

Poland and the Jews

Cantor who lived in Israel and the United States from 1987 to 1993, conducts traditional Shabbat services and a daily minyan in the town's Jewish community center.

Chabad also now has a presence in Poland, with synagogues in Warsaw and Krakow. As for how many Jews now live in Poland, no one can say exactly.

The first problem is, who is a Jew? Is it someone counted according to the law of return, which identifies anyone with one or more Jewish grandparents as ethnically Jewish? Or should each Jew be counted according to halacha, or Jewish law, in which case the mother must be Jewish?

To date, about 5,000 self-identified Jews have registered with one of the two official Jewish organizations, the Union of Jewish Religious Communities in Poland or the Social and Cultural Association of Polish Jews, both successors to established prewar groups. But Jewish community leaders believe the real number is 30,000 or even higher. One reason is that many people are still discovering they have Jewish roots, with the typical scenario being a deathbed confession of a parent or grandparent.

Another issue in creating an accurate count is that many people are reluctant to admit they are Jewish. After all, and what is difficult for American Jews to fully grasp, is that from 1939 to 1989, through Nazi occupation and communist rule, it wasn't safe to be Jewish.

In Nazi-occupied Poland, being Jewish constituted a death sentence. And in communist Poland, a virulent wave of state-sponsored anti-Semitism in 1956 forced an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 members of the country's largely assimilated Jewish population to emigrate. In 1968, another outbreak of anti-Semitism pushed out approximately 13,000 more Jews.

Thus, in Poland today, according to Beit Warszawa's Schuman, "Nobody takes their Jewish identity for granted."

Some people have always known they were Jewish. That was the case with Monika Krajewski, an artist and teacher at the Lauder-Morasha School. During the 1970s, she and her husband, Stanislaw, then in their 20s, started studying in secret with a small group of friends, calling themselves the Jewish Flying University.

"We started learning; we didn't even know the names of the holidays," she said, explaining that their only resource was a copy of "The First Jewish Catalogue," published in 1973. Now she and her husband, a writer and professor at Warsaw University, are members of Nozyk Synagogue.

Others learn later. Małgorzata (Gosia) Szymańska, for example, was 12 when she asked her father why he always perked up when news of Israel came on television.

At the time, she didn't understand what being Jewish meant.

Now 26, Szymańska received a joint master's degree in Jewish communal service at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion and public administration at USC in 2006 and has been working this past year as a project manager at American Jewish Committee's Los Angeles office. She returns to Poland this month to become Beit Warszawa's first full-time administrator.

But it's not only Jews who are rediscovering their past. Non-Jewish Poles have become aware of the 800 to 1,000 years of Poland's rich Jewish history only since the collapse of communism in 1989. They are coming to understand that Polish history and Jewish history are integrally intertwined. And they are wondering how a small minority of Jews could have had such a huge influence on their country, sometimes referring to the absence of Jews as Poland's "phantom limb."

Polish universities -- including Krakow's Jagiellonian University, Warsaw University and Wrocław University -- now offer full Jewish studies programs. And places such as Brama Grodzka (Grodzka Gate), the archway once linking the Christian and now -extinct Jewish sections of Lublin and currently a cultural center, are dedicated to preserving whatever can be salvaged from the Jewish past, including photographs and oral histories, and to educating people

through exhibits, theater performances and lectures.

Artist Tomasz Pietrasiewicz, 50, who is not Jewish and who founded Brama Grodzka 15 years ago, explained, "I was born a second time at Grodzka Gate in 1992."

Zuzanna Radzik, 24, a devout Catholic who served as a guide on the trip, has been involved in Catholic-Jewish dialogue since high school. In 2001, when she was 18, she mounted a campaign against a bookstore renting space in the basement of All Saints Catholic Church in Warsaw when she discovered it was selling anti-Semitic literature. She circulated a petition and tried to meet with various church officials, drawing widespread attention to the situation, but it was eventually a new parish priest who succeeded in ordering the bookstore closed in December 2006.

Radzik received a master's degree in Catholic theology from the Pontifical Faculty of Theology in Warsaw. She has been accepted at Hebrew University for the fall term, and if funding comes through, will pursue a second master's degree in religious studies.

