for his generation, Jan writes, in his essay "I Don't Remember Communism," that "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?"

Closing an historical circle, in a way, Jan recently met with Anka Grupińska at an oral history workshop she was conducting for ZOOM, his Polish Jewish Young Adult Organization. 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, Jewish, Christian and secular Poles 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 After Communism in the New Poland: A Timeline

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 Holocaust. 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 the reestablishment of democracy and independence could give Polish Jewry a chance — hence, the marked Jewish participation, alongside the majority of 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, the rebirth cannot be considered surprising: a democratic society allows its members to make individual identity choices. In an existential sense, however, this rebirth — a fruit of long and patient efforts — is still nothing short of miraculous.

**1989** – Communism fell, 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 position goes to Menachem Jaskowicz, 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, and it makes Warsaw the main transit point for Soviet Jews leaving for Israel. After a crisis in Auschwitz over closing a Carmelite convent on its grounds, the Vatican reiterates its desire to

relocate the institution. That same year, a group of Jewish parents in Warsaw opens Poland's first Jewish kindergarten since 1968.

**1990** – 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. The Jewish Culture Festival organizes its second summer season in Kraków, on a modest scale. Over the years, the Festival will grow to become Europe's largest Jewish culture event.

**1991** – During the first ever visit to Israel by a Polish leader, President Lech Wałęsa apologizes in a speech at the Knesset for “wrongs committed against Jews in Poland.” Poland becomes one of the most pro-Israel 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.

**1994** – 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.

**1997** – 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. The Catholic Church begins the observance of an annual “Day of Judaism” to sensitize the laity. *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 Benjamin 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 portrayal of wartime Polish attitudes toward Jews.

**2001** – Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski leads the commemoration of the 60th anniversary of the Jedwabne massacre – the first President of Poland to officially recognize atrocities against Jews by Poles in World War II. The Church, and the residents of Jedwabne, 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 some newsstands and churches, the level of anti-Semitic violence is consistently low. The first post-WWII Polish translation of the Torah, with an extensive commentary, is published by Pardes Lauder.



**2002** – The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ) is established by the Union of Jewish Communities in Poland and the World Jewish Restitution Organization (WJRO) to promote the history of Polish Jewish communities and to preserve Jewish heritage sites in Poland. Barely 1,231 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.

**2003** – Two Jewish film festivals are launched in Warsaw, both drawing large audiences. The Jewish Agency for Israel in Poland assumes responsibility for Taglit-Birthright Poland. By 2014, it will have sent close to 700 participants on the ten-day tours of Israel. The Moses Schorr Foundation is established to support the expanding Hebrew-language and Jewish adult education programs, including e-learning and community projects, of the Moses Schorr Center in Warsaw.

**2004** – The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture starts the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland, designed to support and sustain the revival of the Jewish community and Polish-Jewish understanding. Continuing today, with a registered office in Warsaw, the Taube Foundation's Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland has provided tens of millions of dollars toward sustaining Jewish institutions representing heritage scholarship and preservation, cultural innovation and education. Michael Schudrich becomes Poland's Chief Rabbi, a position that had 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 Kraków 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 Kaczyński, is known as a friend of Israel, however, and in his first interview after his victory is confirmed, he compares himself to Ariel Sharon. Chabad-Lubavich opens centers in Warsaw and Kraków.

**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. 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.

**2008** – The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture begins development of an innovative cultural tourism program called Taube Jewish Heritage Tours. Righteous Gentile Irena Sendler dies at age 98. A social worker and anti-Nazi partisan, Sendler helped organize an underground operation rescuing Jewish children from the Warsaw Ghetto. To honor the memory of her brave deeds the Taube Foundation creates a memorial award in her name, to be given to Polish men and women who rescue Jewish heritage and strengthen Jewish life. The inaugural Irena Sendler Memorial Award is made to Janusz Makuch, the director of the Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków. The very first Jewish Community Center in Poland opens in Kraków. The opening ceremony is led by Prince Charles, who initiated the project. Located in a modern building next to the Tempel Synagogue, the JCC Kraków is supported by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, World Jewish Relief and the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, among



others. It serves the needs of the local Jewish community through meetings, public lectures, workshops, language classes, celebrations of Jewish holidays and weekly Shabbat dinners. It also offers a seniors club, a students club, a library and a kosher kitchen. The visionary design of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews receives the International Architecture Award from the Chicago Athenaeum.

**2009** – The Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation formally registers as a Polish nonprofit organization; under the direction of Helise Lieberman, the Taube Center represents the Taube Foundation's programs in Poland. A sister cities relationship between Kraków and San Francisco is established. Over 100 people from the San Francisco Bay Area participate in the sister-city founding ceremony in Kraków. 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. Marek Edelman, deputy commander of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, veteran of the 1944 Warsaw Uprising, well-known cardiologist, author and a member of Solidarity, passes away in Warsaw and receives a state funeral in the Warsaw Jewish Cemetery with military honors.

**2010** – Rabbis, with the support of the Union of Polish Jewish Communities, Shavei Israel and other organizations, serve communities in Warsaw, Kraków, Katowice, Łódź and Wrocław. The rabbis, along with students from Warsaw's Kollel, provide outreach and Jewish learning opportunities in smaller communities, including Gdańsk and Lublin. A tragic air crash kills President Lech Kaczyński and the First Lady, together with a 94-person top level delegation, as they were about to land in Smolensk, Russia; in the Warsaw synagogue a service is held for the victims. The third Limmud Polska gathering, a weekend of Jewish educational and cultural programs organized and sponsored by JDC, draws over 600 participants, representing 19 communities around the country. The Cheder Café opens as the Jewish Culture Festival's club-café in Kraków. Formerly a Jewish prayer house, the Cheder offers a wide range of cultural events, concerts, lectures, meetings and workshops; it is also a reading room

with a rich collection. The New Jewish Music Festival (Festiwal Nowa Muzyka Żydowska) is launched in Warsaw to promote an ongoing discovery of traditional Jewish music as an element of inspiration for contemporary musicians. The City Council of Łódź establishes the Marek Edelman Center for Dialogue to organize activities promoting the multicultural and multiethnic heritage of Łódź, with particular emphasis on Jewish culture.

**2011** – The Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ) dedicates an education center in the renovated Renaissance synagogue in Zamość. The structure is one of the few surviving Renaissance-era synagogues in Poland and one of the most architecturally significant synagogues in the country. In the 2011 Polish census, 7,353 Polish citizens surveyed declare Jewish ethnicity, compared to the census of 2002, which resulted in the figure 1,231. This significant difference is mostly a result of a new methodology: respondents can declare more than one identity. Most of the Jewish respondents declare both Polish and Jewish identity. Both the census and the number of memberships in Jewish organizations verify a slow but continuous growth of the Jewish population in Poland, mostly in the Masovian Voivodeship (Warsaw) and other major cities. POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews' centerpiece, an 18th-century synagogue's timber frame and painted ceiling, are created in workshops throughout Poland.

**2012** – Poland celebrates the life and work of Janusz Korczak, one of the most complex and tragic figures of the Holocaust. A beloved, pioneering educator, he directed a Jewish orphanage in the Warsaw Ghetto until he and his charges were transported to their deaths in Treblinka in 1942. The Korczak Year includes a series of events and publications in honor of his contribution to literature and science, including a March of Remembrance. The March is organized by the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, the Jewish Community (Gmina), the Center for Holocaust Research IFiS PAN, Stowarzyszenie Drugie Pokolenie (Second Generation Association), the Jewish Youth Organization (ZOOM), and Śródmieście and Wola districts. For the first time in the history of the Venice Biennale, a non-Polish national is



chosen to represent Poland at the 54th International Art Exhibition in Venice. Yael Bartana, an Israeli artist, presents the film trilogy “... and Europe will be stunned.”

**2013** - The Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum opens a new exhibition in block 27, entitled “Shoah.” The ceremony is attended by, among others, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Polish Minister of Culture and National Heritage Bogdan Zdrojewski. The exhibition was prepared by the Yad Vashem Institute in Jerusalem. Warsaw’s first-ever modern Jewish Community Center is opened. Funded by JDC, the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture and the Koret Foundation, the new JCC is the second in the country and serves as a hub for a vast array of Jewish cultural, educational and community programs and activities, many taking place outside the JCC’s walls. The Polish Parliament’s decision to reject a bill allowing Jewish kosher and Islamic halal ritual slaughter launches a heated debate in Poland and internationally. The ban was later overturned by Poland’s constitutional court. Poland celebrates the Year of Julian Tuwim, an extremely prolific Polish poet and author of Jewish descent, who embraced his Jewish identity by the end of WWII. Born in Łódź, Tuwim was a major figure in Polish literature and received the prestigious Golden Laurel of the Polish Academy of Literature in 1935. In March, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews unveils the awe-inspiring wooden roof and painted ceiling of its close-to-scale replica of the Gwoździec Synagogue. Both the painted ceiling and the timber frame roof were constructed using only the tools and techniques of the period. The final element of the synagogue replica, the bimah, is installed in the late summer; the installation process is open to the public. On April 19, the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is commemorated in concert with the soft opening of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. By the end of the day, over 7,000 people have visited the Museum. The painting of the wooden bimah for the 18th-century synagogue in the Museum is completed. In the crack between the buildings on 22 Chłodna and 74 Żelazna Streets, Jakub Szczyński designs a unique art installation entitled Egtar Keret’s House — the narrowest house in

Warsaw. Named after an outstanding Israeli writer, the construction serves as a studio for visiting artists. The Grand Opening of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews takes place on October 28.

**2014** – The Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland celebrates its tenth anniversary. The JHIP’s goals have been to support the ongoing revival of Jewish culture in Poland, further awareness of this resurgence among Jews and non-Jews, and foster positive interest in Polish Jews and Poland among American Jews, most of whom have Polish roots. The Warsaw office, under the leadership of Helise Lieberman, runs a successful Jewish heritage tourism program (Taube Jewish Heritage Tours) and promotes leadership in the next generation through its Mi Dor Le Dor educational initiative. Mi Dor Le Dor trains 20-30-year-old tour guides in living Jewish history, changing the focus of Jewish heritage tourism from the March of the Living’s focus on death to a new focus on the living, thriving Polish Jewish community. The Parliament of the Republic of Poland (Sejm) unanimously declares 2014 to be the Year of Jan Karski, featuring a series of international conferences in Washington, Chicago and Warsaw. The conferences focus on the historical consequences of Karski’s mission and its contemporary relevance in the context of “Responsibility to Protect,” the United Nations doctrine defining the responsibilities of individuals, organizations and states to protect civilians during times of war and to intervene when ethnic cleansing occurs. On June 4, Poland marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of its first free elections after World War II when it became the first country in the Eastern bloc whose democratically elected leaders wielded real political power. After 44 years of Communist rule, June 4, 1989 initiated a new beginning of Poland’s journey to freedom and democracy. POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews receives the Association of Polish Architects (SARP) Award of the Year and Award for the Best Architectural Object Built Using Public Funds under the Honorary Patronage of the President of the Republic of Poland. The Galicia Jewish Museum in Kraków celebrates its tenth anniversary with special events highlighting “A Decade of Change.” The Grand Opening of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews takes place on October 28. ■

# Fighters: *Survivors who stayed in Poland or returned after the fall of the Soviet Bloc*

## Twenty-Five Years On

by Marian Turski



In the early 1990s, Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich had just begun his work to reanimate Jewish life in Warsaw. One of his early initiatives, a conference held at the first Jewish summer camp in Zaborów 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 Stanisław 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 minyan 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 the University of Warsaw, was a classical sabra with a secular outlook. The audience, 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, toward 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, more than twenty-five 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

In 1989, the optimists were convinced that democracy, freedom of association, freedom of speech and the anticipated accession to the European Union would accelerate the process of overcoming xenophobic prejudices. The results of professor Ireneusz Krzemiński'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 understandable. For over a decade,

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.

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.

Polish society tried to cope with the victims of the violent post-Communist transformation: people who paid for it with unemployment and 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 presence was, in particular, revealed through the debates surrounding Jan T. Gross's books, *Neighbors* and *Fear*.<sup>2</sup> In a nutshell, by the time of the second poll there was clearly much more empathy for Jewish memory, as illustrated by “Compassion,” a recent poem by the eminent poet Bolesław Taborski (in my own translation):

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,<sup>3</sup> and by academic research centers and university chairs on Jewish culture and history, which have sprung up not only in Warsaw and Kraków but also in lesser centers such as Wrocław, Poznań, Łódź 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 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

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

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 has been bringing Lublin's Jewish past back to life and to the attention of the city's residents.



2014: Marian Turski, center, escorts the Grand Duke and the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg on their visit to POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. *Photo by Magdalena Starowieyska / POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.*

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 Kraków Jewish Culture Festival for many years and continue to do so, but nowadays it is supplemented by similar events in Łódź, Lublin, Poznań, Gdańsk, Włodawa 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 Kraków festival in their scale and diversity.

I also see this empathy and curiosity reflected in the public interest in POLIN 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.”<sup>4</sup> 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 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.

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



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 bygone time. Please note that the new climate now enables people of such origin to "come out." This



2014: Marian Turski in the Grand Lobby of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. *Photo by Franek Mazur.*

In 1989, the optimists were convinced that democracy and the expected access to the European Union would accelerate the process of overcoming xenophobic prejudices.

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 1,200 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?

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 Holocaust, GWŻ in lieu of Jewish Religious Community.

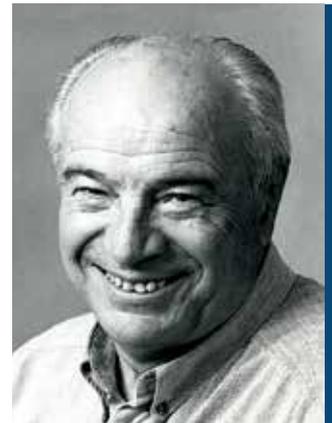
A high official of the GWŻ told me not so long ago that some of its members would prefer that the mailman and the neighbors not know who the sender is; and I am aware that some still conceal this knowledge from family members as well. I neither praise nor condemn – I simply relate, though I cannot conceal 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? ■



# A Historical Miracle: Jewish Life in Poland After Communism

by Feliks Tych



**B**efore addressing the condition of the Jews and Polish-Jewish relations since 1989, 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.

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

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.<sup>1</sup>

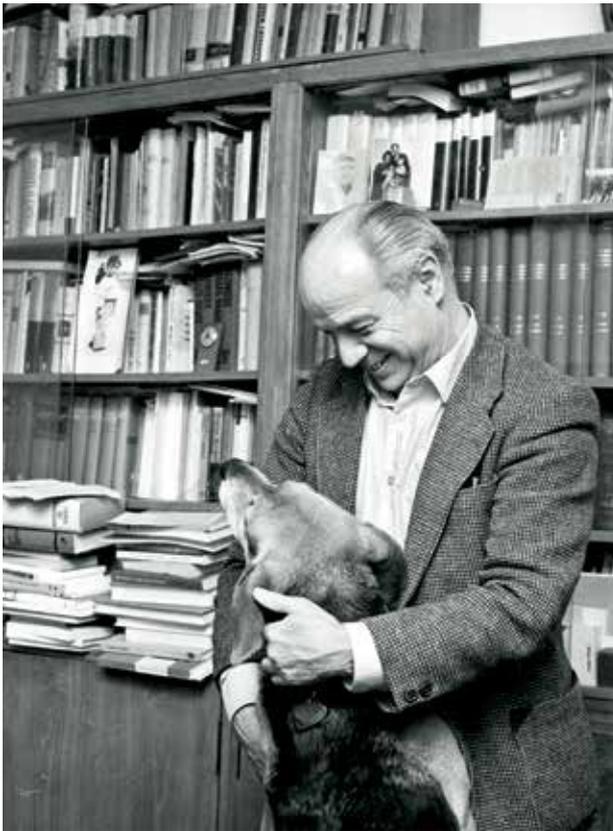
Among the younger generations of educated Poles, including high school youth, the percentage of those declaring anti-Semitic attitudes has declined markedly, while that of respondents expressing *hostility* to anti-Semitism is on the increase.

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 grâce*, 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

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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.



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

How many people claiming a secular or observant Jewish identity remained in Poland after 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. 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 régime* 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 grassroots 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 also set up academic centers of Holocaust research in Warsaw and Kraków, 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,” because 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, 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 prewar 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



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



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.

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 Cywiński, 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 2004, 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 Bełżec, 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



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

such as the complexes at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Majdanek, Bełżec 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 are gradually being addressed and this must continue. 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 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 new POLIN 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 presence in Poland, as expressed in the number of the country's Jewish citizens, continues to decline

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.

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 Michał Friedman, Arnold Mostowicz, or Paweł Wildstein,<sup>2</sup> who, barely a few years ago, were still among us.

<sup>2</sup> 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 30 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. ■



# Returning Home to Raise the Phoenix from the Ashes

by Sigmund Rolat



I realize that I am a somewhat unusual Holocaust survivor; in fact I have always held on to 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 Wałęsa and the Solidarity movement, that I grew eager to return to Poland.

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.

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 twenty-five-year involvement in business ventures and cultural initiatives in Poland remains deeply fulfilling. My most significant commitments are to reviving Jewish life in the city of Częstochowa, where I was born and raised, and to my role as board co-chair of POLIN 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.

Years ago I took my son and my daughters to Poland to see their ancestral land and Częstochowa – once a wonderful microcosm of Polish municipalities. I wanted my children to see the site of Częstochowa'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.

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.



Częstochowa, famed for the Black Madonna icon at Jasna Góra, 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 Częstochowa – 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 partisans. My father was killed in the Treblinka death camp uprising.

After the war, I was lucky to emigrate 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. POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews magnificently portrays, 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 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 Arbà Aratsot, the (Jewish) Council of the Four Lands (of Poland), was the only Jewish executive politi-



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

cal 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 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 teach-



2009: At the invitation of Sigmund Rolat, famed violinist Joshua Bell performed two concerts, one in Częstochowa, Mr. Rolat's birthplace, and one in Warsaw to benefit POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

ers – 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 Katyń 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

people (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" 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 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 – Natan Rapoport'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 Kraków and Warsaw have become the European continent's largest. Hundreds of Polish scholars, writers, journalists and community activists have 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 renascent 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 Częstochowa I was offered a wonderful opportunity. Professor Jerzy Mizgalski asked for my 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 invariably encountered almost total ignorance on this subject, though without exception, they were eager for knowledge. Professor 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 Częstochowa 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 exhibition'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



2013: Foreground, Sigmund Rolat and Tad Taube at the soft opening of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

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.

