

JEWS IN POLAND TODAY by Michael Nevins

INTRODUCTION

My paternal grandparents both were born in 1878 in Dabrowa (pronounced Dombrova) from where they immigrated to the United States during the late 1890s. Dabrowa then was a shtetl in tsarist Russia, midway between Bialystok and Grodno, with a population of about 1,600 natives, three quarters of them Jewish; now the town is located in northeastern Poland and there are about 6,000 citizens - but no Jews.

In 1982, long after my grandparents were gone, I wrote a memorial book about Dabrowa's lost Jewish community and about a dozen years later participated in a ceremony there rededicating the partially restored old cemetery. I heard nothing more for two decades until, to my great surprise, I received an e-mail invitation to participate in a program to be held in May 2016 that would honor the town's Jewish past. Of course I accepted and brought a son and grandson along. I also invited Dr. Mark Podwal to join us because I knew that his mother had emigrated from Dabrowa in 1929 at age eight. Mark is a renowned artist and was so inspired by the experience that upon his return home he painted eighteen pictures that juxtaposed Jewish symbols with photographs of the old town in his unique whimsical style. Those pictures have been exhibited both in this country and in Europe and early this year were compiled in a small book titled "Kaddish for Dabrowa Bialostocka."

Our return trip in June 2018 provided an opportunity for Dr. Podwal to exhibit his pictures in Dabrowa and to distribute signed copies of the book. Joining us from Israel was Kiki Harary whose great grandfather was the last rabbi of Dabrowa. Each of us spoke at the memorable ceremony, but our remaining time in Poland provided a fascinating glimpse into the current situation for Jews and non-Jews alike. What follows here are impressions gathered during those enlightening - and exhausting - four days in June.

RISING FROM THE ASHES

I didn't know it at the time, but the day that I flew to Warsaw, June 4, 2018, was the 29th anniversary of the bloodless revolution that ended the Communist era in Poland. (It also was the very same date as the Tiananmen Square massacre.) After negotiations between the Solidarity trade union and the communist government, an election was held in 1989 which Solidarity won by a landslide giving them them control of both chambers of the Parliament. Soon Lech Walesa was elected president, a constitution passed, there was economic revival in a free market system and eventually Poland joined the EU and NATO.

After the end of World War II, Poland's Jewish population (mainly returnees from Russia and survivors of the camps) was roughly 50,000, a small fraction of about 3.3 million before the war. But when Communist authorities adopted harsh anti-Jewish policies and purges that prompted mass emigration and exile, their number shrank to fewer than 30,000 by 1970 and continued to decline. As late as the 2012 census only about 8,000 people identified themselves as Jews, but this was up from 1,200 a decade earlier. Estimates vary but now there may be as many as 20,000 Jews of various degrees of commitment and its been suggested that there might be tens of thousands "hidden Jews" who had Jewish roots but didn't know it - or didn't want to know it. After all, during the war many Jews had to hide their identity in order to survive, Many children were given away to Catholic families or were raised in orphanages run by nuns. However, after Pope John Paul II, "the Polish Pope," apologized for past church behavior and referred to Jews as our "elder brothers", ingrained attitudes began to change and Jews began coming out of the woodwork.

Censorship was lifted following the end of Communism and as open dialogue was permitted, Poles from all backgrounds began to confront their history and many wished to know more about the country's - perhaps even their own Jewish heritage. During the 1990s several young activists set up a "hot-line" that counseled thousands who were coming to terms with revelations about their origins. Their reactions varied: some embraced their family's narrative, a few men even became circumcised.

In 1988 a small film series on Jewish themes was held in Krakow that developed into a Festival of Jewish Culture with an open-air klezmer music concert that each year attracts more than 20,000 visitors from all over. Mind you more than 90% of Krakow's Jews were killed during the war and now it's one of the most vibrant signs of Jewish life in all of Europe. For many young people suddenly it was "cool" to be a Jew. Some scoffed that this was merely "pseudonostalgia" but similar festivals and exhibitions soon followed suit in other cities. In her book *Virtually Jewish* historian Ruth Ellen Gruber described how and why non-Jews were embracing Jewish culture in the virtual absence of Jews. She suggested that for some the process was a way of filling in communist-era blanks while for others it was a way of coming to terms with the Nazi legacy, or a key to building (or rebuilding) a democratic and tolerant state.