She is also a board member of Forum for Dialogue Among Nations, founded in 1998 by former Polish National Parliament member Andrzej Fołwarczny, 37, who serves as president. The purpose of this not-for-profit, nongovernmental Polish organization is to promote conversations between Poles and Jews in order to foster understanding and to help eradicate anti-Semitism.

Fołwarczny believes that the visits the 20,000 to 30,000 Israeli and American Jewish teenagers make to Poland every year on March of the Living and other organized trips present a "golden opportunity" for dialogue. "Many Polish students have never met Jews," he said, also pointing out that the Jewish teens, if they are denied personal contact with Poles, often return home with even deeper prejudices.

But some questions that arise between Polish and Jewish teens stifle dialogue.

Realizing this, Fołwarczny's organization collected 50 of the most challenging topics - questions such as "Are Poles anti-Semites?" and "Why don't Jews recognize Jesus Christ as the messiah?" -- and asked various Polish and Jewish scholars and religious leaders to provide answers. The result is the newly published book, "Difficult Questions in Polish-Jewish Dialogue," a joint project of the Forum and the American Jewish Committee. Fołwarczny recently completed a tour of seven U.S. cities, including Los Angeles, to talk about his work and the book.

Fołwarczny is attracted to this work for many reasons. For one, as a Lutheran in a country that is 95 percent to 98 percent Roman Catholic, he is a member of a minority. His grandfather, in fact, a Lutheran minister, was imprisoned in Dachau.

Also, during the 1990 Polish presidential election, he witnessed anti-Semitism when some right-wing extremists accused Lech Wałęsa's opponent, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, of having Jewish origins. And later, working with German Jewish and Polish Jewish student dialogue groups, he saw, to his amazement, that many Jews held the Poles more responsible for the Holocaust than the Germans.

It is exactly that belief -- that the Poles were worse than the Germans -- that typifies the challenge of breaking down stereotypes.

While Poland did not instigate World War II -- the country was invaded and occupied by the Germans and 3 million Poles were killed, rendering them victims also - many Jews believe that the Poles were complicit in the Holocaust, that they failed to come to the Jews' aid and that the Germans placed the camps in Poland because of the Poles' entrenched anti-Semitism.

In fact, the history is not so simple. The camps were placed on Polish soil, at least in part, out of efficiency, because that's where the Jews were. It was cost-effective, according to Maciej Kozłowski, a historian and ambassador-at-large for Polish-Jewish relations for Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Which doesn't excuse the Poles, either. "The vast majority of Poles were

indifferent," Kozłowski said. He pointed out that the Poles themselves were coping with severe wartime conditions, immobilized by hunger, cold and fear, and, for some, even relocation and captivity. He also noted that the punishment for aiding Jews in Poland, unlike other Nazi-occupied countries, was death, as well as death for other family members.

On the other hand, about 6,000 Poles risked their lives and their families' lives to help Jews and are recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. This is the highest number in any one country and about one-third of the total.

Additionally, the Polish government in exile was the only such government that actually tried to assist the Jews, albeit unsuccessfully, and even alerted the Allies to the German's plan to exterminate the Jews by sending couriers, such as Jan Karski, from Warsaw to London armed with information and documents.

To help clarify Poland's role, David Peleg, Israel's ambassador to Poland since January 2004, is always careful to refer to the murdered Jews as "the millions killed by the Germans on Polish soil." And in July 2006, the United Nations agreed to rename the Auschwitz concentration camp, a U.N. heritage site where 1.5 million people, mostly Jews, died, "the former Nazi German concentration camp of Auschwitz."

"I think it's important to note that Poland today is not an anti-Semitic country," said Peleg. He explained that the government fights against anti-Semitism and that the kind of physical attacks on Jews that occur in countries such as France and Belgium aren't happening in Poland. Rather, Peleg sees Poland's anti-Semitism as rooted in stereotype, more than contemporary reality.

The Catholic Church historically has been guilty of perpetrating much of Poland's anti-Semitism. Jews were viewed as Jesus' killers, eternally damned and incapable of salvation.

It wasn't until Nostra Aetate ("in our time"), Vatican Council II's Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, was announced by Pope Paul VI in 1965 that the church's position on Jews was officially reversed by removing charges of deicide and deploring all forms of anti-Semitism, among other changes.