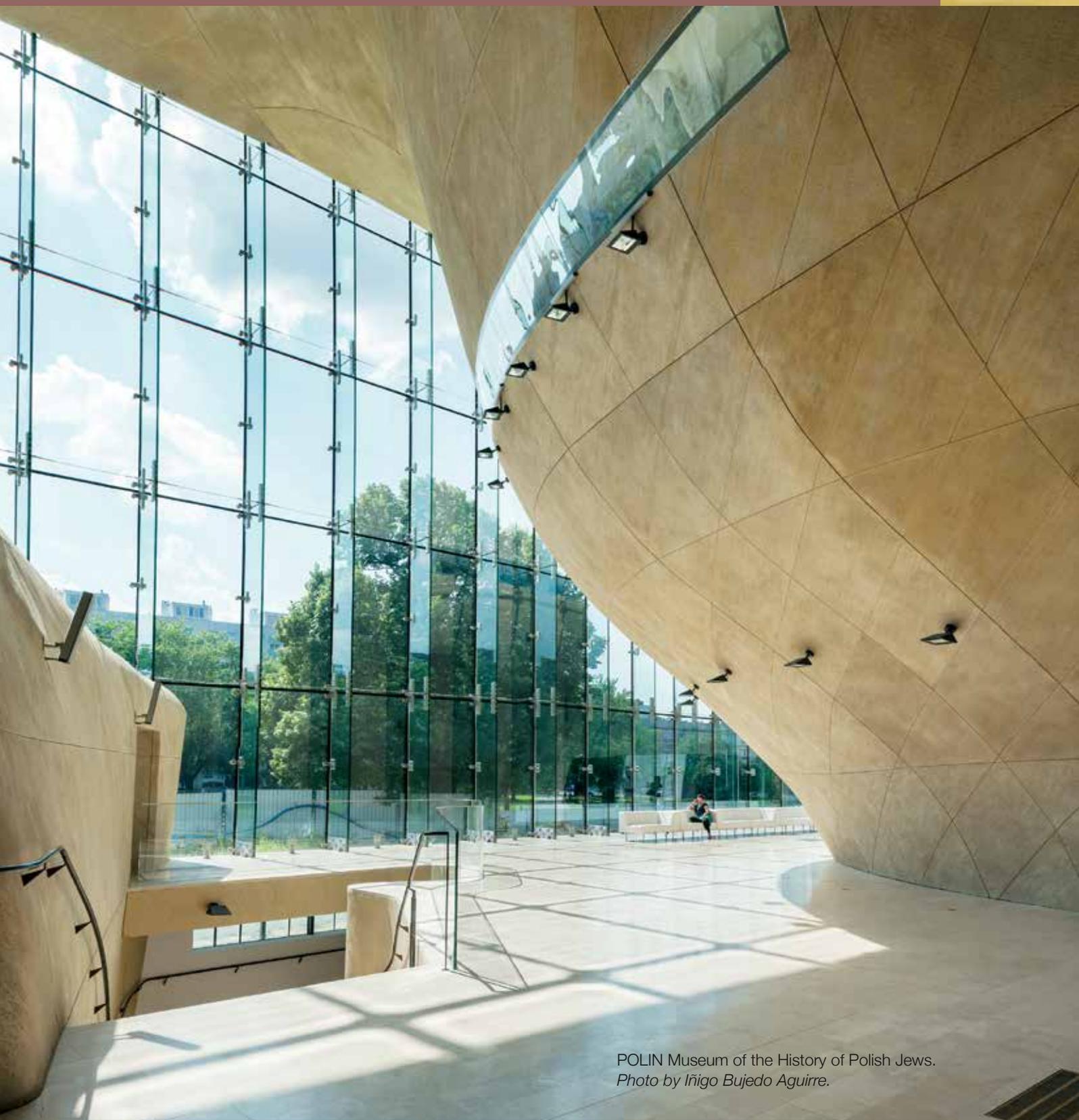
Hundreds of Jews and Christians, young and old from around the world, attended these events, replete with joy and sadness, drama, emotion and nostalgia. There was not one untoward incident – quite the contrary, even from Up High the verdict seemed favorable, for the weather was just glorious.

Israel's ambassador to Poland, Shewach Weiss, succinctly described the exhibition as "Przykład Częstochowy," the Example of Częstochowa. 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 Częstochowa the exhibition was shown at the National Library in Warsaw and then incorporated by the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage into nationwide curricula. Art from this program also accompanied the "Jews of Częstochowa" exhibition on its travels throughout the United States. (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 POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews has been built. It shines like a phoenix risen from ashes, a paragon of excellence. ■

# Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland

Celebrating Ten Years: 2004-2014



POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.  
*Photo by Iñigo Bujedo Aguirre.*



Jewish Community Center, Kraków.



70th Anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, April 19, 2013.



Czulent, Jewish young adult association, Kraków.



At center, 2013 Irena Sendler Memorial Award recipients Mayor of Warsaw Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz and Minister of Culture Bogdan Zdrojewski.



Galicia Jewish Museum, Kraków.



Poland Flag Raising, San Francisco City Hall.



Ringelblum Archives in the Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw.



Jeffrey Farber, CEO, Koret Foundation, and Shana Penn, Executive Director, Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, in Warsaw.

# Dreamers: *Activists who dared to face down authoritarianism and reclaim their Jewish birthright*

## My Grandfather Would Be Proud

by Piotr Wiślicki



I heard the word for the first time as a five year old at a summer camp. The other children were calling out to me “Hey Jew!” “Jew boy!” (in Polish “Żydzie,” “Żydku”). I don’t think it was even meant pejoratively; I’ve simply always had “Semitic features.” As a matter of fact, recently there was a film here in Poland called *Run Boy Run* about a Jewish child in hiding during the Holocaust. When one of my old friends saw the poster for the film, he asked if that was a photo of me from my childhood.

When I was a boy, the topic of Jews and Jewishness was not so much concealed — it just wasn’t a topic at all. The fear was such that no one talked about being or not being a Jew. Every time my aunt Rena, my mother’s sister, came from Israel, everyone at home would say she came from Croatia — because that’s where she went after the war. I don’t even remember if I visited my grandfather’s grave when I was a boy. I probably did and it must have been in a Jewish cemetery — but for me it could have been any cemetery.

I didn’t ask and no one told me anything.

I began to understand a little when I started primary school, but until 1968<sup>1</sup> I was not yet

fully conscious of my Jewish identity. I had a rudimentary understanding that I was a Jew, but it didn’t mean anything to me. After 1968 I started to be afraid. When someone mentioned the word “Jew” in my presence, I would avert my eyes and try to remove myself — so as to avoid being a witness to the way people talked about Jews. In the 1970s I started to open up, but only to very few people. I implored my most trusted friends to keep my Jewish identity a guarded secret.

Today I am proud of who I am. It’s not simply that Poland has changed, but rather it is the passage of time in my own life, my own strength, and my own understanding of the world. Now when someone tells “concentration camp” jokes about Jews, I speak up. I say who I am and ask him or her to stop. I don’t want to hear such talk.

In 1968 we nearly left the country. Both my parents had lost their jobs. My mother, Janina Królikowska-Wiślicka, came from a traditional Jewish family. According to my grandfather, they were Cohens (Hebrew: *Kohanim*), the priestly class descended from the Biblical Aaron. Until 1968 my mother was the head of the prestigious Cepelia company (the official Polish folk art enterprise). Afterwards she became a pharmacist’s assistant on Brzeska Street in Warsaw’s desolate

13,000 Jews left Poland with one-way visas, among them many professionals, government officials, artists and intellectuals.



Praga district. It could not have been worse. Paradoxically, the events of 1968 ended up helping my father, Alfred Wiślicki. When he lost his job in mechanized construction, he returned to university and eventually became a professor. He authored numerous important scientific publications on the history of technology and mechanization. He was also the founder and president of the Polish Society for the History of Technology.

But after my parents lost their jobs, they were ready to leave Poland. My father had even received an offer of a full-time job in England. It was then that Anna, my nineteen-year-old sister, announced that indeed she loved us all very much, but she wasn't going anywhere because she had met the love of her life and was going to stay in Warsaw. So we remained in Poland with my sister, and her great love has been my brother-in-law ever since.

After 1968 I visited my grandfather's grave with full awareness of who he was. But when entering the Jewish cemetery, I would look around carefully — making sure that no one might see me. I donned my kippah only when I was safely past the cemetery gates, never on the street out-



2012: Piotr Wiślicki in POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. *Photo by Andrzej Daniluk / Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland.*

SB would have been successful in breaking me down and I would have cooperated. I honestly don't know. They threatened me: they said my parents would lose their jobs, I would be kicked out of the university, taken into the army. They tried to force me to sign a document stating

**For six years I have been involved in the production of the Core Exhibition of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. I don't know precisely when this exhibition and the Museum became my life's goal.**

side. I was ashamed, but something was beginning to change. Pride in being a Jew was starting to germinate inside me. I started reading, finding out things, talking to my parents. Slowly I was becoming a Polish Jew.

There were times that I regretted we hadn't left Poland in 1968. In the early 1980s, there was a radically anti-Semitic patriotic group called "Grunwald." Out of youthful curiosity I went to a demonstration they were holding outside of the former Security Services office on Koszykowa Street. When I stood in the crowd I realized that if someone recognized who I really was, I would be attacked and beaten. I was afraid. Later, in 1972, the Security Services (SB) wanted to recruit me as an informant. If I hadn't had such great and wise parents, perhaps the

that I wouldn't tell anyone about our meeting. I refused, telling them I couldn't sign anything like this because I always tell my parents everything. At home my parents told me: you won't go to the army because you have a medical exemption thanks to a spinal disorder; we already lost our jobs long ago, and if they kick you out of university, so be it. Only then did I understand that the Security Services could not hurt me. My father wrote an open letter demanding that they leave me alone. He also told me that if the situation became too unbearable, I could always emigrate. For many years the SB denied me the right to leave the country, and after finishing my studies I couldn't take any job that would put me in contact with foreigners. That was the only repression I personally suffered at the time.



Before I became active in the Jewish community, I went to the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN)<sup>2</sup>, where the Security Services archives are kept. As an injured party under the Communist regime, I asked to see my file. I was very frightened what might be in those documents, but they turned out to contain merely nonsense and invented denunciations.

In 1989 I was fully aware of who I was. I decided to go to the Jewish Community office. The day I went I remember that I kept looking around, checking to see if anyone was watching me. I received an application to fill out. I completed it, left the synagogue, and immediately went back in. I took the document back and said that I wanted to be part of the community, but that I wouldn't sign anything. Then I left again. Moments later I came back, signed the necessary documents, and started to be active in the community without looking back.

By 1990 I was already a person of professional and financial success. I had a good life, a wonderful family and many friends. I think that under such fortunate circumstances it is easier to find one's own identity. I was independent, stable and strong, and no longer had to fear the Security Services. I was invited to cooperate with the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland and became seriously involved with their working group. My activities with the Foundation announced definitively to the world that I am a Jew.

In 2006 I was one of the founders of the newly revived B'nai B'rith organization in Poland. Since I've always been a good organizer, Marian Turski, Chairman of the Council of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and Chairman of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, came to me and asked if I could help with the museum. He got me involved with the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland

<sup>2</sup> Established by the Polish Parliament in 1998, the Institute of National Remembrance – Commission for the Prosecution of Crimes against the Polish Nation is a research institute with prosecution powers that is tasked with investigating Nazi and Communist crimes committed in Poland between 1939 and 1989 and disseminating the results of its investigations to the public.

– I became a board member and later the chairman. For six years I have been involved in the production of the Core Exhibition of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

I don't know precisely when this exhibition and the Museum became my life's goal.

I repeat time and again that POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is a museum of life, not death. Most of Poland's Jews were indeed murdered and not many remain but our history exists and continues to go on. After the war the state tried to erase that history. The museum's goal is to tell the story from the beginning. We all need it, and I'm sure that there is no Jewish history without the history of Poland, just as there is no Polish history without the history of Jews.

My wonderful grandfather, Waclaw Wiślicki, was a Member of Parliament for four terms before the war and belonged to the "Jewish Circle" of deputies. Julian Tuwim<sup>3</sup> wrote about him – "If it's a Jew, it must be Wiślicki." He was a very well known social worker, very modest, in contrast to his brother Feliks, who was a rich manufacturer and founder of the Factory of Synthetic Silk in Tomaszów Mazowiecki, the largest such factory in Europe at the time. Although both brothers were assimilated, my grandfather was the one who followed Jewish tradition. His brother steered clear of political issues, while my grandfather was active in the Parliament and was great friends with Janusz Korczak.

At one of the Parliament's debates, my grandfather said something that entered the language and is still used: "If things are so good, then why is it so bad?" He was referring to the abysmal living conditions of the Jewish poor at the time. Today, I think that if my grandfather were to see POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, he

<sup>3</sup> Famous Jewish poet (1894-1953). Born in Łódź, he was a major figure in Polish literature and received the prestigious Golden Laurel of the Polish Academy of Literature in 1935.



Piotr Wiślicki's grandfather, Waclaw Wiślicki, a prominent Member of the Polish Parliament for four terms.



would no longer feel the need to say this. Today the words of my grandfather are no longer valid for Poland's Jews. I think that today things are indeed good.

No matter what one might say about Polish anti-Semitism, I think that there is neither more nor less anti-Semitism here than anywhere else in the world. The reality in Poland today is different. For example, my daughter once showed me a scan of a postcard circulating on the Internet. It was a card a girl wrote to her grandmother while on summer holiday: "Dear Grandma, I'm sending you best wishes from the seaside. P.S. I saw a Jew." This lack of knowledge, those jokes and figures of Jews with coins (which supposedly bring good luck) represent folklore, not anti-Semitism. Today I am not afraid to walk in public wearing a kippah, not even in a small village. Naturally they would say: "Oh look! A Jew is walking!" He is, so what?

Pride in being a Jew was starting to germinate inside me. I started reading, finding out things, talking to my parents. Slowly I was becoming a Polish Jew.

So nothing. I don't know, maybe I should go to a soccer match in my kippah? Of course, expressions like "Jews to the gas chambers" appear in various places, but I want to believe these are only naïve childish insults and pranks, not someone's real views. Some people in Poland imagine that there are at least ten million Jews here, or at least two hundred thousand in positions of power, but such people are marginal.

The renewal of Jewish life after 1989 cannot be compared with what it was like before the war. Some three and a half million Jews had been living in Poland. Today, according to estimates, we represent from four thousand to two hundred thousand. Perhaps at this point it's worth asking the question, Who is Jewish here in Poland after all? Religious Jews scarcely exist, those born of Jewish mothers or fathers are also few. (In Poland, we recognize that one can be a Jew after either parent.) But for me a Jew is someone who wants to say, "I'm a Jew." Are my sister's chil-



2013: Left to right, Piotr Wiślicki, Shana Penn, Tad Taube and Jeffrey Farber next to the mezuzah at the entrance to POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

dren Jews? For sure they are, but they have little to do with Judaism and Jewishness — so what then? Once I talked about this with Hanna Krall<sup>4</sup>. I asked her: "Who is a person who was born of a Jewish mother but doesn't feel like a Jew? What should we call this person?" Hanna Krall's response was that such people are the children of

Jewish mothers.

I'm aware that it is impossible to rebuild what existed before the war with only a small number of people. The renewal of Jewish life in Poland has taken on the nature of a fairground with its many festivals and films. But Jewish communities are slowly forming and now there is also POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. And what is interesting is that this renewal is also happening to some extent spontaneously. My son had a serious car accident a few years ago, when a tram crashed into his car. The driver didn't even want to get out of the tram as he was convinced he had killed the car's driver instantly. The car was so smashed that the driver's seat didn't exist. By some miracle my son was not injured. He was not hurt at all. The morning after, I went into his

<sup>4</sup> A well-known Polish writer of Jewish origin, born in 1935, who survived World War II in hiding. Her works focus on the relations between Jews, Poles and Germans during and after the war and the search for her own identity.



room but he wasn't there. When he came back a couple of hours later I asked where he had been. He answered, "In the synagogue." He didn't pray but wanted to talk to God. Another example — I gave him a medallion with the Star of David on it. He always wears it, but with this difference: he has always worn his with the star facing out, while for years I wore a similar medallion with the star reversed so that no one would see it. Now I'm no longer afraid, but for years I was hiding it from the world. Such behavior would not cross my children's minds. Today it's hard for them to understand that fear from my youth. My younger son finished Jewish primary school,

I'm sure that there is no Jewish history without the history of Poland,  
just as there is no Polish history without the history of Jews.

and my children proudly say that their father is a Jew. My daughter wants to get involved in a Jewish organization. For me such behavior is a symbol of the rebirth of Jewish life in Poland. First, the synagogue is open. Second, people talk about their Jewish roots openly, aloud, and without fear or shame.

POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews is a monument to life. There is no sadness; one enters it with joy and happiness. Most Jewish museums in Europe are museums of the Holocaust, commemorations of tragedy, misfortune and massacre. Our museum will sponsor concerts and many educational programs. Only one of its eight galleries is dedicated to the Holocaust because we also want to show the thousand years during which Jewish culture flourished here. Poland was, after all, once the largest Jewish cultural center in the world. Historians estimate there are over 14 million Jews living in the world today and that about 70 percent of them, more than nine million Jews, have their roots in the historical territory of Poland. We hope that many people who are interested in what Jewish life here was like will come.

The original idea of the museum arose in the early 1990s in the minds of a few marvelous dreamers connected to the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland. Later

another group of dreamers wanted to invest money in this same concept. In 2005 the first Polish public-private agreement in history was signed between the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, the Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the City of Warsaw, thus officially establishing POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. The three institutions shared responsibility. The Ministry and the City Mayor constructed the building, while the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute donated the land, which had been donated by the city, and raised funds for creating the Core Exhibition. Today the building, which is the most

beautiful modern architecture in Poland, stands before the Monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Heroes, and the Core Exhibition is open to the world. Its content was created by an international team of scholars who have cooperated and consulted with more than a hundred and fifty experts from around the world. We succeeded in raising over 170 million Polish zlotys (about \$47 million dollars) from donors worldwide for creating the Core Exhibition and for other museum programs.