It's been estimated that more than 85% of American Jews trace their roots to Poland but most know little about their heritage prior to the Holocaust nor are aware that today Poland has a small but vibrant Jewish community. Now there are four functioning synagogues each in Krakow and Warsaw and a few elsewhere and there are at least thirteen rabbis. A kindergarten established by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation in 1989 was so popular that a Jewish day school formed that now has 240 students ranging in age

from three to sixteen. Community seders are being held in more than a dozen cities, there are kosher restaurants, summer camps, youth groups, JCCs, a B'nai B'rith lodge, Chabad, a *mikvah*. (I even found tiny and tasty bialys in Bialystok and brought home a dozen.)

In 2000 a young New York rabbi Michael Schudrich moved to Lodz and four years later was appointed “Chief Rabbi” of Poland. He heads the restored Nozyk Synagogue in Warsaw and, as the rabbi sees it, his main obligation is toward the living Jewish community, to help them with revive their identity and assist them in expressing their Judaism: “I want to give people the chance to decide to be Jewish.” But in addition to conventional rabbinic duties his work includes encouraging “hidden Jews” to come out. The rabbi also is aware of the country’s profound Jewish past whose memory must be preserved. He feels responsible for protecting mass graves and the more than 1,300 unattended cemeteries throughout the country. Rabbi Schudrich notes that the six “death camps” that were located in Poland (*not* “Polish death camps”) are the world’s largest Jewish cemeteries but, as he says, “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.” All agree that Rabbi Schudrich’s role is especially challenging because not only must he satisfy his own diverse community, he also has to maintain a respectful working relationship with the increasingly conservative government.

A similar concern about balancing past and present challenged the planners of the splendid POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews that opened in October 2014 on the former site of the ghetto and just opposite Israeli sculptor Nathan Rapoport’s poignant monument to the heroes of the uprising. The museum’s mission is not to focus on the Holocaust but to

celebrate the contributions made by Jews in this land for more than 800 years before the war. It is a message that's been heard by more than a million visitors, nearly half of them school children.

On my first evening in Warsaw I met Monika Krajewska who along with her husband Stanislaw ("Staszek") were among the first young people who helped spark the revival of Jewish life. In 1982 she published a book of photographs (*Time of Stones*) that she'd taken of tombstones she found in remnants of Jewish cemeteries - perhaps just a few stones scattered in a field, but when I later had a chance to see the book, they had great emotional depth. As Monika and Staszek tramped around the environs of small towns they sometimes discovered Jewish relics - an old building or the trace of a *mezuzah* on a doorpost. In the process they taught themselves Hebrew and Yiddish and several years later, as "hippies" living on Manhattan's Upper West Side, they were exposed both to Jewish communal life and religious practice. Monika's entire family was killed during the war and she had no known Jewish roots, but she was intrigued and had an orthodox conversion in New York. Gradually she began using Jewish symbols and letters in collages and textile designs, paper cut-outs and calligraphy and her exquisite work has been widely exhibited. Currently Monika is teaches art at Warsaw's Jewish day school and gives workshops for adults about Jewish tradition as expressed through art.

Staszek Krajewski's Jewish parents were communists but over time he gradually became fascinated with his cultural and religious heritage and felt the need to learn more. In 1979 Staszek and Monika helped create the underground "Jewish Flying University" an independent seminar that during the Communist era studied Jewish issues. Later they were founding members of the first Jewish kindergarten in Warsaw since before the war. A

colleague in the kindergarten project Konstanty Gelbert eloquently explained the psychological dilemma of the childrens' parents and grandparents during that time:

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.

