Beauty and Sadness: Experiencing Poland’s History and Jewish Heritage

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Available at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/history-in-the-making/vol5/iss1/9
As a Western student of Holocaust history, my knowledge of Poland before the summer of 2011 was shockingly limited. I knew much about Poland as it existed under Nazi occupation, but after 1945 I understood it as merely one of those mysterious, Communist countries in Eastern Europe. I could certainly find Poland on a map of Europe, but my mental map of the nation itself largely consisted of a vague shape dotted with forbidding names like Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Treblinka. This sadly inadequate familiarity with Polish and Eastern European history was the product of both my chosen academic focus and my primary education, which took place under the specter of the Cold War and tended to generalize and de-emphasize the "enemy" nations which lay behind the Iron Curtain. However, after spending nearly a
month in Poland as a fellow of the Auschwitz Jewish Center, I am shocked by my previously myopic view of Eastern Europe. Now I can say from experience that Poland is a fascinating, complex nation that is still profoundly affected by the legacy of the Holocaust.

During the flight from Dublin to Krakow, I honestly expected my trip to consist of Nazi death camps and Stalinist architecture, with a bit of luscious countryside filling in the rest. Though all of these are present, there is so much more history and beauty within Poland that I was thunderstruck. I learned the first day in country that my expectations about Poland had been incredibly mistaken; they had not prepared me for the strikingly beautiful, Old-World European architecture in places such as Krakow. I was in awe of the city’s beautiful market square, which is over 700 years old and the largest of its kind in Europe. This awe did not subside when I encountered similar city centers in Łódz, Bielsko-Biała, and Bedzin. Conversely, Warsaw surprised me with its modern, bustling, metropolitan feel—until I remembered that the Warsaw of my education was completely destroyed during and after the 1944 uprising against the Nazis, and was subsequently rebuilt as a modern, Communist city.

Figure 2: Downtown Oswiecim, Poland. Photo by author.
In addition to these larger cities, I was privileged enough to visit numerous smaller towns which had sizeable Jewish populations before the war, such as Działoszyce, Chęciny, Chmielnik, Sydłów, Kielce, and Jedwabne. After spending a full week in the small town of Oświęcim, known in German as Auschwitz, it was clear by the defensive stance of the locals that the vast majority of people who visit the concentration camp just a kilometer away have no idea the town even exists, though it has for more than eight centuries. A few of these towns are now infamous, but most of them are simply small settlements that have unused synagogues and Jewish cemeteries, tragic histories, and people living amongst the vestiges of atrocity.

All of the places I visited in Poland were dynamic, living communities missing the crucial Jewish presence that had been central to their functioning prior to the Nazi invasion in 1939. Though we know that more than three million Polish Jews died in the Holocaust, the reality of that loss cannot be conveyed in numbers and text; it must be experienced. Despite knowing much about Nazi crimes in Poland and the ultimate fate of Polish Jewry, I was unprepared for the moment in which the realization was crystallized, and this unexpected experience will forever affect how I understand the Holocaust.

Figure 3: Aron Kodesh (Holy Ark) in Bobowa Synagogue.
Photo by author.
Having attended the annual Krakow Jewish Culture Festival and wandered around the former Jewish district, Kazimerz, for my first two days in the city, it was difficult to remember that the reason for these events and conservation efforts is the near-total loss of Polish Jews in the 1940’s. Once central to Poland as a major segment of the population, Jews and Judaism had become a history to reclaim and a culture to celebrate and memorialize, rather than a living element of the present day. When in cities such as Krakow, I often felt that Poland is continually confronting the enormous gap created by the loss of those three million people, who once made up the vibrant Polish Jewish community. The festivals and museum collections that preserve and celebrate this history make it quite easy to forget that there are a literal handful of Jews living in Poland today, until one is faced with a situation in which attempts to fill this immeasurable gap are unsuccessful in the face of stark reality.

This reality struck me on my second evening in Krakow. I felt the staggering weight of the Polish Jewish tragedy for the first time when we attended Shabbat services at the 16th century Remuh Synagogue, now the only operating temple in the city. The uplifted voices of psalms sung in Hebrew, echoing rapturously off the stone walls, temporarily blinded me to the fact that this ritual was not being celebrated all over Kazimerz as it had for centuries before 1939. There were only a handful of people where there should have been tens of thousands, praying in the one small temple offering Shabbat services when there should have been hundreds. Over the course of the day, I had begun to understand that, in what was once the mighty center of Ashkenazi Jewry, one can only find Jewish heritage in ruins, memories, museums, festivals. Finally, reality struck me suddenly as I realized that when I returned a heartfelt “Gut Shabbos!” or “Shabbat shalom!” greeting that evening, the initiator of the exchange was nearly always an American Jew, visiting Poland to attend the Krakow Jewish Festival. This realization laid bare the aching sense of loss that undercuts all attempts to reclaim or celebrate Poland’s Jewish history, and I came to understand that the silence of the three million murdered is positively deafening.