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of my company, thanks to which I have been able to dedicate myself *pro bono* to the creation of the Core Exhibition. POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews now takes so much of my time that I work five to seven hours a day for the museum quite apart from my regular profession.

I'm very proud that I can be a part of this monumental project. Our exhibition awakens profound emotions. How to show a millennium of common history? We don't yet fully know what the effect will be, but we are putting together thousands of pieces of a puzzle that I hope and believe will be truly fantastic.

I'm very glad that I didn't emigrate in 1968, that I stayed here. I feel at home. I think my grandfather would be proud of me. ■

*Prepared by Justyna Pobiedzińska*



# Poland, like America

by Stanisław Krajewski



**T**he 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 U.S. 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.

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 Hesed 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 Nożyk 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 toward 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 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 achieve-



1984: Stanisław 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.*



ments, even to boast. Our stay in America had given us a taste of that skill, which was contrary to the Polish upbringing, 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.

**In the U.S., 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.**

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



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

Poland in a way that would have been unthinkable in the U.S., and this was one of the specifically Jewish arguments for us to go back to Poland.

Despite our considerable efforts to find a U.S. publisher – we even hired a literary agent – nothing worked. The reactions were positive but, as one of the publishers said, “Death is not salable.” 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



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

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.

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 S. 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 Hesed was very difficult to imitate. What remained was either the more traditionalist approach, often at risk of becoming fundamentalist, or a strongly anti-Orthodox one, often at risk of becoming 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 thirteen. 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 Nożyk



Synagogue; this was done on 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 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 Ark 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



2013: Stanislaw and Monika Krajewski received the inaugural Lifetime Achievement Award from the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture and the AJC. Photo by Paweł Mazur.

Yet in 1978 or even in 1988, nobody would have guessed that in 1998 or in 2014, Jewish life would exist, let alone be much stronger, more genuine, pluralistic and youthful.

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 2014, 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. ■



# How to Live When You're Not the Last

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.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Małgorzata 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.

So here I am, more than 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 Kraków 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 – were terribly concerned that our involvement in the underground would 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.



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

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 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 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: “Staś, 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, Staś 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 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 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.



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

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 Ronald 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 240 students. They all came from somewhere, from some closet their parents had decided to leave. To make sure their kids will never need one.



2012: Konstanty Gebert speaking to a Taube Jewish Heritage Tour group.

So we set up the [Jewish] school. Today, it has over 240 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 been sufficient by themselves. 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.

And yet, in twenty-five years' time, 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. ■



# A Festival of Jewish Culture

by Janusz Makuch



**T**he older I get the more distant, calm, but also curious I am in my observations of people's daily struggles with life. I am fascinated by the arc of energy that stretches between the day of birth and death — its growing build-up, the intensity of light, the geometry of human fate in which the axis of symmetry is marked by the middle, between moments of going up and falling down, until that final flash, before darkness comes irrevocably. I also look at myself and what I have been doing in the last quarter century as nothing more than an attempt to manage my own life. Would I ever, 26 years ago, have predicted where I would be today? No. At that time I had no idea what the Jewish Culture Festival, which I have directed in Kraków since then, would become, both for me and for others.

Twenty-five years ago I was just following the voice of my conscience and intuition, staying away from any form of speculations, business plans and long-term goals. I was just enjoying every day and every book I read, as well as steeping myself in the newly discovered beauty of Klezmer, Sephardic, Chasidic, and Cantorial — or to put it simply, *Jewish* — music. Step by step, I became more knowledgeable, and the thread that connected me with this newly discovered world slowly became my lifeline. I eventually realized that this was my world. Since that moment, which can't be marked in a calendar, I became part of it, and this land of milk, honey and blood, fertilized with the ashes of millions, became my land.

## Destiny

When I left my hometown at the age of 20, I knew that I would never go back. There was a kind of certainty that took the form of destiny.

And Kraków was my destiny. Is there any other city in the world where I could be doing what I am doing? I am under the impression, I am certain, that our festival is one of the very few in the world that would die if it were moved somewhere else. We are like old trees — deeply rooted in this land, in this city, in these walls, in this history, in everyday life. We have been rooted here for centuries and for centuries will remain rooted here. We can create and develop only here, absorbing juices from the hidden sources, branching out and going higher. When I left my family house and closed its door I threw, as the saying goes, the key into the river. I came to Kraków and found myself in a new house, in Kazimierz, the Jewish district of Kraków. This was the year 1980.

The 1980s were the beginnings of a search for the buried foundations of a world that had passed. This search included many Jews and non-Jews alike. If I had to give a name to the interest young Poles were then showing towards Jewish culture, I would call it a “syndrome of searching for the sunken Atlantis.” It was as though there was a revelation that this mysterious and beautiful world was irreversibly lost. And if I were to give a name to the interest of young Jews in their own culture, I would say it was “a syndrome of a searching for a destroyed Jerusalem.” Both groups experienced a revelation and a sense of sadness at the same time. These feelings generated fascination, longing, love and a new form of shared awareness. Such was the atmosphere of the first Jewish Culture Festival, which took place in Kraków in 1988.

The 1990s were a period of “archaeology.” We realized that we lived in a world of ashes and started to rediscover what was hidden beneath



them. We gradually uncovered different parts, trying to piece them together. When we weren't successful — and quite often we weren't — we relied on what we had built as an imagined projection of our own dreams and visions. Then wise and insightful people arrived and told some of us that we were creating a virtual Jewish world. A world without Jews. They told us that we had no right to it, as if the sphere of love were limited only to the selected ones. For some, "Jewry" became a great business opportunity, a true cash cow. This is why quite soon pseudo-Jewish restaurants popped up everywhere. This increasingly virtual Jewish world was shrouded by the pall of kitsch, while the ghost of a Jewish Disneyland rose above Kazimierz.

At the same time, others were deepening their love and fascination with Jewish culture, leading them to a completely new level of awareness, namely to the point where the borders that divide the Jewish and Polish worlds were becoming blurred. This was our common world; a world where nobody would ask who you were, where you came from, or why. It was enough to be present and belong to the rebirth of the Polish-Jewish community.

Here my observations can be put simply: following the emergence of Jewish culture in Kazimierz, something more important also emerged — Jewish life — with its whole diversity, contradictions and continual desire to express its own rebuilt status quo. Of course the scale of this new Jewish life can't be compared to what it was before the Shoah. This would be a useless comparison. But there is a point in discussing what this new world is like.

### An actor in history

I have been directing the Jewish Culture Festival for 26 years. What does this time mean? Everything. And yet nothing. It might sound strange, but I have become an actor in Poland's history. My face is very Polish, and no matter how hard I try to change it, it will always be my face. So how is it possible that a *goy*, born in eastern Poland to a family that is just like any other Polish family, transformed into a Jew?



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

Was it simple coincidence or destiny? Neither. Ever since it happened, I have carried a *dybbuk*<sup>1</sup> in me, this *daimonion*<sup>2</sup> of everyday life leads my mind and my heart. I do this because this is my choice; because this is my life and this is how I want to live it. There is nothing unusual in it except the fact that it is unusual in itself. However, it is also not enough to say, "I have made a choice." And although I am under the impression that this choice was made somewhat for me, or even against me, that moment, that murky moment of my life during which this choice was made, was also a beginning of a difficult yet bright and beautiful road that led me to good, even if, at times, it took the form of evil. Since then I have found the meaning of the words of Rabbi Nachman of Braclaw, who once said: "A man goes through life on a very narrow bridge. The most important is not to be afraid." And: "You are there, where your thoughts are. Make sure that your thoughts are where you would want them to be."

1 In Jewish mythology, a *dybbuk* is a malicious spirit believed to be the dislocated soul of a dead person. Although the term appears in the sixteenth century, it was not until Ansky's play *The Dybbuk* (first staged in Warsaw in 1920) that the term was popularized in literary circles.

2 In the Old Testament, a natural spirit that is less than divine but greater than human; in the New Testament, more of an evil spirit or demon. Socrates used it as a reference to an "inner voice."



I direct this festival because I was very lucky. I was born in Poland. In fact, this is one of the very few things that I have had no influence on. I was born in Poland, a strange country with a complex history; a nation at one time noble and another time wicked. Or both at the same time. And ever since I realized how difficult this Polish heritage is, I have also realized that I am doomed to constantly confront it. In this unequal confrontation with history, myths, stereotypes, prejudices and the whole plethora of Polish vices and weaknesses, I turn for succor to Polish writers: Cyprian Kamil Norwid, Czesław Miłosz, Witold Gombrowicz and Aleksander Wat. I come from a country of rabbis and *tzadiks*<sup>3</sup>, *geonim*<sup>4</sup> and *melameds*<sup>5</sup>; a country of Jewish thinkers, writers, bankers, architects, painters, doctors, shoemakers, tailors, directors, film producers, politicians, scientists and Jewish soldiers; from a country of pious and good people.

I come from a country of anti-Semites and people of good and pure hearts; a country of blackmailers; a country with the biggest number of the Righteous Among the Nations. It is a country where the anti-Semites would sacrifice their life for the life of others, and a country where the Jewish police killed its own brethren. I come from a country of the belligerent Father Tadeusz Rydzyk<sup>6</sup> and the country of John Paul II; from a country where anti-Jewish graffiti is painted on the walls of synagogues, and a country where thousands of non-Jews study Jewish history, culture and religion; from the country of German death camps and the country of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising; from the country of Jewish ghetto fighters Emanuel Ringelblum, Mordechai Anielewicz and Marek Edelman; as well as Polish partisans Jan Karski, Jan Nowak-Jeziorański and Władysław Bartoszewski.

3 From Hebrew, “righteous one.”

4 Plural of *gaon*, a term for an eminent Jewish scholar; from the original title for the directors of two prominent Talmudic academies in Babylonia from the 6th to the 11th centuries.

5 From Hebrew for “teacher.” In the Talmudic period, a respected teacher of children.

6 A controversial Polish Catholic priest, founder and director of the ultraconservative Radio Maryja station.



2009: Janusz Makuch and Tad Taube onstage at the closing night concert of the Jewish Culture Festival, in Kraków.

I come from the country of the Jewish Parliament — the Council of Four Lands (Va’ad Arbà Aratsot), from the country of countless shtetls, yeshivas, Chasidic courts; in a country of Jewish autonomy and pluralism, but also a country of *numerus clausus*<sup>7</sup>, bench ghettos<sup>8</sup>, pogroms and mass murder. I come from a country of anti-Semitic madness where Jews were burned alive in rural barns. And I come from a country of Christian mercy where Jews were hidden in rural barns. I come from a country of blood and ashes, with the shade of synagogues and churches; from a country where, in one long night, Germans gassed, burned and murdered almost six million people. What I have found here is my heritage — mixed languages, the same God in different forms, memory of the past, pride and shame, painful love and sturdy faith that no matter what happens, life goes on and is worth living. It is the life of here and now that is one of the most beautiful gifts.

7 A method used to limit the number of students from a particular group or class who could study at a university. In Poland during the Interwar Period, it was particularly used in an anti-Semitic fashion to limit the number of Jews in desirable departments. For example, according to YIVO, in 1923–24 there were still 1,402 Jewish medical students, forming 30.2% of the total. In 1926–27 their number dropped to 698 (18.6%), and in 1935–36 Jewish medical students formed only 13.8% of the total number. In the faculty of law their percentage in 1923–24 was 24.6%, while in 1935–36 it was only 12.5%.

8 Segregated seating areas for Jews in university classrooms, begun in 1935. Failure to comply with the segregated seating meant expulsion.



## Only in Poland

I was born in Poland. I am a Gentile, and for the last 26 years I have been the creator and director of probably the biggest festival of Jewish culture in the world. And this is possible only here — in Poland! Why do I do it? Because I have a sense of responsibility for the good and evil that has been present in our community in its almost thousand-year history.

I am doing it because we were born here and we are the heirs to history, not just parts of it but all of it. And yet it does not mean that we are the slaves of history. History can be confronted and its absolute determinism can be questioned. It just happened that history seems to be the absolute area of the devil's work with whom we may, indeed, be powerless but not necessarily incapacitated. I do this through the Festival of Jewish Culture.

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.

I have been organizing this festival because, with all my powers, I am trying to prove that being a Pole in this country may also mean being a Jew, and being a Jew may mean in this country being a Pole. Just as it was centuries ago (and for centuries), this country was inhabited by those whom we call “Polish Jews.” As someone who has been living here for 52 years, I am a “Jewish Pole” — and this completes this historical image. I know that there are more like me out there. For me there is no contradiction here. In a sense my festival revives memory — a common memory. And it blesses the future — a common future. And in this sense, for me — a Pole — the heritage of Jewish culture is my own heritage.

It may be worth remembering that the first festival was organized in 1988, a year before the collapse of Communism. It was organized by two non-Jews<sup>9</sup>. It is worth bearing in mind that the

9 Krzysztof Gierat and I.



Janusz Makuch on stage introducing a concert of the Jewish Culture Festival. *Photo by Wojciech Karliński.*

majority of the countless cultural initiatives undertaken to commemorate the Jewish presence in Poland, but also to commemorate the Holocaust of the Jewish Nation, are non-Jewish initiatives. For me this is completely natural, logical, justified and necessary. Yes, as we — Poles — admit that Jews have made and still continue to make a fundamental contribution to the development

of Polish — and more broadly European — culture, as we admit that Jews have always been an integral and organic part of Poland's history and culture, then, after the Shoah, we are especially obliged to take care of this Jewish heritage, and to constantly commemorate it.

I do not do it to brood over death! Civilizations blossom and civilizations fall. As Kohelet (also known as Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament) says: “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth forever” (Kohelet 1.4); and further: “Cast thy bread upon the waters, for thou shalt find it after many days” (Kohelet 11.1). I know this and out of this knowledge comes my hope that life always wins over death. Of course, I can see the most horrid uniqueness of the Holocaust. My heart is embossed with Kaddish<sup>10</sup> and El Malei Rachamim<sup>11</sup>, and I pray for all those who were gassed

10 Jewish prayer recited as a ritual of mourning.

11 Ashkenazi funeral prayer.



The closing night concert of the Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków draws over 20,000 revelers to Szeroka Street in Kazimierz, the historical heart of Jewish Kraków. *Photo by Paweł Mazur.*

to death, killed and burned. I still carry with me the roll of poems written by Paul Celan<sup>12</sup>, and don't believe that I will ever be able to rebuild my faith in man's goodness as I believe that man is inherently evil, and I avoid, like the plague, visits to Nazi death camps. I avoid kitschy nostalgia, lamenting over the lost world, and conferences about killings, when every day, worldwide, thousands of people die.

I am constantly fascinated with the energy of Jewish life, the one before and after the Shoah. I know that six years of the Shoah does not mean and cannot mean the demise of Jewish civilization. Six terrible years cannot overshadow a thousand years of life!

I have been doing the festival because I believe it is a relatively smart way to fight anti-Semitism. Its effectiveness may not be the greatest, but nobody else has yet come up with anything spectacular in this area. Anti-Semitism is omnipresent, regardless of the geographical longitude, as it is a state of mind that cannot cope with its own self

and the world around it. I have been trying to create, for Jews and non-Jews alike, an opportunity for an intellectual, spiritual, emotional and historical discovery; to build good every day.

I have also been doing this because I love Israel. I love its air, soil, sky, water and the desert. And its people. I am a Polish Zionist. And out of all the cities I have been to, the dearest one to my heart is Jerusalem.

I have been doing this because I still love Kazimierz. Kazimierz has been changing; the owners have changed and the ones who are here today tend to be more focused on daily profit than Jewish heritage — it is what it is. I have stopped complaining; because in Kazimierz, history still provokes a reflection of the past. Indeed it is an impressive past and worth preserving. But much more is the future — one that I cannot foresee. As nobody could foresee that Jewish life would be reborn in Kazimierz when prophecies were once made that Kazimierz would remain a symbol of Jewish absence, how can we foresee what will happen in ten or fifty years?

I do it because I believe in God. I love, desire and pray that this will last until my breath and heart stops. I believe that it is worth it and that this is the way it should be. *Ani ma'amin!*<sup>13</sup> ■

<sup>13</sup> Hebrew, "I believe."

<sup>12</sup> Jewish poet, 1920-1970, born in Bukovina in the Kingdom of Romania (now Ukraine). His parents refused to leave the country at their son's insistence and died in a forced labor camp in 1942; Celan was imprisoned in a different camp until 1944. His most famous work of poetry is "Todesfuge" ("Death Fugue"), a depiction of concentration camp life.



# Mosaic

by Eleonora Bergman



A quarter-century after the fall of Communism, I think that we are still in search of Jewish ways of life in Poland, but twenty-five 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.<sup>1</sup>

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

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 emigrated to Australia, the other to Israel) and my father's cousin's two sons (they also went to Israel; one is still alive).

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),<sup>2</sup> and the Zionist factor was just me. (The words *Jew* and *Jewish* were not used officially in Poland at that time.)

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



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 1,200 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 information 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.

My professional life began and evolved in Communist-dominated secular institutes where



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

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-Shtime*), 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,<sup>3</sup> and then he grew deeply involved in the monument project at the Umschlagplatz, which was completed in 1988.

My father was active during the 1980s in his contacts with YIVO, the New York-based Yiddish Scientific Institute,<sup>4</sup> exchanging letters with Dina

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 visnshaftlekher 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.”



Abramowicz, their famous librarian. He also corresponded with editors of *Yiddische Kultur*<sup>5</sup> and published articles there. Also starting at the time of Solidarity, he decided to read more about the Holocaust, and especially about the fate of the Jews of his beloved native Vilno (Vilna, Vilne, Vilnius). He read Mark Dworzecki's diary<sup>6</sup> 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 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.

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 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 Reizen'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 twenty-fifth volume of *Studies in the History of the Soviet Union and Central Europe* in January 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 ar-

ticle 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 Bronisław Taraszkiewicz,<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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

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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.