Staszek Krajewski has described himself as a “Polish Polish Jew.” Poland is his homeland where he feels a bond of common experience with his non-Jewish peers. At the same time, he feels connected to all Jews: “we are parts of the same faith and fate.” Transition from a secular to an observant Jewish life in Poland wasn’t easy. As he recalled, “[No one could] have guessed that we would have to pay for our success by facing many problems of Jewish identity, involvement, continuity and tensions among various trends of Judaism that are quite similar to those in America.”

When Staszek and Monika Krajewski were jointly awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture in 2014, the chairman declared “Their personal courage, moral integrity and spiritual depth have set a benchmark few will be able to surpass.”

After my visit with Monika, I met Helise Lieberman who grew up in Illinois and in 1994 moved to Warsaw along with her husband Yale Reisner and their five year old daughter. They were recruited by philanthropist Ronald Lauder - he to head a Jewish genealogy institute and she to be the founding director of the Lauder-Morasha elementary school where students are taught Hebrew and Jewish tradition and culture in addition to the complete standard Polish curriculum. Their intent was to stay for just two years but they never left. Since 2009 Helise has been the director of the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland. The center is the representative office of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture chaired by its founder Tad Taube (a Krakovian by birth) and headquartered in San Francisco. The Taube Foundation has disbursed over 300 grants totaling nearly \$26 million to more than 100 cultural programs and organizations, among them the POLIN Museum, the Emanuel Ringelblum Jewish Historical Institute and the annual Krakow Jewish Culture Festival.

Helise feels privileged that she's not only witnessed the extraordinary and unanticipated rebirth of Jewish life in Poland but has participated in it. She writes, "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 book...and become the teachers of their own children and grandchildren as well as their peers, both Jewish and non-Jewish." In 2015 Helise Lieberman (along with Rabbi Schudrich and Joshua Ornstein) was awarded the prestigious Bene Merito Medal by the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs and lauded as "a friend of Poland in recognition for contributions made to the promotion and strengthening of the Republic of Poland on the international arena."

LAW & JUSTICE

In 2001 the twin brothers Lech and Jaroslav Kaczynski founded the right-wing Law & Justice party that is referred to by the abbreviation PiS (sounds like peace). Lech became president and the reclusive Jaroslav became prime minister. Their supporters included working class union members, less educated and more religious people. The Kaczynski brothers promised to make Poland great again (sound familiar?). They scorned Western values and contrasted a conservative Catholic Poland and its family values with a godless, free-thinking, gender bending Western Europe. As a former foreign minister said, "Poland must be cured of the onslaught of those who believe that history is headed inevitably toward a new mixture of cultures and races, a world made up of cyclists and vegetarians, who only use renewable energy and who battle all signs of religion."

Lech Kaczynski died in an airplane crash in 2010 that was widely attributed to Russian sabotage. Now Jaroslav, although technically a mere legislator, as head of PiS is the real power behind the throne; President Andrezy Duda seems to be more of a figure-head. Since the Law & Justice party won the election in November 2015 with 37% of voters, it reversed many liberal tendencies that had marked the post-Communist period blaming them for weakening national will and eroding unity. It favors strengthening already stringent anti-abortion laws which led to mass protests from women's groups dressed in black.

The party's homophobic and xenophobic supporters admire the extreme nationalistic policies initiated in Hungary just as the Polish government during the 1930s had mimicked policies of their fascist neighbors. PiS is packing the courts with ultra-conservative judges, has demonized the media and purged government agencies of dissidents. The EU threatened sanctions but nothing has happened perhaps because Hungary threatened to veto any such effort. Although Poland had promised to take 7,000 asylum seekers, Kaczynski described them "parasites and protozoa" and has admitted none. Apparently PiS tolerates core democratic principles only when they support their agenda; in effect, political loyalty is above the law. Sound familiar?

Among the reasons for Law & Justice's electoral victory in 2016 was their platform promised an increased minimum wage, \$140 per child benefit and free medicine for seniors. Establishment leaders were overconfident, campaigned passively and the extreme left were impractical. The nationalists demonized the EU and Germany, were xenophobic and anti-immigrant. They appealed to rural workers who felt that they weren't benefiting from the new economy and an inevitable outcome of frustration and anger was heightened anti-Semitism.