However in Poland, where the communists were in control, the first official Catholic Church document reflecting Nostra Aetate wasn't published until 1990, and its message didn't start spreading to the public until 1993, almost 30 years after Vatican Council II, according to Yale Reisner of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw.

"[The church] is moving in a positive direction, but it's going to take time," said Reisner, an American scholar who has lived in Poland since 1994. He noted that the Polish Catholic Church is the only Catholic institution, outside of Italy, that since 1998 has sponsored an official Day of Judaism. It takes place on Jan. 17, and its purpose is to foster interfaith dialogue and education.

Another huge issue is restitution for confiscated Jewish property.

The Polish government passed a law in 1997 giving the Jewish community permission to submit claims for synagogues, schools, cemeteries and other communal religious properties. "The scale is enormous," said Monika Krawczyk, CEO of the Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland, who stated that about only 20 percent of the claims have been resolved in the time-consuming restitution process.

Of the more than 1,200 Jewish cemeteries that have been identified, for example, one-third have been destroyed and only 60 have been officially transferred to the Jewish community. Additionally, once these properties have been procured, the repair and upkeep is often financially daunting.

The return of private property is even more complicated, given that homes, land and businesses were confiscated from Jews, as well as from non-Jewish Poles, by the Nazis and later by the communists. Many of the properties were destroyed, along with any identifying records, and were later rebuilt by different people, making it difficult to trace original ownership.

Some movement, however, is finally being seen. A draft of a long-awaited restitution

Consulate General

Republic of Poland in Los Angeles
website: www.PolishConsulateLA.com
(310) 442-8500

Consul General
Krystyna Tokarska-Biernacik
ext. 109

e-mail: mailing.list@consulplla.org

Culture, Science Education,
Public Affairs

Consul **Paulina Kapuścińska**
ext. 108

e-mail: culture@consulplla.org

Administration and Finances
Consul **Małgorzata Kopeć**

ext. 104, 105

e-mail: admin@consulplla.org

Passports/Visas/Citizenship Section
Consul **Marzena Gronostajska**

ext. 103, 106

e-mail: visapascit@consulplla.org

Legal Affairs/Consular Protection
Consul **Dariusz Dobrowolski**

ext. 102, 107

e-mail: legal@consulplla.org

Economic and Trade Division
Vice-Consul **Michał Urbankowski**

ext. 114

e-mail: wehla@consulplla.org

fax: (310) 442-8526

website: www.pan.net/tradeconsul

Receptionist X 115

Zakład Pogrzebowy

(323) 681-0776 - (626) 793-7159

Oferujemy pełen zakres usług związanych ze zgonem. Przygotowanie pogrzebu, możliwość kremacji zwłok. Msza pogrzebowa w języku polskim, pogrzeb na polskim cmentarzu, stypa. Zawiadom nas, a my zajmiemy się przygotowaniem i formalnościami.

Cabot & Sons Mortuary

Catholic Funeral Directors

Serving the community since 1921

We offer funeral arrangements with Mass in the Polish language, cremation or burial at a gravesite in the Polish section of a cemetery.

Joseph L. Drociak,

Attorney

Over 43 years experience

Personal Injury, Wrongful Death,
Workers Compensation, Medical
Malpractice, Wrongful Termination,
Sexual Harassment, Nursing Home abuse

7627 S. Western Ave. (323) 971-3981
12400 Wilshire Blvd. (213) 384-7900

Los Angeles

bill has been presented to the Polish Parliament, in which Jewish and non-Jewish former property owners who are no longer Polish citizens would be able to collect approximately 15 percent of the current value of the buildings or lands.

But the real question is, is there a future for Jews in Poland?

Holocaust scholar Berenbaum believes the unrealistic hatred toward Poland will slowly cease as the numbers of Holocaust survivors diminish. He also sees the Polish Jewish community becoming more assertive and more involved in shaping its own future.

And the truth is, we may not even know for another 50 years if Judaism can take root again in Poland. But for people like Symcha Keller, who heads the 300-member Jewish community in Łódź, that doesn't matter.

"It is not easy to be a Jew in Poland," he said, "but it is very, very important." □