7 An interwar Communist Belorussian activist in Poland.

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



called me a *Yidishe 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.<sup>9</sup> The officer had been right; it felt as if I were departing



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

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

**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.**

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

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 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

<sup>9</sup> 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.



some of Y.L. Peretz's<sup>10</sup> stories, which he helped me translate. 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,<sup>11</sup> 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, started to collect files for every Jewish community in prewar Poland, made a 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



2014: Eleonora Bergman working at the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute.

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 Ronald S. 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 now, more than twenty-five 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. ■

10 Yiddish author Yitzhak Leib Peretz (1852-1915), born in Zamość, 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.

Expats: *Foreigners who came, stayed, and made Poland their home*

## An American in Poland: Helping to Build a Modern Jewish Identity

by Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich



When I came to Poland for the first time in an official capacity in 1991, 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 Nożyk Synagogue in Warsaw is now about 700, 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 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, in her early twenties, discovered 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.

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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, 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 *ulpan*.) 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.



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



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 thirteen rabbis: seven are traditional, three are Reform, and three are Chabad emissaries. One of the traditional rabbis is 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 240 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 Kraków, Katowice, Łódź and Wrocław; of the Reform rabbis, two are in Warsaw, and the other in Kraków. There also is a new *Zionist kollel* in Warsaw where five 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 & 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

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

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.

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

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



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.



2013: Rabbi Michael Schudrich celebrating Chanukah with children in Warsaw.

ten years, I have found increased sensitivity to our tradition 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 Leżańsk, where the great Hasidic master, Rabbi Elimelech is buried. Thousands of Hasidim and other Jews visit Leżańsk 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 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 toward a new Poland and are proud to be part of the



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

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.



2007: At the groundbreaking of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Left to right: Tad Taube, Archbishop Kazimierz Nycz, Rabbi Michael Schudrich. *Photo by Wojtek Radwański.*

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 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. ■



# Finding the *Pintele Yid*

by Helise Lieberman



Photo by Paul Milne.

**A**s Poland celebrates twenty-five years of democracy, and my family and I mark our twentieth anniversary of living and working in Warsaw, I marvel at what has been achieved in just one generation. In 1994, my husband, our five-year-old daughter and I came to Warsaw from New York City for a two-year work contract. We decided to stay, because we realized that we were invested and committed to Jewish life in Poland. Most of all, our Jewish family life was developing in ways we could never have imagined. For each of us individually and as a family, our sensibilities as Jews were enriched beyond expectation.

The Jewish people wandered in the desert for forty years after the exodus from Egypt, not because they were lost, but because the transition from slavery to freedom is never a straight and clear path. In Poland, people overthrew an authoritarian government and won freedom for the entire nation, including Poland's Jewish citizens. Suddenly Polish Jews, long intimidated and prohibited from embracing their Jewishness, could choose their cultural and religious identities, no longer predetermined by a repressive regime. They could create community, unfettered, openly celebrate their traditions, and transmit their heritage to their children. The first "post-slavery" generation was learning to lead a Jewish community and forge a Jewish future.

Looking back over my family's twenty years in Poland, I have had the privilege to participate in breathing new life into Poland's Jewish community alongside Polish Jews who had survived the Holocaust, together with their children and

grandchildren. Polish Jews emerged from the "desert" after Communism was dismantled in 1989. Today's leaders and community members are mostly the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Polish Holocaust survivors; they grew up under Communist rule, and some were at the forefront of the democratic opposition in the 1970s and '80s. These activists rejoiced at the news of the Round Table discussions in the spring of 1989 that precipitated the June 4, 1989 democratic elections, the first in Poland since before World War II and the first in the entire Soviet Bloc. Poland led the way for the subsequent fall of the Berlin Wall and the lifting of the Iron Curtain.

At that time I, like most of my American Jewish contemporaries who had been deeply involved in the Soviet Jewry movement, was not aware of the existence of Jewish life in Poland let alone in the rest of the Soviet Bloc. It was as if a no-man's land lay between what was then West Germany and the Soviet Union. And even though my grandfather's family came from what is now the Polish city of Bielsko-Biała, and the oil paintings by my great uncle, who had perished in the Shoah, were considered family treasures, I had grown up in a generation that described Poland as the "old country" — a place where Jews came from but no longer lived in, the mythic source of a mixture of accents, assorted recipes and bittersweet stories, preserved by those who had packed and taken with them all of the best of Eastern European Jewish heritage and left nothing behind.



The impact that the political events of 1989 would have on Jewish life in Eastern Europe could not have been foreseen at the time. The newly reborn democratic Poland, after centuries of thwarted attempts, wars and occupations, embraced the revival of its Jewish communities and a return to its multicultural roots. The country's

I often pinch myself. How privileged I have been to not only witness this extraordinary and unanticipated transition, but to participate in it: first as the principal of the Lauder Morasha Day School, on behalf of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation; as the first director of the Education Center of POLIN Museum of the History of

I am often asked, “What has changed the most since you arrived in 1994?” I answer that it is I who have changed the most.

commitment to democratic values and civil society made it possible for Jews to reassert their own identities and create communities. After years of living in the shadows of the Shoah and decades of Communism, after the Jewish world had all but given up on Polish Jewry, Jews in Poland began to take their rightful place at the global Jewish roundtable. They did not allow themselves to be defined by others. They did not define themselves by the past or by who they were not, but rather by who they were and continue to be, with respect for the past informing their present and helping them plan for the future. They identified naturally with *klal yisrael* and fully engaged in Jewish life in Poland.

Polish Jews; as a consultant to the Rothschild Foundation Europe, the Westbury Group and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; and currently as the director of the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation. There is no doubt that extraordinary things — miraculous things — have been achieved in Poland through the efforts of many passionate and dedicated individuals and with the support of committed sponsors, foundations and agencies from around the world. Each position I have held has been much more than a professional post. Although very different from one another, each has given me entree into the past, keys to the present, glimpses into the future.



2007: Jewish educator Helise Lieberman leads a community discussion at the Klezmer Hois in Kraków.  
Photo by Wojtek Radwański.



2013: Helise Lieberman leading a tour of Jewish Warsaw as part of the Taube Jewish Heritage Tours program.

I am often asked, “What has changed the most since you arrived in 1994?” I answer that it is I who have changed the most. My experiences in Poland over the last two decades have reshaped my Jewish sensibility and daily life, as well as my understanding and appreciation for Jewish history, tradition and culture. As the director of the Taube Center, I have a unique vantage point. I am immersed in experiential learning, encountering Polish Jewish heritage daily, exploring the complex thousand-year Polish Jewish narrative and participating in current Polish Jewish life. These opportunities, combined with my professional and personal interactions with Jews from around the world, leave me more strongly committed than ever to a Polish Jewish future.

Perhaps it was fortunate that I was not well-versed in the historical timeline when we arrived. Believing that everything was possible, I focused on the future rather than the past. After all, Jewish communities throughout the centuries have re-emerged in seemingly inhospitable lands. And, more importantly, my mentors and partners here in Poland, even with their doubts and concerns, have had complete faith that a Jewish community could grow again in Polish soil.

Through the Taube Center, I have had the honor of leading and learning simultaneously as we craft programs and initiatives to support, broaden and share Poland’s Jewish renaissance with fellow Polish citizens of all ages and backgrounds and with Jews from around the world. Through the Taube Jewish Heritage Tour Program, which we launched in 2008, my colleagues and I meet guests from around the world, inviting them to explore Jewish Poland, sharing complex narratives and engaging both native Poles and visitors in meaningful, often thought-provoking, conversations. In discovering their own family roots or meeting with Polish Jews of different generations, visitors are often inspired to examine their own Jewish lives and identities. For if here in Poland, in spite of the Holocaust and decades of Communism, one elects to identify and express oneself as a Jew — then why not anywhere else in the Jewish world?

In reclaiming their Polish Jewish heritage and engaging in the diversity of Jewish life offered today, Poles with Jewish roots are crafting multiple identities as citizens of Poland, of Europe and of Israel. There is no doubt that the *pintele yid* — the spark of Jewish life that endures in



spite of overwhelming odds — is in full display as Polish Jews establish Jewish homes, create new genres of Jewish food, art and music, author books, and direct theater and films, having become the teachers of their own children and grandchildren as well as their peers, both Jewish and non-Jewish. And increasingly as Jews from America, Israel, Australia, England and other countries take the opportunity to visit the New Poland, Polish Jews are experiencing a growing connection to the global Jewish community and becoming true partners in Jewish peoplehood.

Not long ago, the Taube Center was approached by young adults in their twenties, those for whom the repression of Communism is only a fading childhood memory, who asked us to help

learning about Polish Jewish history and heritage and contemporary Polish Jewish life, while also exploring how to transmit their knowledge and experience to their own students, community members and visitors from other countries. The participants passionately debate the challenges of Jewish heritage preservation and explore new expressions of Polish Jewish culture. They are committed to uncovering the past and to creating a multicultural future in Poland in which Jewish life can thrive.

Mi Dor Le Dor is among the fruits of the many seeds planted in 1989. I am an eternal optimist, yet I could not have imagined in 1994 that today 240 children would be enrolled in Warsaw's Jewish day school, that Limmud

Like most of my American Jewish contemporaries who had been deeply involved in the Soviet Jewry movement, I was not aware of the existence of Jewish life in Poland, let alone in the rest of the Soviet Bloc. It was as if a no-man's land lay between what was then West Germany and the Soviet Union.

them connect meaningfully with their Polish Jewish heritage. For various understandable reasons, their family stories had not been handed down, the *niggunim* (Yiddish, “melodies”) had not been sung, and there was no family *kiddish* cup stored in paper at the back of the closet. If Jewish heritage — that which we inherit and pass on — was not available to these young Polish Jews, how could they transmit a living heritage to their children and grandchildren, how could they connect to their own Ashkenazi roots in the wider Jewish world?

In response, we at the Taube Center created a unique initiative, the Mi Dor Le Dor Jewish Heritage Educators' Leadership and Training Program. Launched in 2012 with seven participants, the program is now in its third year of providing a ten-month program in “engaged Jewish learning” most akin to the Wexner Heritage Program. With the support of the Rothschild Foundation (Hanadiv) Europe, the Koret Foundation and the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, participants from Lublin, Łódź, Kraków, Szczecin and Warsaw are

Poland would attract 1,000 participants annually from all around Poland, that different streams of Jewish religious practices would take root, that thriving JCCs operate in Kraków and in Warsaw, that more than 650 young people have participated in Taglit-Poland's Birthright trip to Israel, that Moishe House would choose to host its international conference in Warsaw (where it has an active house), or that POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which presents the thousand-year history of Polish Jews, opened in 2014 on the site of the Warsaw ghetto.

Who would have been able to predict that every summer more than 20,000 people from Poland and around the world fill Kraków's Szeroka Square to enjoy the closing night concert of the Jewish Culture Festival, that Jewish and Holocaust Studies departments have opened in major Polish universities, that books about Polish Jewish history and tradition abound, or that thousands of volunteers around the country — both Jews and non-Jews — serve as the dedicated caretakers of Polish Jewish heritage and culture?



Through my personal and professional experiences in Poland, I am constantly challenged to take a closer look, and I feel obligated to encourage others to do the same: to rethink and reexamine how they view and understand Jewish life in Poland, past and present, to connect with their own family heritage, and to include Polish Jews

of *nakhes* (Yiddish: “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 suc-

Poland was a place where Jews came from but no longer lived in, the mythic source of a mixture of accents, assorted recipes and bittersweet stories, preserved by those who had packed and taken with them all of the best of Eastern European Jewish heritage and left nothing behind.

as integral participants in Jewish peoplehood. I have come to expect and accept contradictions, including conflicting narratives and perceptions, sometimes built on myths and generalizations, and have learned that understanding and resolution is often to be found reading between the lines while observing what is right in front of us. Yes, it’s complicated, but a profound sense

cees 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.

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, gray and red, or perhaps the sepia tones



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



of old, fading photographs. I, too, would probably have chosen those colors back in 1988. But I have learned since that Jewish life in Poland is multifaceted and multicolored. I have learned that life is not always lived in the extremes of black and white. Grappling with the issues that lie in the gray zones provokes us to think and to challenge misperceptions and preconceptions, but also directs us toward self-discovery and the opportunity to reconnect with the Jewish world through the Polish Jewish prism. In my own journey, it is living and working in the midst of Poland's Jewish past and its revival that has opened me up not only to the many shades of gray but also to the vibrant colors of new possibilities and connections that now characterize Jewish life in the New Poland.

As I was writing this essay, I was asked how my Jewish life might have been different had we not moved to Poland. I am sure that we would have enjoyed a very vibrant Jewish life, but I don't think I would have come to appreciate the complexity of the Jewish world, nor the diversity



2013: Helise Lieberman at the Irena Sendler Memorial Award Ceremony held in the auditorium of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

experience the Jewish world from an array of experiences and perspectives. I have learned many valuable lessons during Poland's transition to

In reclaiming their Polish Jewish heritage and engaging in the diversity of Jewish life offered today, Poles with Jewish roots are crafting multiple identities as citizens of Poland, of Europe and of Israel. There is no doubt that the *pintele yid* – the spark of Jewish life that endures in spite of overwhelming odds — is in full display.

of Jewish identities. I carry two tangible passports with pride: one issued in the United States and one in the Republic of Poland. On June 4 of this year, when Poland celebrated twenty-five years of democracy, I was extremely proud to belong to and represent both countries. I also carry a third passport: my Jewish one. It allows me to cross communal borders, travel through time zones — historical and geographical — and

democracy, chief among them that we all have a *pintele yid* in us. I now proudly wear multifocal Jewish lenses, and while there are transitional areas that are blurred or blended, I have no intention of altering the prescription. If anything, I am more curious than ever about the Jewish lives that require a closer look, more attention, and the opportunity to share my vision and perceptions. ■

# The Third Generation: *Those raised in the shadow of the Iron Curtain as Communism fell*

## The Polish Phenomenon

by Magdalena Matuszewska



**A**s I am writing these words in the year 2014, it is almost the tenth anniversary of when I started working for the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation. Before that, I was an assistant at the Center for Jewish Studies of the Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, and at the Hebrew Studies Department at the University of Warsaw I taught Hebrew. I hope to obtain my doctoral degree in Jewish Studies soon. None of these possibilities are anything I could have imagined in the 1980s when I was growing up in Warsaw — gray and distressed by Communism.

The reality of the 1980s reached into the lives of children like myself, with propaganda at school, newspeak, a shortage of basic items, ration cards, curfews.

On September 1, 1939 Germany attacked Poland, and on September 17th the country was invaded by the Soviet Union. Poland, after its deep involvement in World War II and fighting in various battlefields in Europe and the Middle East, was left behind the Iron Curtain by its Western allies, England and France, with which it had a military alliance in case of war. This new status was not accepted by many Poles. Those fighting against the newly imposed Communist system showed enormous courage and paid a very high price, especially in the 1940s and '50s. Poland of

the 1970-80s was still trapped under the regime that was developing an official false narrative of history while imprisoning and harassing its citizens — from the organized underground of the *Solidarność* (Solidarity movement) to the Catholic Church, in which the anti-Communist opposition found shelter, to ordinary Polish citizens who would not accept the system. The reality of the 1980s reached into the lives of children like myself, with propaganda at school, newspeak, a shortage of basic items, ration cards, curfews. As my father was a “private initiative” (a term in the Socialist lexicon that meant “businessman” — not

perceived favorably by the authorities), my parents had difficulties enrolling me in kindergarten. Political realities were holding down people’s aspirations and enthusiasm.

Jewish issues were rarely part of the public discourse; there was very little opportunity for Jewish affiliation, and very few sources (not to mention places) for Jewish education. The Communists had pressured a significant percentage of Poles with Jewish roots to emigrate in the purges of March '68. All this in a country that, before World War II, had some 3.5 million



Jewish citizens with a history that stretched back to the Middle Ages. While Jews had suffered pogroms in other countries and were expelled from England and Spain, Polish rulers had historically welcomed Jews and granted them special privileges. The Communists, though, did not find this tradition a subject of their interest, though paradoxically there were Jews in the Polish Communist structure.

Looking back, I can say that neither the tragedies of World War II nor the Jewish issues of my childhood were abstract to me as a girl. Spending time with my grandfather with a number tattooed on his arm and listening to my grandmother's stories from Ravensbruck and Buchenwald, I absorbed their reality as part of my family heritage. Unlike many in the 1980s, my father continued to be attracted by Jewish culture and intrigued by situations like a visit of a group of Chassidim to Góra Kalwaria (Yiddish: Ger). That must have been quite a sight to see in Poland of the 1980s! He was excited to get a copy of *Literatura na Świecie* (Literature in the World) in 1987 that was devoted entirely to the Talmud (an exceptional publication for those times). In the mid '80s I was shown a Jewish cemetery in Kazimierz Dolny (Yiddish: Kuzmir) not far from Lublin, which looked like a scrap of a mysterious world. I didn't know then that in later years that cemetery would become a major focus of my M.A. dissertation.