When Donald Trump visited Poland there was no criticism of Jaroslav Kaczynski or his associates. Evidently PiS feels empowered by an American president who calls Hungary's leader Viktor Orban "strong and brave" while Canada's Justin Trudeau is "weak and unreliable." Although Kaczynski sees Orban as a role model he despises Vladimir Putin whom he holds responsible for his twin brother's death. Many liberal Poles are pessimistic about Poland's future fearing that thirty years of democracy is insufficient maturation time to overcome the current political shift to the

right. (In this country we worry that more than two hundred years may not be long enough.) Some express dismay that America no longer is a beacon of hope, a counter force against authoritarianism. (To quote Pogo, now “The enemy is us.”)

NEIGHBORS

Princeton history professor Jan Gross’ book *Neighbors*, published in 2000, described how villagers in Jedwabne incinerated 340 Jews in a burning barn under the watchful eye of the Nazis and killed hundreds more - conventionally. The book sparked bitter debates about the complicity of Poles and prompted a wave of reexamination, some of it leading to revisionist history. Perhaps as a whole Poles weren’t as bad as many Lithuanians and Ukrainians, but there’s no doubt that there were many instances of Poles tracking down Jews when not supervised by Nazis; indeed, it’s been variously estimated that between 10 and 100,000 Jews were either directly killed or turned in by Poles. The official narrative has been that if any Jews were killed by Poles it was by deranged individuals and that nearly two million non-Jews died during the war, nearly as many as some three million Jewish Poles who died, but even if true, this was not industrialized genocide. Some cite the fate of about 22,000 Polish officers who were massacred by the Russians in the Katyn Forest in 1940, as if to say, you Jews suffered, but so did we.

Certainly we should honor the many brave Poles who gave aid and saved lives - Yad Vashem has recognized more than 6,800 Poles as righteous gentiles, greater than from any other country. But many Jewish families who lost loved ones can’t forget mistreatment and even atrocities committed by Poles both before and after the war, with and without Nazi supervision. Many Poles did vile things, sometimes in order to save their own or their family’s skins but, in truth, so did Jewish *kapos* in the camps.

Moreover, all Jews in the ghettos weren't heroes; there were Jewish criminals and black marketeers too - plenty of shameful behavior to go around among all parties.

THE HOLOCAUST LAW

When PiS came to power in 2015, they passed a bill which said that "Whomever publicly accuses the Polish Nation of participating in or were responsible for committing Nazi crimes is punishable by up to three years imprisonment and a hefty fine. The phrase "Polish death camps" has been a festering sore point; rather, they should be remembered as German death camps on Polish soil. PiS stressed that occupied Poland didn't have a collaborating government like, for example, France's Vichy government.

The bill wasn't implemented until January 26, 2018 - the day before Holocaust Remembrance Day - which they later insisted was a coincidence - and several days later the so-called Holocaust Law was signed by President Duda. By rewriting history PiS was creating a narrative of heroic Polish victimhood - in effect, it became a crime to tell the truth, at least as we in the West understand the truth to be. It remains to be seen whether the law will be overturned is up to the country's Constitutional Tribunal, the highest court, which either can endorse or send it back to the Parliament for amendments. While awaiting review the law is said to be "frozen" but because it's already on the books, any Pole or foreign citizen may be in jeopardy even for past statements.

One evening we heard Jewish journalist Konstanty Gelbert speak to a group of young non-Jewish activists. He described how three months

earlier he'd written a deliberately provocative editorial which, in effect, dared the government to come and get him. By the time we heard him speak nothing had happened to him yet. Gelbert remarked that he's sure that government leaders are not personally anti-Semitic but fear losing their hard core of supporters. For Kaczynski, as for other authoritarian leaders, the primary purpose of rewriting history is to retain power.

President Duda insisted that the Holocaust Law was needed to stop the country from being misrepresented in history, that it protects Poland's "dignity." On the evening before he signed the Holocaust Law into the statute book, far-right supporters gathered outside the presidential palace in Warsaw and urged Duda not to kowtow to Jews and the law triggered an outburst of anti-Semitism not seen in years. When 60,000 Poles marched in the annual Independence day parade among the signs displayed were "Bring God back," "Jews to Israel." and "Get the Jews out of Power." After these public displays there was a spike in anti-Semitic incidents; an effigy of a hasid was burned in a public square. Although Jewish leaders are discouraged by recent events, as one said, "We'll carry on until the first stone comes through the window."