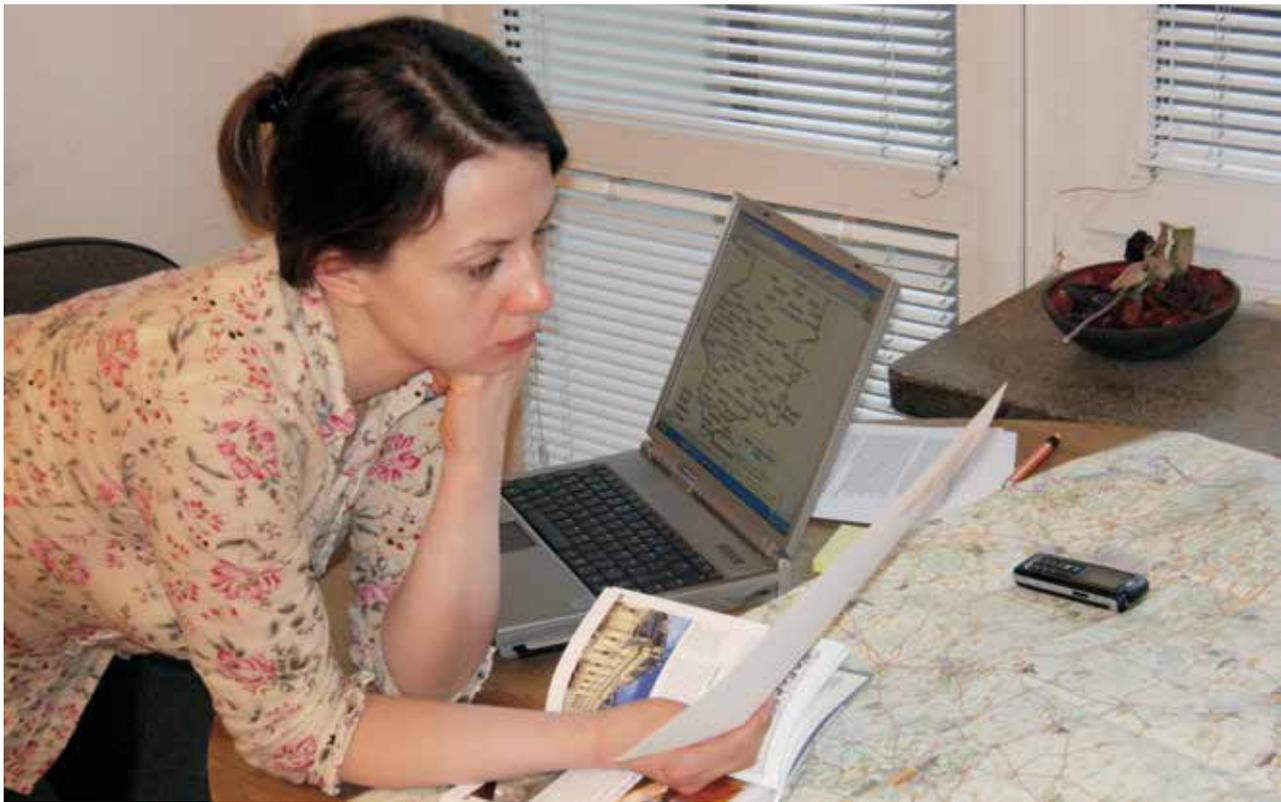
Poles have always been known for their resistance and struggles for independence and freedom. Pope John Paul II breathed a spirit of freedom into peoples' hearts during his pilgrimage to Poland in 1979. One outcome of that historic visit was the founding of Solidarity, a mass social movement fighting for employees' rights, the only one of its kind in the Soviet Bloc of European countries. The number of members reached some 10 million — a quarter of all the country's citizens! Eventually it led to the world-shaking fall of Communism. Poland's semi-free elections in June 1989 evoked tremendous enthusiasm in the nation and offered hope for a better life. Opening the country to the world, linking Poland with its pre-Communist heritage and allowing people to have free choice



Magdalena Matuszewska delivering a paper during the European Association for Israeli Studies Conference, Munich 2012.

offered rich new perspectives in every field from daily life to academia, religion, the economy, history and modern technology. For me, as a teenager in 1989, the fall of Communism meant I would no longer be obliged to study abroad as planned. Suddenly there was the possibility of attending the first private high school in Warsaw with some of the classes actually held in English. Only later did I learn that changes should have been conducted differently — the Communist system had not been entirely eradicated and its remnants were still, in various ways, in power. A disastrous economic situation and difficult reforms began to eviscerate Poles' enthusiasm. The Communist leaders, privatizing national firms, quickly adapted themselves to the new reality, creating a new post-Communist business class.

However complicated the question of post-1989 transformations and their impact on both government and society has been, changes in some fields are apparent. Poland's democratic transition has had a profoundly deep and multi-faceted influence on Polish Jewish relations. In terms of political changes, the most important



Magdalena Matuszewska at the office of the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation.

was the restoration of full diplomatic ties between Poland and Israel in February 1990 after a 23-year hiatus. After numerous visits by officials in both countries, a decision was made by the Prime Ministers to conduct annual inter-governmental consultations — the first took place in Jerusalem in 2011. For the last few years, Poland has been called the strongest ally of Israel in Europe, since the involvement of the late President of Poland Lech Kaczyński. Previously, when he was Mayor of Warsaw, Kaczyński donated land in the center of the city for the construction of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. An important department of the Israeli Embassy is the Righteous Department, which coordinates issues connected to the honorary title “Righteous Among the Nations.” Poland has the largest number of awardees — almost 6,400 — each one represented by a tree planted at the Yad Vashem Institute. The heroism is even more astonishing when we understand that Poland and Ukraine were the only countries in German-occupied Europe in which any support to a Jew meant a death sentence not only to the one helping but also to his/her entire family.

When I began my courses in the Hebrew Studies Department of the University of Warsaw in the mid 1990s, even though it was a few years after the fall of Communism, the rebirth of Jewish life and culture, although visible, had not yet begun to flourish. Although the first Jewish or Hebrew studies were created in Poland before World War II, most perished in the Holocaust together with their creators and others were closed throughout the Communist period with the exception of the Jewish Historical Institute (operating since 1947) and the Cathedral of Semitic Studies at the University of Warsaw (since 1950). The latter was the forerunner of the Hebrew Studies Department from which I graduated in 2002. In 1986 Jagiellonian University in Kraków established its Center for Jewish Studies, and after 1989 several Jewish Studies departments opened — in Wrocław, Poznań and Lublin to name a few.

I started my Hebrew studies with deep interest, encouraged by my father, even though I was out of step with my peers who were choosing the obvious fields connected with the new system: economics, marketing or European studies. In my chosen field there were few prospects for occupational



development and very little possibility for scholarships, research fellowships or student exchange programs. But after Poland joined the European Union in 2004, new educational opportunities arose. With the support of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was selected to participate in a Hebrew language course (*ulpan*) at Haifa University. After that, supported by the Taube Foundation, I conducted a research project at Hebrew University in Jerusalem for my Ph.D. thesis: the study of an unpublished manuscript (housed at the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw) that is a collection of Hebrew poetry from the Ottoman Empire. As a young girl I had been interested in poetry, so I was pleased to revive my early enthusiasm.

During my academic teaching post at the Center for Jewish Studies, University of Maria Curie-Skłodowska in Lublin, there was an organized effort to reintroduce Hebrew to academia in this region of Poland. The language, which was familiar to some 40 percent of Lublin inhabitants before the war, had been almost totally erased in the decades after the Holocaust. When Hebrew courses were announced — open to anyone interested — my first class was literally bursting at the seams. As I began speaking to the class I saw more and more people arriving and suddenly realized that I was talking through the open door to students gathering in the corridor! One of the students (non-Jewish as most of them were) told me later that she came to the course because she wanted to be able to read the inscriptions in the neglected Jewish cemetery in her little town (a former shtetl) in Eastern Poland. She was not an exception. I met many enthusiasts like her during my post. Poland had only needed the spark of democracy to give people a chance to discover their identity, personal or social, in a new way: whether in relation to the neglected heritage of anti-Communist fighters or the prewar legacy of the Polish Republic; whether in relation to one's own Jewish roots — often newly uncovered — or in relation to Jewish neighbors past or present.

From my perspective, the gradual revival of Jewish life and culture in Poland has developed on a scale that was not anticipated. Today's Jewish communities not only exist but



2013: Magdalena Matuszewska, left, and Shana Penn, Executive Director of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, at a Shabbat dinner in Warsaw held at the National Opera House, celebrating the soft opening of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews on the 70th anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

are growing in both Orthodox congregations and Reform ones such as Etz Chaim, Beit Warszawa, or Beit Kraków. Many young people now feel comfortable with — and proud of — their identities as Polish Jews. Dynamic organizations like the Jewish Community Centers in Kraków and Warsaw have transformed Poland into a place of inspiring Jewish continuity. Cultural organizations, including the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland and the Galicia Jewish Museum, have been celebrating Polish Jewish heritage by offering lectures, educational programs and materials, Jewish heritage tours, and meetings between Polish and Israeli youth. And POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which opened to the world on October 28, 2014 on the former site of the Warsaw ghetto, tells the history of a thousand years of Jewish presence on Polish lands. As expressed by Professor Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Director of the Museum's Core Exhibition Team, the narrative is based on mapping the past, recognizing the present, and building a future, all based on the understanding that we honor those who died by remembering how they lived.

Thousands of people — non-Jews, Polish Jews and the Jewish diaspora from around the world — participate in festivals in Poland that



promote Jewish culture, a phenomenon initiated in 1988 with the first Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków. This great Jewish fiesta that lasts for ten days at the turn of June and July annually is one of the biggest in the world and has inspired Jewish festivals in Wrocław, Białystok, Łódź, Warsaw, Chmielnik, Gdańsk ... the list seems endless! In Warsaw there are two Jewish film festivals, both attracting a wide audience. The Polish book market also reflects this flowering of Jewish culture, with probably one of the highest

has voiced his appreciation of the breadth of popularity of Jewish culture among the Polish people and the enthusiasm with which it is embraced.

It seems to me that today the challenge is to strengthen the message by educating the world in some truths about Poland: that *Armia Krajowa* (Polish Home Army), of which my great grandfather was a member, had strong anti-*shmaltzovnik* regulations (executing those who were betraying Jews to Germans during World War II); that

When Hebrew courses were announced — open to anyone interested — my first class was literally bursting at the seams. As I began speaking to the class I saw more and more people arriving and suddenly realized that I was talking through the open door to students gathering in the corridor!

percentages of publications on Jewish themes in the world: from Holocaust studies to Judaism to translations of contemporary Israeli writers. The transformations of the last decades in Poland have uncovered something quite surprising to American Jews: the extensive involvement of non-Jews — Catholics and others — as co-creators of the rebirth of Jewish life and culture. Even the Catholic Church in Poland shows its support by organizing an annual Day of Judaism, an initiative that takes place in only two countries in the world: Poland and Italy.

What the international community has difficulty understanding is that Poland is different from the stereotypes people carry in their heads regarding both the past and the present. Yes there were black chapters in Polish Jewish relations. Yet contemporary Poland has done much to increase public awareness and reflection about these. Jonathan Ornstein, director of the JCC Kraków, says that there is no country in Europe where citizens are more knowledgeable about Jewish culture or more welcoming to Jews; no European city where it is more comfortable to be a Jew in public than Kraków. Similarly, the Israeli Ambassador to Poland, Hon. Zvi Rav-Ner,

there were no Polish concentration camps, only German camps in occupied Poland; and that Poles and Jews share a thousand-year-long common legacy.

In 2005, I had the privilege of joining Shana Penn in building the Taube Foundation office in Warsaw to carry out the goals of the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland. In the beginning, the office was in my apartment. Today, with an enlarged team in a modern section of the Jewish Historical Institute Gallery, we run educational programs, make grants, provide customized heritage tours for individuals, families and groups, do networking and offer consultations. In collaboration with our U.S. colleagues we share a common vision of Poland as a powerful place to discuss Jewish memory, identity, loss and continuity as well as a common mission to build bridges in Polish Jewish relations. After meeting with many American visitors I also understand and appreciate how important it is to build connections between American Jews and the living heritage of Ashkenazi Jewry, so much of which is rooted in Poland. I feel honored to be involved and contributing to this inspirational and unique Jewish revival in Poland, a historic phenomenon not to be missed. ■



# From Stalin and Hitler to the Remuh

by Daniela Malec

**T**he 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 see I was getting politically involved. During my Russian lessons (1989



Daniela Malec in Tel Aviv. Photo by Julia Maria Koszewska.

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.

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.

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 post-war Poland. I was disappointed when the other attendees looked at me with the kind of pity reserved for orphaned children.

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.

**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.**

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



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

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 Kraków, 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.

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 Powązkowski 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 Kraków 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 (PUSŻ) was also formed. Neither I, nor my friend, nor my parents had any contact with these, however. The word-of-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



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

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 Kraków (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 Kraków, 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 Kraków'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 Kraków, things went very quickly. I was introduced to the community, met its oldest members, celebrated my first Chanukah, 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 Kraków, 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 2003, during a Birthright Taglit trip to Israel, 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 Kraków – and beyond. The young community drew in foreign funders and many well-wishers and convinced them that the development of Jewish life in Kraków was worth investing in.

Now, as a result of all of these activities, we have a Jewish Community Center in Kraków, which has a Sunday school for children, various educational courses, lectures, meetings and also



Rabbi Boaz Pash and Daniela Malec leading Chanukah celebrations for the Jewish community in Kraków.  
*Photo by Mariusz Frej.*

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 Kraków for years, as well as a kosher shop and restaurant. Life in Kraków's Kazimierz in no way resembles what it was before the war or 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 Kraków. Over time I discovered that this wasn't the case and like-minded groups had existed at various times before us. In Kraków, a similar young group had met in the early '90s, and although they were 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.



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 the Remuh, in whose Kraków 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. June 4, 2009

### Today, June 4, 2014

Five years since I wrote the above essay, I'm sitting in my home in the hip Florentin neighborhood of Tel Aviv. After graduating from Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem in 2008,

Discovering my Jewishness will always be an experience akin to retrieving a sunken ship full of gold, reclaiming a lost treasure, treasure that had been taken from my family by force.

I decided to apply for Israeli citizenship (“make aliyah”), based on the Right of Return and following similar decisions made by some family members in 1958. So here I am, Israeli, Tel Avivian, living a few minutes’ walk from a Mediterranean beach, surrounded not just by countless coffee shops, restaurants and nightclubs but also by a good choice of synagogues of different prayer style and denominations. True, most of the synagogues in Florentin do not operate every day, most restaurants are not strictly kosher — this city is liberal, mostly secular, progressive and cosmopolitan — but when it comes to a choice of kosher foods, the options for Jewish learning, the choice of a synagogue community, Tel Aviv is heaven on earth in comparison with any city in Poland. And if I look back on why I made *aliyah*, this was my main motivation — to have more options, more learning, more choices — to have it “easier” and richer when it comes to being a Jew.

I have been employed here by an international interfaith organization (Religions for Peace) to

work with young people of different faiths. I help organize international projects aimed at multi-religious dialogue, actions for peace, protecting the Earth, opposing violence toward women, and many other topics. I love the interfaith spirit of my work. I love visiting temples of other religions. I love hearing the *muezzin* on Fridays when Tel Aviv becomes so quiet before the start of Shabbat and the Muslim call for prayer drifts up to my window from the nearby neighborhood of Jaffa. I am patiently awaiting religious and political peace in the Middle East, as I am awaiting the Messiah.

I visit Poland often and am thrilled to see that the Jewish community there is growing, Jewish Community Centers being built, Jewish books being published in Polish, Jewish weddings taking place, Jewish children being born. The Jewish presence must survive in Poland and its presence must be strong, as this is truly the best answer to

Hitler’s atrocities. I also delight in the fact that more and more non-Jewish Poles express their feelings that the Jewish heritage of Poland is part of their Polish heritage — they are proud of it and want to preserve it, want to include it in building their Polish identity. The work on Jewish revival in Poland is work that builds bridges, heals historical wounds. I am proud and happy that I was actively involved in this revival.

As much as I now define myself as an Israeli, I will always be, even more, an Eastern European Jew, a Polish Jew. Marked by the Holocaust and by Communism — when Jews first lost their entire world and then hid their identity out of fear — discovering my Jewishness will always be an experience akin to retrieving a sunken ship full of gold, reclaiming a lost treasure, treasure that had been taken from my family by force. I am an Eastern European Jew suspended between cultures, countries, languages. Between belonging and being an outsider. A wandering Jew, for whom my true house, my true land, in some sense, is only the Torah. ■



# Genuine Czulent

by Anna Makówka-Kwapisiewicz



**B**orn in 1981, I grew up in a small town of barely 12,000 where everything is concentrated around the community center, the school, the library, and of course the Catholic church. Before World War II, the town had been inhabited by a German minority, a few Russians and a few Jewish families. After the war, the town took on the homogeneous look of a typical Polish town: the beautiful Evangelical church had been turned into a community center, the monastery into a high school, and in the place where there used to be a synagogue, there is a private home.

Most of the inhabitants of the town did not differ much, but one thing that distinguished me was my curly, thick, long hair. From time to time, while I was out walking with my mother, some ladies might make remarks about my “Gypsy” beauty – “As pretty as a small Gypsy! What nice black eyes and hair! She looks like a little Spanish girl!” Sometimes I also heard speculations about our Jewish descent, but they were dismissed immediately by another comment, “No, it is impossible. I know this family, they are such decent people.”

In a small town, where everyone knows each other, it is easy to get used to this kind of behavior and lack of privacy. Moreover, the comments made me feel special in some way, maybe a little different.

I often went to visit my sick grandmother. She couldn’t leave the house anymore, so we brought her lunch every day. Because my mother traveled frequently, I often slept over at my grandmother’s house. She had survived the war and told me

many stories about her life. We also spoke often about the Holocaust. She tried to protect me — in a way only she could understand — by teaching me Catholic prayers. She said that knowing the prayers would save me, because when Germans returned, I would be immediately recognized. So we prayed together. I was raised Catholic, so I did not analyze my grandmother’s puzzling behavior too much, excusing her by her age or war experience.

I started high school. As a rebellious young girl, I chose “general studies” 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 objected, 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 told me that I was Jewish! At the beginning I was so shocked that I did not know what to say. After a while a jumble of memories started to fill in the picture. Finally I understood why my grandfather had had to hide in the forest, why my grandmother did not waste any food. I realized why my grandmother felt I needed to know the whole catechism by heart, I understood why she cried 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.

That revelatory news convinced me that my family and I were among the last Jews who lived in Poland. I decided that I would dedicate my academic life to analyzing the origins of anti-Semitism, which had been used to commit the murder of the Jewish people. I wanted to construct an objective and true history of the Holocaust that 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.

While I was writing my master's thesis, 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 the Hebrew letter ן [he] suspended on

**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.**

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 Kraków. She told me about the Jewish community in Kraków, as well as about a new Jewish association of young people named Czulent.<sup>1</sup> My reaction to this news was immediate. I decided to begin Jewish studies and engage in the activities of the Jewish community in Kraków.

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 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.

<sup>1</sup> Polish transliteration of *chulent* (a stew).

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 a year, in the beginning as an informal group of friends who had met in Taglit. They then decided to establish a network of organizations for young Jews in Kraków. 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 Kraków, Mr. Tadeusz Jakubowicz. This small studio on Dietla Street (an omen, as the building had once been an or-



Anna Makówka-Kwapisiewicz was four years old in 1985.

phanage for Jewish children) turned into the association. With help from the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the World Jewish Relief, the room was furnished.