The Holocaust Law was meant to support an image of Poles solely as martyrs, never as collaborators, but it caused an unexpected world reaction, especially from Israel and the EU. In the United States when fifty congressman signed a letter of condemnation, Donald Trump's response was to nominate Georgette Mosbacher as our next Ambassador to Poland. At her Senate confirmation interview in June the cosmetic businesswoman, socialite and Republican fundraiser acknowledged her fondness for Polish culture since she had grown up near Chicago where many Poles live. Georgette Mosbacher's estimated net worth is \$45 million; she's brash and often appears on Fox News. She used to wear the Hope Diamond to

soirees, lives in a \$30 million coop on Fifth Avenue and once wrote a book called "It Takes Money, Honey." At her Senate interview Mosbacher remarked that Poland's Holocaust Bill had sparked anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe. President Duda's office shot back that her remarks were "unnecessary and mistaken" but that if she's confirmed they would accept her. One wonders whether our new ambassador is qualified to represent democratic values in such a highly-charged political climate.

Several countries have called for actions against the Polish government but Rabbi Schudrich insists that outside interference would be counter-productive: "Are we going to win this one? I don't know but it has to be done locally." According to a recent survey, more than half of the country is against the new law: "Now is the time to show support for what I would call the good guys."

(After five months of secret discussions, Benjamin Netanyahu and his Polish counterpart issued a joint statement praising Polish resistance to the Nazi occupation and distancing Poland from the Holocaust. The move came after Poland agreed to scrap prison terms for those who criticize its wartime conduct - it would be considered a civil crime, not criminal. The former head of Israel's Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial slammed the statement, saying that it contained "highly problematic wording" and "grave errors and deceptions." Netanyahu defended the compromise statement, which sought to ease months of tensions between the two countries, but acknowledged that it did not address all elements of the dispute. Other reactions have been mixed but critics have accused Netanyahu of whitewashing history for political considerations.)

THE WARSAW GHETTO MUSEUM

In 2023 a new Warsaw Ghetto Museum is scheduled to open to coincide with the 80th anniversary of the ghetto uprising. In announcing the project the Culture Minister said, "I would like this institution to speak of the mutual love between the two nations that spent 800 years here on Polish land." Nice words, but just one day after it passed the Holocaust Law, the parliament approved funding for the museum. Was that also a coincidence or a way of countering the international uproar? A month later Albert Stankowski, a Jewish historian who had previously worked at the POLIN museum, was appointed as director. Some skeptics asked why implement this idea just now? In 2004 a museum had opened about the uprising staged in August-October 1944 by the underground Polish Home Army, known as AK (*not* the April-May 1943 Ghetto uprising by Jews) which led to destruction of the city as the Russian army remained on the other side of the Vistula until the deed was completed by the Nazis.

On our first morning in Warsaw we met Albert Stankowski at the site of the proposed museum which will be housed in the former Jewish Childrens Hospital that had operated since the 19th century. As we toured the abandoned facility the director explained that it would be left much as we saw it - peeling paint, rickety stairs, fading decorations intended to make the wards appear welcoming; one sign next to a wall telephone read, "Call Mommy." Stankowski told us that he wished to show what life was like in the ghetto by creating a visceral effect - minimizing text and maximizing squalor for its emotional impact. Albert Stankowski anticipates that school children will visit the facility on the same day that they go to the POLIN museum which will provide a different perspective. It appeared to us that Director Stankowski was sincere and when I asked whether the government would be influencing content, he replied that so far (three months) their only instruction to him was that the narrative should be expanded to include other ghettos as well. When I persisted, he

acknowledged that if in the future there would be undue government pressure about the message that he would resign. Time will tell.