In the beginning, Czulent functioned as an informal group of friends. Young people like myself who had discovered the Jewish origins of their parents or grandparents did not know what to do with this new knowledge. There were many different stories, often traumatic, enfolded in a family mystery, hidden by its members due to more or less justified fears. We could talk honestly among ourselves about a kind of duality of our histories.

Most, like me, were raised in Catholic families, some in atheist, but almost no one came from a family where Judaism was practiced. There were often symbolic gestures — like not eating pork, keeping elements of Jewish cuisine in daily menus, or hearing some Yiddish spoken



by grandparents — but hardly any one of us could say we carried on any Jewish traditions learned at home. We shared the culture of trauma, secrets, and efforts to hide at any cost whatever was Jewish in our family histories. During such meetings we tried to reconstruct the stories of our ancestors and at the same time learn about broadly understood Jewish traditions, religion and culture. We were creating our Jewish identities, not by relying on our experiences, but rather by piecing together fragmented conceptions about Jews. As Jean Paul Sartre said, “The Jew is a man whom others consider a Jew.”<sup>2</sup> We too played the roles that matched our conceptions.

To deepen our knowledge, 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.<sup>3</sup> The first Friday dinner was very moving for me. My colleagues



2014: Anna Makówka-Kwapisiewicz with daughter, Nina, receiving the prestigious Bologna Ragazzi Award at the Bologna Children's Book Fair.

A characteristic sign of my cooking was to oversalt everything and Daniela added a huge amount of pepper. However, this did not prevent anybody from 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

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

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, Mrs. Zosia asked us for help in preparing dinner, and from then on, Friday dinners were prepared by Czulent with the aid of the American 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.

<sup>2</sup> French: “Le Juif est un homme que les autres hommes tiennent pour Juif.” Sartre, Jean Paul, *Anti-Semite and Jew / Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946).

<sup>3</sup> Holocaust survivor and Solidarity activist, she had been a member of the Kraków City Council from 1994 to 2002.

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. Each year the association developed and began to implement major projects, including the Remuh Library, the Jewish Film Club, *Mifgashim be Polin*, “Polish women, Jews – Kraków 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 toward different and sometimes controversial topics. More and more people are coming to the meetings. I have ongoing participants who ask about future months' programs.

From its beginning as a group of friends, Czulent turned into a well-organized and active association. However, some members of the Jewish community in Kraków regarded Czulent as non-Jews who could not be trusted. This 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 Kraków. For a year I worked for the rabbi, and we 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 united Jewish community and regenerate Jewish life in Kraków. Over time, we have established cooperation and friendship. Now other Jewish

institutions also organize a Shabbat dinner and holiday celebrations. All the Jewish associations continue to cooperate and remain friendly. The Jewish community in Kraków 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. 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 child would be raised in awareness of their origins and the history of their nation.

In 2007 the National Organization of Jewish Youth – ZOOM from Warsaw – along with Czulent, organized a trip to the mountains for all the members. Piotr and I felt it would be an ideal



2013: Czulent project *Unzer Kroke* (Our Kraków), a cultural event held in front of the Old Synagogue on Szeroka Street in which children of all backgrounds were encouraged to use art to find their connections to Kraków.



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 Białka Tatrzańska, and pleaded, on our knees, with the clerk to come on her 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 Registry Office. I suspect that this clerk will remember for the rest of her life our large group of friends singing in Hebrew.

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 Kraków. Now I spend Shabbat at our home with Piotr and our wonderful daughter. Sometimes we participate in the dinners organized by the Community. 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. 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 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 to exist only outside of Poland. Now I live in Kraków with my husband and our daughter where we are creating a Jewish home and family. We meet on walks with 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 other Jewish organizations, 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 in the pages of history books.

*June 4, 2009*



2014: Anna Makówka-Kwapisiewicz's husband, Piotr, with their daughter, Nina.

### **Today, June 4, 2014**

On the third day of Chanukah last year Nina came home from kindergarten and announced that we had to invite her friend for our next candle lighting because the friend wanted to become Jewish. Why? Nina explained that other children want to receive gifts every day for eight days as she does. It was her own way to mitigate the lack of Christmas. Another time she informed us that her kindergarten teacher wanted to taste the challah that she bakes with her father every Friday. Our daughter talks openly about being Jewish; even more, she boasts about it.

When Piotr and I began our relationship, we knew that Jewish identity was and would always be a crucial part of our lives together. When Nina was born, the most important question became how to provide her with a Jewish education, Jewish culture and opportunities to meet Jewish peers. Would it be possible in a city where there are a handful of Jewish children, where the kindergartens are dominated by the religion of the majority and the curriculum is based mainly on the Catholic holidays? We have found that it is indeed challenging, but as an old proverb says, “A person in need will find a way.” We continue to stay active in our association, Czulent, which arose as a supportive group, a space for young people rebuilding their Jewish identity. Our changing needs have had an impact on the evolution of the association: today we offer



educational projects for our children. Within the framework of one of them, *Unzere Kinder* (Our Children), we teach children, through art workshops, about their culture and history. But most important, we create an opportunity for the children to spend time together and socialize. Their innocent games have increased the involvement of their parents for whom the lack of Jewish education in their own youth was a huge problem.

In order to expand the outreach of our activities, Piotr and I came up with the project *Majses*,

We realize that we are no longer simply people who are creating an identity — we are Jews who are proud of our heritage and are forging ahead with our culture here in Poland.

a book series for Jewish children comprised of fairy tales in Polish and Yiddish. Do children in Poland know Yiddish? Not really. However, some of their grandparents or great-grandparents do. A child can see, very often for the first time, a Hebrew letter and open a beautifully illustrated book from the right-hand side. To increase access to the books, we distributed them free of charge across Poland through Sunday schools, the JDC and other Jewish institutions.

Did it help? At the beginning people were skeptical of the idea. Now we are receiving many requests from parents, not just Jewish, for the book. Not only were these books praised in the Jewish community, but one of the books in the series, *Majn Alef Bejs*, was nominated for its illustrations as a Poland Book of the Year 2013. The illustrator received a Special Mention in the Ilustrarte 2014 contest in Portugal, and a silver at the ED-Awards European Design. Czulent, as the publisher, received the prestigious Bologna Ragazzi Award for first prize in nonfiction at the Bologna Children's Book Fair 2014, one of the most important international events dedicated to children's publishing. This award is often referred to as "The Oscars of Publishing."

The public awards held great meaning for us: a Polish book in the Jewish language winning

such acclaim. We realize that we are no longer simply people who are creating an identity — we are Jews who are proud of our heritage and are forging ahead with our culture here in Poland. It is a culture being created by Jews, not related to klezmer festivals or stereotypical images of the community presented by non-Jews.

As an association, Czulent is also developing and facing challenges related to discrimination, all kinds of racism or anti-Semitism. Currently we are running the project "Anti-Semitism Is Not

an Opinion," taking innovative actions to raise awareness about preventing anti-Semitism. We cooperate with other ethnic and national minorities in Poland. We are trying to be active wherever we can and support those who expect and need it. Our aim is not to save the world, but isn't *Tikkun Olam* an inherent part of our tradition?

Through our activities we want to show our daughter that everyone can have an impact on the reality they live in. We have the ability to change it for the better. If there is no Jewish school, we organize workshops. If access to Jewish books is impeded, we open a library. If we need support and respect, we have to show it to others first.

Our pro-social activity gives us a sense of meaning and fulfillment. One day when Nina was just a few months old, I was talking to a Jewish mother, much older than I, about the issue of bringing up children as Jews in Poland. She was deeply concerned that her child was going to harbor a grudge against her for being brought up in a Jewish home. Knowing of my determination and plans, she asked me, "Do you think that Nina will be happy about it?"

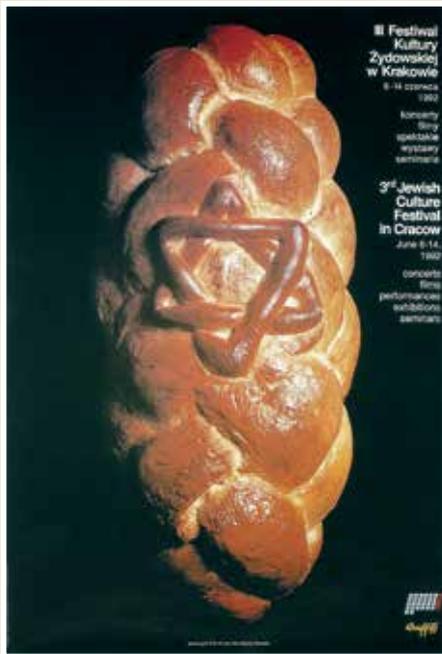
How did I answer? I told her the truth at that time, "I don't know." Today, I'm happy to say, my answer would be a resounding "Yes!" ■

# Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland

Celebrating Ten Years: 2004-2014

“Tad Taube’s philanthropy is strengthening democracy in Poland.”

— Hon. Aleksander Kwaśniewski, President of the Republic of Poland 1995-2005



Jewish Culture Festival Poster, 1992.



Reconstructed bimah and painted ceiling of 18th-century synagogue, POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Photo by Rick and Laura Brown/Handhouse Studio.



Examining a model of medieval Kraków.



From the exhibition *Poland and Palestine – Two Lands and Two Skies*. Cracovian Jews through the Lens of Ze’ev Aleksandrowicz at the Galicia Jewish Museum, Kraków, Poland.



Taube Jewish Heritage Tours.



Deputy Chairman of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland Marian Turski, left, and Chairman Piotr Wiślicki. *Photo by Andrzej Daniluk/ Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland.*



Jewish Genealogy & Family Heritage Center, Warsaw.



Jewish Community Center, Warsaw.



ZOOM, Polish Jewish Youth Organization, Warsaw.



Jewish Culture Festival, Kraków.



Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland: renovation of Zamość synagogue.



Centropa teacher training in Poland.



Mi Dor Le Dor educational initiative.

# The Millennials:

## *Young people effecting change in today's free and democratic Poland*

## I Don't Remember Communism

by Jan Śpiewak

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 S. 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.

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



2008: Jan Śpiewak in San Francisco where he served as a Humanity in Action intern with the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture.



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

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 aunts, 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.

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.

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 education 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

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.

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.

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 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.

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 “benches 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 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.<sup>1</sup> That was a warning sign for the Jews who tried to start a new life in Poland. In the mid-1950s,

<sup>1</sup> 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.



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

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 supper 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.

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.

*June 4, 2009*

### **Today, June 4, 2014**

Since I wrote the above essay, there have been some surprising changes to the Warsaw Jewish Community leadership (the Gmina) that I regard as very positive. In April 2014, elections to the Gmina Board were won predominantly by young people. In fact, the new president of the Gmina, Anna Chipczyńska, is only 30 years old. My friend Anna Bakuła, who was president of the Polish Jewish Youth Organization (ZOOM) for four years, became the new treasurer. Only two people from the former board got re-elected. To me this signifies the ascendance of a new generation of Jewish leaders in Warsaw. Change is coming, youth participation is increasing, and hope is thriving again. ■



Jan Śpiewak, in foreground at right, with friends at a Shabbat dinner.



# My Mother, My Art, My Jewish Life

by Helena Czernek



Photo by Aleksander Prugar.

**M**y first memories of my Jewishness come from a time at the beginning of the 1990s. I was perhaps five years old. I remember we were having a Passover Seder with some Israeli guests. As the youngest child, I was asking the questions, gently prompted by my mother, “How is this night different from all other nights?” Even though I did not fully understand what this meant, it had a great impact on my future. Ever since I can remember, I was aware of my Jewish ancestry.

This Seder was, for my mother, both an effort and a research project to connect with her roots, which she had been carrying out for some time. It was a particularly difficult matter in her case. Due to the extent of assimilation of her family, just about everything had to be learned from scratch. She was diligently putting together snippets of information, snatches of memory and heard stories. There was hardly anyone to learn from. An additional burden, in our case, was that we lived outside of Warsaw, in the countryside, in the small village of Jędrzejów Nowy.

Although before the war a significant part of the town’s population had been Jewish, almost no trace remained afterward. There are two houses left, one used to be a house of prayer. Some of the elder neighbors still recall the prewar times, and occasionally stories of the local Jews are brought up. Not long ago, during a random conversation with one of these townspeople, I found out that as a 10-year-old boy, he used to light the fire on Shabbat for a Jewish family named Gewis.

All that, however, relates to the increasingly distant past. When I was growing up and

my mother was searching for her way in life and her identity, there was nobody of Jewish origin around us. There was no group to study together, there was no synagogue or any store with kosher products. It was all being done, as she said, “in our own way.” In spite of these limitations, our house has been always filled with Jewish atmosphere and symbolism.

My mother very often brought up the topic of her Jewishness in her artistic work. As long as I can remember, there was a mezuzah hanging on the doorframe and a menorah standing next to some worn-out prewar scrolls of the Book of Esther and fragments of the Torah, which by a miracle were saved from being milled into scrap in a paper factory in Jeziorna<sup>1</sup>. There was a panorama of Jerusalem hanging above my bed, which my mother had brought from her trip to Israel. Many times, as a child, I would look at this picture and search for places by their numbers listed in a description. My favorite part of the photo was a barely visible little building described as the Tomb of Absalom in the Cedron Valley. It was my dream to see it with my own eyes one day. I actually did just that, standing on the Mount of Olives in 2009.

When I was 20 years old, I started my own research into what it means to be Jewish. Compared to my mother when she was my age, I was in a far more auspicious situation. I already had some basics, which I had acquired at home, and even though my childhood experiences had been relatively disordered, they formed a

<sup>1</sup> Currently called Konstancin-Jeziorna, a town about 12 miles south of Warsaw.



Helena Czernek at a Passover Seder in her childhood home with artist Shalom Sechvi who was visiting from Israel.

substantial starting point. As a member of the third generation after the Holocaust, I was not as burdened with the trauma of the past, which probably has made me much less anxious on my journey to find my place in the Jewish world. I also have many more possibilities and opportunities. Numerous new Jewish organizations and institutions have emerged in recent years.

The offerings are very broad and tailored to various needs, levels of religiousness and different ranges of age. For quite a long time,

In amazement my grandfather has remarked many times, “In the past, people around had to be convinced that one is *not* a Jew, even when one was. I did not suspect that I would live to the moment where people would want to *prove* their Jewish roots.”

I have been participating in programs like Taglit Birthright Israel and the events organized by the Polish Jewish Youth Organization (ZOOM). Thanks to ZOOM I met people like myself who were searching for their identity and place in the world.

These organizations and contacts allowed me to spread my roots across the community. In the course of time, I myself became an organizer of events addressed to young people. I wanted to share what I had learned. After spending a year in Israel, studying in the department of industrial design at the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design, I settled in Moishe House in Warsaw, the

Polish branch of the international Moishe House organization. Together with three other roommates, we set an important goal — to create a Jewish home that could stand in as a substitute for a real Jewish home for those who were lacking such a place.

I felt strongly the importance of the activities conducted within the framework of Moishe House — to fill in the gaps and collectively learn Jewish traditions from the beginning, surrounded by a domestic, intimate atmosphere; to observe Shabbat and Jewish holidays with friends and, in the course of time, to begin celebrating these traditions in our own homes. There are lots of people like us in who are filling in these gaps; in fact it seems that we are in the majority. I think it is something quite distinctive about the Jewish community in Poland.

After the war, many of the Jews who survived tried to erase history from memory, to cut themselves off from the war experience. For fear of subsequent anti-Semitism, they preferred to recede from their identity. This is why my family never came back to their prewar surname. Jewish tradition was not passed down from

generation to generation, quite often the origin was concealed. There seems to be no continuity between the Judaism of the prewar Jews and the contemporary practice. We often find ourselves wondering whether what we are participating in today is a reconstruction — or are we building from scratch?

After all, we are so different from our ancestors. The years of Communism did not favor those who were determined to find and rebuild their Jewishness. This lack of continuity differentiates us from Jews in other countries, who usually have clarity about their origins. The searchings that Polish Jews are undertaking can



go on for years or even their entire lives. Most of the histories are complex, entangled. This lack of clarity often creates misunderstandings between Polish Jews and Jews from abroad.

In Poland, standard halakhic<sup>2</sup> indicators do not necessarily apply. Having a Jewish mother does not mean being a Jew. It is far more complex here. A Jew is someone who has one Jewish grandparent or just someone who *feels* Jewish. Due to the fact that most of my peers come from mixed families, there is no distance noticeable between these two backgrounds. Many of our friends who participate in Jewish events are not even of Jewish origin. Despite the difference between Polish and foreign Jews, it is thanks to the latter that we can experience the revival of Jewish activity and awareness. They showed us Judaism's basics.

In recent years, there has been an unusual revitalization of Jewish activity in Poland. More and more people are owning up to their origins

and want to participate in its renewal. More and more is happening all around me. A few years ago, I was on a trip to Łosice, an old Jewish town on Podlasie. I was trying to find a Jewish cemetery, but all I could find in that place was a park. Alleys and benches, walking couples – there was nothing that could indicate the existence of a Jewish cemetery. Undoubtedly, local inhabitants had never even heard of it. But today, in place of the park, there is once again a Jewish cemetery. It was reconstructed from the *matzevot*<sup>3</sup> found in the area.

It could be said that the course of history in Poland has been changed. Gradually, the remnants of old synagogues and cemeteries are being renewed and renovated. Twenty years ago such changes were almost impossible to implement. Today, both the descendants of prewar Jews and non-Jews are actively involved in this effort. Jewish topics have become popular — we can even say attractive — for both sides. Here again, history has unexpectedly reversed. In amazement

<sup>2</sup> Related to Jewish religious law governing practices of everyday life.

<sup>3</sup> Jewish tombstones.



Passover Seder at Moishe House in Warsaw.



my grandfather has remarked many times, “In the past, people around had to be convinced that one is not a Jew, even when one was. I did not suspect that I would live to the moment where people would want to *prove* their Jewish roots.”