FORUM FOR DIALOGUE

On the last night of my visit, we attended the opening session of the annual national leaders meeting of Forum for Dialogue, a Warsaw based organization that has been fostering connections between Jews and non-Jews for twenty years. After the fall of Communism a young legislator Andrzej Folwarczny was disturbed by the continuing prevalence of anti-Semitism in both public and private discourse and after visiting Israel and interviewing Holocaust survivors he found that anti-polonism was equally evident there. There seemed to be two parallel narratives - each side defining themselves as victims and the other side as being indifferent to their history. In 1998 Andrzej founded Forum for Dialogue Among Nations in an effort to eradicate anti-Semitism, foster Polish-Jewish interactions and teach tolerance through education about shared history. Since its inception the organization which is comprised mostly of non-Jewish activists has provided various programs that confront difficult questions, attempt to break down stereotypes, correct misunderstandings and build mutual trust.

As admirable as is their mission, the challenge is enormous. FORUM's vice-president Michal Bilewicz, who conducts surveys of anti-Semitism and prejudice in Poland, has described several distinct forms (<https://vimeo.com/145393890>). Disturbingly prevalent is the notion that Jews secretly conspire to get revenge, seek reparations for what was taken from them and wish to control the world. In effect, it's a variation of the all too familiar *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* slander. Indeed some surveys have indicated that as many as 20% of Poles still accept the infamous blood libel calumny.

FORUM's School of Dialogue has a network of nearly one hundred volunteers who engage thousands of teenagers in over 130 towns throughout the nation in workshops and educational programs like the one in Dabrowa. Every year one thousand students are brought to Warsaw to attend a gala where some receive awards and scholarships. FORUM also engages public opinion leaders and provides outreach to visiting Israeli students and since 2007 an international group of "Friends" has provided substantial financial and other support.

When we attended FORUM's Leaders of Dialogue meeting, I was impressed by the dedication of their enthusiastic and highly intelligent staff. President Folwarczny believes that much progress has been made over the past two decades, but that the future depends on continued participation by people of good will on both sides: "Together we hope to write a new chapter in Polish-Jewish relations." It seems to me that in difficult times like these all people who work to promote mutual understanding and value democracy need our support. They are today's righteous among the nations.

A case in point is Dorota Budzinska, the literature teacher who almost single-handedly developed the high school student program that brought us to Dabrowa in 2016 and 2018. It's frustrating that Dorota speaks no English which makes communication nearly impossible, but her actions speak so much louder than words. Starting about three years ago she recruited several other teachers and enlisted support from school officials, the mayor and the priest. We were impressed with the evident commitment of her students to the project which included their cleaning the Jewish cemetery. Why Dorota does it is hard to say - the only clue: apparently her

grandparents “saved Jews during the war.” Whatever her motive, Dorota has been relentless in developing this praiseworthy program (this year partially funded by a grant from Forum for Dialogue.) It is testament to what one determined individual who wishes to do the right thing can accomplish. In the gender neutral sense of the word, Dorota Budzinska is a *mensch!*

ZYDKIS As we toured Warsaw’s Old Town on my last morning I had a mission. On my previous trip while examining the wares in souvenir shops, I’d seen scores of carved wooden figurines called *Zydkis* (Lucky Jews.) The bearded old men with crooked noses, sidelocks and long black coats carried coins and/or money bags and are widely considered to bring good luck. Display them in your home or office and you’re sure to get rich. Apparently, the phenomenon began in the 1960s and the trinkets are popular as wedding and housewarming gifts. Are they anti-Semitic creations? Not necessarily, but they’re certainly reflect negative stereotypes. Some prejudices are hard to dispel. The good news was that on this trip the *Zydkis* seemed less in abundance than before - it took three stores before I found any. Perhaps that’s a good sign - or not.

Note: Quotations from Stanislaw Krajewski, Konstanty Gelbert, Helise Lieberman and Rabbi Michael Schudrich were extracted from their personal essays that appeared in the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture’s publication “Deep Roots, New Branches” published in 2014. My observations will be included in the last of six talks I’ll be giving this Fall in a course called “Jewish Roots in Poland/Russia” at The Learning Collaborative in New City.

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