Polish Jews, however, don’t want to be perceived exclusively through the perspective of the Holocaust. Jewish revival in Poland is not about looking at the past and history only, but an attempt to create something new. My explorations in the areas of Judaism and art came together for me in my designing of modern Judaica. Drawing on tradition, I shape a modern form to convey symbolic meaning. The very first Jewish item I designed nests together three ceramic oil lamps to create what I call a “Menokiah.” When the pieces are all together, it is a nine-branch *chanukiyah*. When disassembled, it can serve as Sabbath candlesticks or as a seven-branched menorah. This project resulted from a direct



Helena Czernek’s “Menokiah.”

mezuzahs. Even if they aren’t religious, it gives them a sense of Jewish identity and links them to their ancestors. The brand I’ve been creating is called “Mi Polin,” which in Hebrew means, “From Poland.” Through my work I try to show, especially to Jews in foreign countries, that Jewish life is blossoming here again. Many perceive Poland as a place where there are no Jews

I feel that my artwork supports this renaissance: using a *chanukiyah* or mezuzah that was created here — by one of us — has a deep meaning.



Helena Czernek’s daffodil pin design was selected by POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews for the 70th and 71st anniversaries of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising on April 19, 2013 and 2014. In 2013 alone, over 50,000 daffodils were handed out throughout Poland. The daffodil honors Ghetto Fighter Marek Edelman, who regularly placed daffodils at the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes on the anniversary of the Uprising. *Photo by Alicja Szulc.*

need of my family. We celebrated Jewish holidays together but didn’t have the proper candle holder for Chanukah. It seems this need for Judaica is common to a significant part of the Polish Jewish community. More and more people need Sabbath candlesticks, kippahs,

— and even if there are, that they should leave Poland as soon as possible. They are surprised that there are Jews who want to live here and are creating new art and culture and values here. These new creations are directed toward the future; they carry hope. This hope is essential to the reconstruction of the Jewish community. I feel that my artwork supports this renaissance; using a *chanukiyah* or mezuzah that was created here — by one of us — has a deep meaning.

Often I try to imagine what Warsaw and Poland would be like if there had been no war, no Holocaust, no events of March 1968. Who would be today’s Jews? Will we achieve the moment when Polish rabbis lead Jewish communities? The road that I have traveled has brought me to the point where I feel a part of the new community of Polish Jews. I know that it is impossible to bring back what disappeared, as if there was no breach. However, I feel obligated to participate in the creation of a new Jewish life. Because if not I, not we, then who? ■



# Not My Grandfather's Poland Anymore

by Magda Dorosz



**T**he year 1989 was one of the most important and crucial years in the postwar history of Poland: the year of the Polish Round Table talks, resulting in the first, partially free elections to the Polish Parliament in June, after Solidarity gradually started assuming power; the time of great political transformations related to the fall of Communism; and the time of great changes in society — suddenly ration coupons to buy gas, coal or meat were no longer needed.

Yes, I lived through all these intense events but had little or no awareness of them — in 1989 I was just five years old. It wasn't until I had history classes in school that I became fully aware of the revolution in Polish society through which I had lived.

In 1989 my life was focused on completely different things. My sister was born in May, and it was she who was the center of the changes in my world. The house was full of noise, and we had many guests coming to see and admire the new baby. I don't recall any discussions on topics like elections, the Round Table or Solidarity. But then again, I wouldn't have understood them.

Several times I have been asked how I remember the time of Communism in Poland. But my memories of those days come exclusively from the stories told by my parents or grandparents. I don't remember standing for hours in lines, as my parents and grandparents were forced to do, regardless of the time of the day or season. I don't remember problems with my family being able to

buy everyday products. Try as I might, I find it difficult to imagine empty shelves in the store. Or a time when oranges were a rare delicacy.

My childhood, in spite of coinciding with the last years of Communism, was joyful, colorful and filled with laughter. It was the time that I happily spent in primary school, playing with my peers, going on vacation or skiing with my parents. What else could one ask for?

Did Communism influence my childhood? I was fortunate not to feel it. Did Communism influence my family? Unfortunately yes, completely changing its history.

As a child I wondered why my mother's family was so numerous. There were always many uncles and aunts, close and distant, many cousins, and my grandparents had numerous siblings. So on the one hand, I grew up in a big family. But on the other hand, I could not help but notice that the family of my father was significantly smaller. There was only grandfather and grandmother, her sister with a family, and one aunt. There were no other uncles or aunts, either close or distant. There were no cousins. There was no family on my father's side living on the other side of Poland to visit from time to time on vacation, the way most children did.

I never met my grandfather on my father's side. Well, he did meet me but unfortunately I don't remember him. He died when I was ten months old. As I found out many years later, my grandfather took a great family secret to the grave. He had shared it with maybe two people in our family, but because of fear and disturbing memories of war-time, they did not want to reveal anything.



Magda Dorosz with her newborn sister, summer 1989.

The family secret, which was so strongly protected and hidden by my paternal grandfather, was eventually broken many years later, at the beginning of the new century. If Communism had not gripped and isolated postwar Poland, I would have been told sooner about my family's history. I would have understood, even as a child,

**It wasn't until I had history classes in school that I became fully aware of the revolution in Polish society through which I had lived.**

that in addition to my grandmother, grandfather and aunt on my father's side, there was a much larger family, scattered all over the world. If I had known, then certainly my childhood, as well as my early adult life, would have been completely different.

I remember one summer day, at the end of the 1990s. I was fifteen, maybe sixteen years old. My mother had asked me to help her with house-cleaning. Nothing unusual, something I have always done with her. I thought it would be the same that day. But this particular time, the day turned out to be the beginning of a new chapter in my life, and I wouldn't really understand its meaning until years later.

Everything began when I came across a folder of documents. At first it seemed like nothing special. It had my grandfather's surname — Roman Dorosz — on the cover, the surname that I knew so well and that I bear today. But there was something else that caught my attention. Next to my grandfather's last name, there was

another name and surname of strange origin — Erwin Hirschhorn — one I had never before encountered. My curiosity did not allow me to pass this by without checking inside the folder. There I found documents related to some real estate located in the far east of Poland and various letters addressed to people whom I had never heard of or known about. And there were other folders, all with similar puzzling contents.

On that summer day — which, frankly speaking, I remember only as if in a dream — I did not understand what I had encountered. But the discovery produced in me a burning feeling of curiosity. I didn't ask anyone about the papers, but whenever my parents were out, I would take the folders, sit down, and read over the documents, trying to figure out what they meant. Every time I studied them I discovered new details, which on the one hand allowed me to speculate on our past, but on the other hand prompted many new

questions, questions I couldn't answer but was reluctant to ask.

After reading all materials over many times I started to comprehend the mystery behind it: my grandfather was Jewish, but did not want the world to know.

After some time, I brought the papers and questions to my parents, trying to find out more. They began to reveal to me the little information they had. Working together, we started adding new elements to our family's history puzzle. But to make it complete, we still had many mysteries to solve.

Among Granddad's documents I found his memoir, which turned out to be very helpful. He described the family's history, to the best of his knowledge, going back to the end of the 19th century. These were the stories that had been passed on in his house, some of which he had witnessed. While reading over those pages filled with the past, I discovered many new facts about that side of my family, including how numerous it had been.



I read about my great grandparents Sara and Osias and my great grandmother's sisters and brothers: Mina, Lusia and Chaja, Filip, Dolek and Marcel.

I learned that my grandfather grew up in a large and respected family from Lvov. His cousins, aunts and uncles lived in Stanisławów, Drohobych and Kolomea. Part of the family was able to escape from Poland before the outbreak of the war. The other part did not escape until after it had started. My grandfather wasn't in touch with them because he had survived the war fighting in the Red Army, taking part in the battles from Odessa to Stalingrad, ending the war in Dresden. Perhaps in that way he had managed to survive?

Every letter that I found in the folders, signed with the "double" name of my grandfather, was a copy. Fortunately, he had the habit of composing all his letters on a typewriter using carbon paper. The original he would send, the copy he would



1992: President of Poland Lech Wałęsa holding Magda Dorosz at the ceremony nominating her mother as a judge.

him from ever seeing his family members again. If fifty years ago he had had the same traveling freedoms I have today, would his life have been different? Undoubtedly.

And in my own world I am witness to the remarkable truth that more and more people are discovering their Jewish ancestry, proudly coming back to the roots that their grandparents had to recant.

leave for himself. These precious copies were a testament to how determined my granddad had been in searching for his relatives who, as a result of the war and extermination of the Jewish nation, were dispersed all over the world.

Besides searching for them through letters, he tried many times to get out of postwar Poland to meet with his cousins who had worked in Europe. It is impossible to compare the difficulties of traveling to Europe or indeed anywhere outside Poland in the 1960s or '70s with what we have now. Today it is just a matter of deciding when and where we want to go. Ticket purchase for a train or plane does not pose problems. Not to mention the ease of getting a passport, which each of us has at home, in a drawer. Such possibilities were completely out of reach for my grandfather. He had to file a petition to get permission to leave the country. Petitions had to be well justified and documented, providing the reason and length for each trip. Every single departure and return was strictly controlled. Such rigorous restrictions prevented

After the war my granddad remained in Poland, together with his cousin – the only other family member who stayed in the country — and settled in Lower Silesia. He started a family and had two children. Unfortunately, his cousin passed away a few years after the war so my grandfather was the only one to take care of both families. And the only one who knew the family secret.

The exploration of my family history entered a new dimension in 2006. In January of that year, when I came home after a year abroad, my father announced that in a few months we were going to Paris to visit our uncle — my grandfather's cousin, with whom he had established contact. It was a wonderful and welcome surprise — I hoped to get answers to hundreds of unanswered questions running through my mind.

The visit was a great success. Indeed, I found answers to many of my questions. We learned so much about my grandfather's childhood, and the gaps in our family's history began to be filled.



Since then, it is as if my life has become a rollercoaster. We discovered many new details of our heritage; we found out about family in the United States, then visited them two years later. We initiated contact with family in Israel. Our world expanded far beyond Polish or even European borders. We achieved things that my grandfather had been trying to realize for almost 40 years. But for many reasons, mainly political, he was prevented from accomplishing them.

On the one hand, I regret that my grandfather was unable to share in this amazing series of events, which he himself had set in motion with his letters. On the other hand, I am glad all this has happened to me, starting with that auspicious year, 1989. Not only did I become an older sister, but also, what is more important for society as a whole, we all

Every year we can choose between vibrant Jewish culture festivals in Kraków, Warsaw, Wrocław. We are offered a wide variety of Jewish film festivals. Every year, dozens of young people travel to Israel as a part of the Taglit Birthright program. When they return, they become active members of a rich and expanding Jewish life.

Contemporary Poland is not the country that people remember on the basis of the terrible events of the war. In the last twenty-five years the image of my country has been dramatically changed by the efforts of both state and international institutions. And in my own world I am witness to the remarkable truth that more and more people are discovering their Jewish ancestry, proudly coming back to the roots that their grandparents had to recant. My history, of uncovering my own Jewish

**Neither the atrocity of the war nor the terror of Communism can ever destroy who we really are. It is our legacy and our great success.**

became free. Because of this historic change I can now — without fear — write this essay about the renaissance of Jewish life in Poland and the discovery of my roots. I am not afraid that somebody will make an issue of it or will fire me from my job. Or even worse, force me to leave the country.

I feel so lucky that most of my life has been lived during the time of a new, reborn and free Poland, where everybody can choose his or her identity or become a member of any group, regardless of its nature. I proudly belong to a few Jewish organizations and I work for another two. I don't have to be afraid to speak about it. Neither I nor anyone else has to hide his or her identity. I have these amazing opportunities, which my grandfather and his family never had. Since 1989, Polish society has been able to celebrate the resurgence not only of a rich religious life in many Jewish communities in Poland, but also rich cultural programs. These allow a deeper exploration and appreciation of a Polish Jewish heritage that has been part of our country for more than a thousand years.

roots, is just one of many similar stories that are being told by my peers. And there will continue to be more of them.

Discovering my Jewish roots was quite a big surprise. Even now, almost 15 years later, I am still not sure I fully understand what it means. But I am happy to continue to search for the answers to questions that arose when I was a teenager.

Recently I was asked if I am not ashamed to speak about my Jewish origin and identity so openly, when my grandfather had to work so hard to keep it a secret, both during the war and the time of Communism. Until I was asked this question, I never thought about it in that way. And even though I had to hesitate a moment before my reply, the answer rose up in me clearly: all the more reason we should now speak about and show our identity firmly and loudly. Neither the atrocity of the war nor the terror of Communism can ever destroy who we really are. It is our legacy and our great success. ■



# Generation Unexpected

by Maciej Kirschenbaum

Recently, a seminary colleague asked me: “How does it feel to be possibly the first Polish Jew to enter a Reform rabbinical seminary since the Holocaust?” I was taken completely off guard by this question — I realized that I didn’t feel that special about my choice of studies. I had simply treated my decision to enter Abraham Geiger Kolleg in Berlin, Germany, as a continuation of my commitment to Jewish life in Poland. But his question made me suddenly aware that my personal story is perceived by outsiders in the wider context of the Polish Jewish revival after the fall of Communism — as a truly unexpected, amazing occurrence.

I guess I have to acknowledge that when I become one of the very few Polish-born rabbis, I will be asked to explain to foreigners the collective experience of the Polish Jewish revival. For those of us in this situation, our Jewish iden-



I was 11, perhaps 12. I had just come home from school, where we had learned that Polish surnames ending with “-ski” denoted a noble lineage. I was brimming with questions: Did I come from nobility? Did my family own a manor house in what is now Ukraine or Belarus? I couldn’t wait to ask my parents. When they came back

I resolved to get involved in the Jewish life of Warsaw to help transform it into an inclusive, safe space for all individuals, regardless of their background, personal circumstances or knowledge.

tity is the culmination of our personal evolution that was made possible by the democratization of Poland. But for each Polish Jew of my generation, the course of this identity formation was, and still is, quite distinct and individual, making it difficult to make general statements. However, the social and political milieu of newly democratic Poland was common to all Polish Jews and had a dramatic impact on our lives. I had to ask myself: How did it impact the development of my Jewish identity?

My Jewish adventure began one winter evening in the late 1990s in my home city, Wrocław.

from work and we settled down to dinner in the kitchen, I asked them about our “noble” lineage. My father sighed, then asked me and my brother to come with him into the living room. There he loudly exhaled then quietly spoke: “It’s high time for you to know something: our surname, Kraśniewski, is not our original one. Our real surname is Kirschenbaum. Your grandfather lost his entire family during the war. I am telling you this, sons, but please don’t share this information with your school colleagues. One is never sure whether a Jewish background could get you into trouble again. After all, the Nuremberg laws



1997: Maciej Kirschenbaum (right) and his brother, Jan, feeding the pigeons in the main market square of Kraków.

targeted everyone who had a Jewish grandparent, regardless of their beliefs. I didn't tell you before, because I wanted to protect you from prejudice." Without further comment, he got up and went into the kitchen to make tea for all of us.

In this way, just as I was about to enter my teens, I found out that I have Jewish roots and that out of our family of 70 members residing in the Chelm region, only four survived the war.

Looking back, I should have guessed earlier that I had Jewish roots. First, there was always matzah on our table around the Easter break. Second, my dad used strange words like *meshuggah* or *chutzpah* that none of my school friends knew. Third, when my parents took me to Kraków when I was 10, we spent much more time in the old Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, than in the Old Town. But all these pieces of the puzzle came together only when my dad disclosed the truth about our ancestry. Unfortunately, he revealed the secret about our roots in a way that instilled a fear of discrimination and effectively prevented me from being open about being Jewish. So when

my dad proposed to get me involved in synagogue life at age 13, I refused. I had other reasons for my reluctance besides fear. The main synagogue of Wrocław was in ruins so the prayer sessions (of mostly the elderly) took place in a small room next to it and there was no rabbi. Additionally, at that time (2000), almost all young people who were involved in the Jewish revival had either left Wrocław or lost their interest in Jewish life.

My experience of finding out about my Jewish ancestry in my teens might not be universal — certainly there were Polish Jews who grew up with full knowledge of their heritage — but I would argue that many committed Jewish activists I know started to explore the meaning of their Jewish identity in their late teens. Another aspect of my family history that seems typical for the Polish Jewish experience was the reluctance of the second generation (our parents) to embrace their Jewish roots. After all, they grew up in the shadow of the anti-Semitic campaign of 1968 and had few possibilities to acquire Jewish education and to develop positive Jewish identification. In some cases, particularly in Warsaw, the process of their identity building started as early as the late 1970s. On a larger scale, however, it only gained momentum with the fall of Communism, which allowed for the expression of minority identities. While many got involved in Jewish life in the early 1990s, some needed more time before they became secure enough about being openly Jewish to get engaged in communal activities. In every case, this process of a Jewish “coming out” involved many steps, and lasted many years. And that's the way it was for me.

When I was a teenager in Wrocław in the early 2000s, there were very few activities available for Jewish youngsters. In order to compensate for the lack of a Jewish peer network, I connected to Jewish culture in the only way available — by reading books on any Jewish topic I could find. Luckily for me, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a rapid growth of Polish publishing devoted to Jewish themes. In this way I had a chance to get an understanding of Jewish history and culture, most of which was autodidactic. Even though I was reading a lot about



Judaism, practicing it was not appealing to me for several reasons. The primary reason was that neither my dad (secular even though he regularly went to the synagogue with my granddad) nor my mum (baptized as Catholic but not practicing) were interested in any form of organized spirituality.

In order to find myself a community, I started to look, during my high school years, for Jews in my generation. Gradually, in spite of my dad's warning, I became open about my Jewish roots with my friends and colleagues. To my surprise, some of my classmates turned out to be Jewish as well! It seemed to us that certain topics, like Jewish roots, could now be openly discussed. This openness might have been connected with the accession of Poland to the European Union, as it exposed Polish society to the idea of multiculturalism. In fact, having a minority background was considered cool in some circles. The growing integration of Poland with the international community also resulted in the revitalization of the Jewish community of



1998: Maciej Kirschenbaum, at bottom right, with his Jewish grandfather, grandmother and brother.

in December 2006, I found out that the first-ever public lighting of a *chanukiyah*<sup>1</sup> was going to take place in the center of Warsaw. I went there on my own and found myself standing in the section for the general public, while I could see the members of the Jewish Community of Warsaw in their own section. I stood there feeling that I

In my opinion, Etz Chaim's inception proved that the Polish Jewish community had finally abandoned the post-Communist tradition of passive dependence on institutions in favor of grassroots organizing.

Wrocław. It was able to secure European funding for the restoration of the synagogue, and with the help of American sponsors, it was able to employ a rabbi and offer organized youth activities. These events fostered my active involvement in Jewish life, both social and religious. Soon afterwards, I finished high school and moved to Warsaw to go to university.

Once I settled in Warsaw, I started looking for a way to get involved in Jewish religious life. My first attempt was through the Orthodox Nożyk Synagogue, the only operating *shul* of the Jewish Community of Warsaw, which is a sister community of the Jewish Community of Wrocław. In a short time, I found the Nożyk a bit discouraging for a young person with a liberal approach to Judaism. Still, I had a strong need to participate in Jewish religious life and kept looking. Then,

really belonged in the "officially Jewish" area. At the same time, I could not help but look at the faces of the people standing in my area and wonder how many had Jewish roots and were also seeking a reconnection to their Jewish heritage that somehow was not satisfied by the official community. That evening I promised myself to grow as a Jew in order to be able to help others who were willing to explore their Jewishness. I also resolved to get involved in the Jewish life of Warsaw to help transform it into an inclusive, safe space for all individuals, regardless of their background, personal circumstances or knowledge. Not long afterward, in December 2006, I went to Israel for the first time to take part in the Taglit Birthright program.

<sup>1</sup> A nine-branched candlestick specifically used for Chanukah candles.



My participation in Taglit Birthright was transformative in countless ways. Not only could I pray at the Kotel<sup>2</sup>, but also I was finally able to get to know a large and diverse group of young Poles of Jewish descent. We were similar — often brought up without any particular religion, usually with no structured Jewish education. Most of us were eager to explore what being Jewish meant. Some of the Warsaw participants of Taglit were involved in Warsaw Jewish life. One of them coordinated the Jewish Sunday School. I asked him whether I could volunteer there. Soon afterwards, I became one of the Sunday School supporting educators. Also at Taglit, I met a group of young Warsaw Jews who were planning to establish a Jewish students' organization. In April 2007,

<sup>2</sup> Wailing Wall of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem.

I became one of the members of ZOOM (Polish Jewish Youth Organization). Its aim was to integrate young Polish Jews by organizing social and educational events. ZOOM's activities integrated young Warsaw Jews and motivated us to voice our needs in the Jewish community. A group of ZOOM members and our older friends decided to meet weekly for a Friday-night dinner with *kiddush*<sup>3</sup>, *hamotzi*<sup>4</sup> and discussions on Jewish topics. We called ourselves Chavurah<sup>5</sup>, and presented ourselves as an open, non-Orthodox

<sup>3</sup> A ceremony of prayer and rituals carried out on the eve of the Sabbath.

<sup>4</sup> Blessing recited over the bread on Shabbat.

<sup>5</sup> From *chavurah* (Hebrew: "fellowship"), a small group of like-minded Jews who assemble for Shabbat and holiday prayer services or to share communal experiences such as lifecycle events, or Jewish learning.



2012: The Mi Dor Le Dor group on the steps of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Maciej Kirschenbaum (blue-striped shirt) is standing next to Helise Lieberman (olive shirt), Director of the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation.



alternative to the Orthodox branch of the Jewish Community of Warsaw. Chawurah meetings started in late 2007 and soon gained visibility within the Jewish Community of Warsaw. As an active member of Chawurah since its inception, I lead seders for the progressive participants of the communal Passover celebration of the Jewish community of Warsaw. Typically in Polish Jewish life, many seder leaders are young people who did not attend them as children, and who were asked their first seder questions by their peers rather than by their own parents. This peer influence became noticeable at Chawurah as well. As time went by, Chawurah's religious

The scope of our potential became evident to me when I started working at the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation, as a coordinator of its educational program *Mi Dor Le Dor* (MDLD)<sup>6</sup>. *Mi Dor Le Dor* is a leadership program for young Poles, predominantly with Jewish roots, who want to become experts in Polish Jewish heritage. As moderator of MDLD discussions, I got to know the new generation of Polish Jewish leaders, who were Jewishly literate, committed to the continuation of Jewish life in Poland, and ready to develop innovative projects to secure the future of the Polish Jewish community. Conversations

Polish Jews brought up after the fall of Communism share one common characteristic: namely, the ability to construct a strong Jewish identity in spite of the unprecedented gap in cultural transmission.

needs (including mine) grew, so we decided to include a full prayer prior to the Friday night dinner. The minyan that gathered every Shabbat gradually blossomed into a progressive community. Soon, we realized that we needed our own rabbi to establish a true congregation. We formed an Initiating Committee that was tasked with persuading the members and the board of the Jewish Community of Warsaw to hire a non-Orthodox rabbi. After a year of concerted effort, in March 2010 we managed to gain enough communal support so that at the General Assembly of the Community we passed a motion obliging the board to hire a progressive rabbi. We found a suitable candidate, Stas Wojciechowicz, who became our rabbi in autumn 2010. Under his leadership, we transformed Chawurah into a progressive congregation, *Etz Chaim*.

In my opinion, *Etz Chaim*'s inception proved that the Polish Jewish community had finally abandoned the post-Communist tradition of passive dependence on institutions in favor of grassroots organizing. This shift was informed by the development of Polish civic society, in which many of us took part. Our involvement in civic society gave us the mindset and skills that enabled us to bring changes to Polish Jewish institutions.

with *Mi Dor Le Dor* participants made me realize that Polish Jews brought up after the fall of Communism share one common characteristic: namely, the ability to construct a strong Jewish identity in spite of the unprecedented gap in cultural transmission. I believe our generation is not afraid to reclaim and to reinterpret the millennium-long span of Polish Jewish heritage. I feel we are so committed that one might say our projects aimed at restoring, renewing, repairing and, importantly, remembering make up the air we breathe. We've actually gotten used to the fact that many of the activities we organize are happening for the first time since the Holocaust. This may explain why I don't feel special as a "first" Polish reform rabbinical student. What is special about my position is the weight of Polish Jewish traditions that need to be continued by a relatively small community. Passing them on is an enormous task. However, I am positive that my generation, young Jews who grew up in free Poland, will rise to this challenge. After all, some scholars have called us "Generation Unexpected." I believe we earned this moniker because of our amazing potential — much greater than anyone 25 years ago could have imagined. ■

<sup>6</sup> Hebrew: "From generation to generation."

# Global Education Outreach Program

Extending the Resources and Impact of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews and of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute

**T**he exhibits and programs of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews tell the epic story of a millennium of Jewish history in Greater Poland that continues to illuminate the world. Cutting-edge multimedia exhibits in the Museum's eight Core Exhibition galleries and an array of public programs offer visitors unique insights and experiences about the many fascinating aspects of Jewish life, culture and politics in the lands of Greater Poland — for centuries the heartland of the Jewish diaspora and the birthplace of much of modern Judaism. Many of the Museum's scholarly endeavors exist in collaboration with the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute, the world's largest repository of Polish Jewish history.

The Global Education Outreach Program (GEOP) aims to transmit the Museum's educational message and unique resources worldwide, and to provide access to the Institute's archives. The GEOP offers scholarly exchanges and international group visits, as well as globally accessible educational resources via the Internet.

The Global Education Outreach Program will:

- **Create Global Academic Partnerships** with major universities, offering seminars, research grants, summer school programs, and conferences in Polish Jewish studies.
- **Develop Educational Exchanges** with top-tier collaborators, such as YIVO; Facing History and Ourselves; USC Shoah Foundation; Yad Vashem; Contemporary Jewish Museum of San Francisco; March of the Living; and Birthright Israel.
- **Train Museum-Based Educators** to engage with visitors from North America, Israel, Europe, Russia, Australia and elsewhere.
- **Launch Internet Programs** to extend the Museum's educational impact beyond the walls of the classroom and the academy.
- **Publish Educational Materials** including the Core Exhibition catalogue and scholarly publications.
- **Offer Genealogy Services** for visitors to access on-site and on-line.
- **Provide a Jewish Heritage Tourism Program** to serve visitors interested in exploring Poland and their family roots.
- **Showcase the Contributions of Polish Jewry** in Judeo-Christian Western culture.



Top four photos courtesy POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Bottom photo by Rick and Laura Brown/ Handhouse Studio.



# Contributors

**Eleonora Bergman** is the Coordinator of the Ringelblum Archive publications of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, the world's most comprehensive archive of Polish Jewish history. She served as the Institute's Director from 2007-2011. She holds a Ph.D. from the Warsaw University Institute of Art and has worked extensively to help document and restore Jewish cemeteries, sites and monuments in Poland. Dr. Bergman is an architect and a historian of architecture in the special field of Polish synagogues, particularly of the 19th and 20th centuries. In 2012 she was awarded the medal of the French Legion of Honor, France's highest decoration, for her contribution to the preservation and rediscovery of the Jewish cultural heritage of Poland.

**Helena Czernek** graduated in Product Design at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw and studied at Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. She is a co-founder of "Mi Polin," the first brand that designs and produces contemporary Judaica in Poland. Ms. Czernek is a member of the Polish Jewish Youth Organization (ZOOM) and a resident of Moishe House Warsaw. In 2012-13 she coordinated the Mi Dor Le Dor educators program for the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation.

**Magda Dorosz** is Taglit Birthright Israel Coordinator for Poland and the Executive Director of the Jewish Community in Wrocław. Through both positions she is reaching out to Polish Jewish young adults to create opportunities for strengthening their identity. She lives in Wrocław, where she received her M.A. in Public Administration from the University of Wrocław.

**Konstanty Gebert** is a former Solidarity dissident and a Jewish activist, who helped rebuild the Warsaw Jewish community after 1989. Mr. Gebert is the founder of *Midrasz*, a Polish-Jewish monthly magazine, and publishes a weekly political column in *Gazeta Wyborcza*. He is also the author of an array of publications, including an essay collection on the Jewish cultural revival in Poland, *Living in the Land of Ashes*; the first set of Polish-language commentaries on the Torah; a history of Israel's wars since 1967; and a panorama of the European 20th century. He is an associate fellow on the European Council on Foreign Relations, and has served as visiting professor at U.C. Berkeley, Grinnell College and Hebrew University.

**Maciej Kirschenbaum** is a first-year rabbinical student at Abraham Geiger Kolleg, a Reform Rabbinical Seminary located in Potsdam, and a member of Hillel Berlin-Brandenburg. Previously he studied economics and management at the Warsaw School of Economics. He is also a Senior Fellow of Humanity in Action, an international network of human and minority rights activists. Mr. Kirschenbaum coordinated the inaugural Mi Dor Le Dor educators program of the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation.

**Stanisław Krajewski** received his Ph.D. in mathematics and teaches logic and religion on the faculty of the Department of Philosophy of the University of Warsaw. Dr. Krajewski is the author of books on the philosophy of mathematics and on the Jewish experience in Poland. Following the political changes of 1989, he helped found the Polish Council of Christians and Jews and the Polish-Israeli Friendship Society. For many years he was the Poland consultant to the American Jewish Committee (AJC). Most recently he served on the curatorial team creating the post-World War II gallery of the Core Exhibition of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.



**Helise Lieberman** directs the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation and Taube Jewish Heritage Tours. A former Hillel Director, Ms. Lieberman was the Founding Principal of the Lauder Morasha Day School in Warsaw and has served as a consultant to the Rothschild Foundation Europe, the Westbury Group and POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. She currently serves as an educational consultant to the JDC-Baltics. In 2007, Ms. Lieberman participated in the Senior Educators Program of the Melton Centre for Jewish Education at Hebrew University. Born in the U.S., Ms. Lieberman has lived in Warsaw with her family since 1994.

**Anna Makówka-Kwapisiewicz** serves as Chairwoman of the Board of Czulent, a Jewish young adult association in Kraków, which recently won the Bologna Ragazzi Award for its Yiddish children's book, the main prize at the Bologna Children's Book Fair, one of the most important international events dedicated to the children's publishing and multimedia industry worldwide. Ms. Makówka-Kwapisiewicz was born in 1981 in a small town near Bydgoszcz, Poland. She majored in Jewish Studies and History and has worked as a researcher, a tour guide and an assistant to the Chief Rabbi of Kraków. As an activist she works on anti-discrimination projects through her membership in Czulent, ZOOM and the Association of Crisis Intervention (for women). She coordinates the Jewish Literary Salon for Czulent. Ms. Makówka-Kwapisiewicz lives in Kraków with her husband, Piotr, and their daughter, Nina.

**Janusz Makuch** is the Executive Director and co-founder of the Jewish Culture Festival in Kraków, now the largest Jewish festival in Europe. In 2008 the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, awarded him the highest Polish civil distinction, the Officer's Cross of the Order of Polonia Restituta medal, for his efforts to preserve the memory of Polish Jews. In the same year he received the inaugural Irena Sendlerowa Memorial Award from the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture for his work in fostering Jewish cultural renewal in Poland. Mr. Makuch served on an international panel of experts in 2012 and 2013, selecting artists to perform at the International Showcase for Israeli World and Jazz Music in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv.

**Daniela Malec** was born in Warsaw. She was a founder of the Jewish young adult association Czulent in Kraków, and participated as a Jewish student leader for different NGOs supporting Jewish renewal in Kraków and across Poland. Currently Ms. Malec lives in Tel Aviv, where she is a consultant for Religions for Peace, an international interfaith peace organization. She also works as a translator.

**Magdalena Matuszewska** has worked for the Taube Foundation since 2005 and currently is the Program Manager of the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland Foundation. A Ph.D. candidate in Hebrew Studies and a researcher at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, Ms. Matuszewska has been teaching at the Marie Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin and at the University of Warsaw. A member of the Association of Jewish Studies and author of several scholarly publications, she has followed her interests in the prewar heritage of Poland and Hebrew poetry.

**Shana Penn** is the Executive Director of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture and a scholar-in-residence at the Graduate Theological Union's Center for Jewish Studies, in Berkeley. Her book, *Solidarity's Secret: The Women Who Defeated Communism in Poland* (University of Michigan Press, 2005) was awarded Best Book in Slavic and East European Women's Studies by the American Association of Women in Slavic Studies. It is newly published as *Sekret Solidarności* by W.A.B. publisher in Warsaw. Ms. Penn's research in Polish Jewish and gender studies has been published widely, including in *New Eastern Europe* and *Krytyka Polityczna*. In 2013 she was awarded the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland.

**Sigmund Rolat**, born in Częstochowa, Poland, is President of Oxford International Corporation and co-chair of the North American Council of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. He holds an M.A. in International Relations from New York University. In 2013, President Bronisław Komorowski presented Mr. Rolat with the Commander's Cross with Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta for his work in facilitating Polish-Jewish dialogue.



**Rabbi Michael Schudrich** is the Chief Rabbi of Poland. Born in New York, he served as Rabbi of the Jewish Community of Japan from 1983 to 1989. He began working in Poland in 1990 on behalf of the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. Rabbi Schudrich became Rabbi of Warsaw and Łódź in 2000, and since 2004 has served as Chief Rabbi of Poland.

**Jan Śpiewak** is a co-founder and was the first Chairman of ZOOM, the Polish Jewish Youth Organization in Warsaw, which is focused on strengthening Jewish identity among young people. He was a Humanity in Action intern with the Taube Foundation's Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland in 2008. Currently he is a Ph.D. student at Warsaw University, specializing in urban sociology. Mr. Śpiewak is also a founder and director of *Miasto Jest Nasze* ("The City Is Ours") — a grassroots association of young people that monitors and advises the Warsaw city government on cultural, political and social affairs.

**Tad Taube** is Chairman of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture, President of the Koret Foundation, and Honorary Consul for the Republic of Poland in the San Francisco Bay Area. He is also Chairman and Founder of Woodmont Companies, a diversified real estate investment and management organization. Consul Taube has dedicated his life to strengthening civic and cultural life and Jewish communities in both the San Francisco Bay Area and his native Poland, from which he emigrated with his parents in 1939 just before the Nazi invasion. In 2004, President of the Republic of Poland Aleksander Kwaśniewski honored him with the Commander's Cross of the Order of Merit of the Republic of Poland. In 2007, after his appointment as Honorary Consul, he established a Sister Cities relationship between San Francisco and Kraków, the city of his birth. As the lead patron of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, he has spearheaded the most significant fundraising campaign — responsible for raising fully one-third of the entire cost of the Core Exhibition.

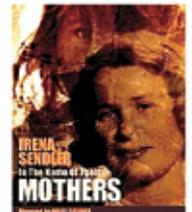
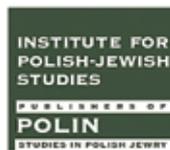
**Marian Turski** was born in 1926 in Druskienniki and grew up in Łódź. Since the end of World War II, he has had a distinguished career in Poland as a journalist and Jewish activist. He is involved in numerous Jewish organizations, as Deputy Chairman of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, Deputy Chairman of the International Auschwitz Committee, and Chairman of the Council of POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Mr. Turski is the author and co-author of over a dozen books and the recipient of the Commander's Cross with Star of the Order of Polonia Restituta (1997), the Cross of Merit, First Class, of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany (2007) and the medal of the French Legion of Honor (2012). As a professional historian and journalist, he has headed the historical section of the *Polityka* weekly magazine since 1958.

**Feliks Tych**, born in 1929 in Radomsko, Poland, was a Polish-Jewish historian and a professor of history. He was the Executive Director of the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute (1995-2007), a member of the Council of Science of the Polish Academy of Science, and a member of the editorial committee of the Polish Biographical Dictionary. Professor Tych is the author of several books and more than 300 academic articles, published in scientific periodicals and conference materials in Poland and abroad. He died in February 2015.

**Piotr Wiślicki** is the Chairman of the Association of the Jewish Historical Institute of Poland, the non-profit organization that founded POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews project in 1993 and continued it as a civic initiative until 2005, when the Association established a public-private partnership with the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage and the City of Warsaw. As the private partner, the Association undertook to finance and produce the Core Exhibition of the museum. Mr. Wiślicki is a founding member of the Polish branch of B'nai B'rith and helped establish the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland. His grandfather, Waław Wiślicki, was a Deputy in the Sejm during the Second Polish Republic, a member of the Jewish Club and President of the Central Headquarters of the Union of Jewish Merchants. In supporting POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, Piotr Wiślicki continues his grandfather's legacy. Professionally, he is the co-owner and Deputy Chairman of a real estate company.



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