



Why Jewish life is thriving in today's Poland

When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited Poland last week, he found a Polish Jewish community virtually unrecognizable to any student of history. That's because 22 years after the fall of communism and more than 70 years after the Nazis annihilated three million Polish Jews (of the 6 million total Jews murdered), Polish Jews are embracing their identity and faith in inspiring and frankly unbelievable ways.

And that's not just because there is a laudable Museum of the History of Polish Jews that opened with fanfare last month or a moving tribute to the anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that brought international attention to the bravery of the Ghetto fighters so many years after their heroic actions.

It's because the country's 25,000 Jews – though a far cry from the millions that built a robust Jewish civilization throughout pre-war Poland – are eager to innovate Jewish life through street festivals, educational and religious programs, and by investigating their family's past, despite the pain.

Today, in tens of thousands of Jewish faces and lives Jewish life in Poland is blossoming. And that is cause for celebration.

And this is extraordinary in a country whose Communist-led post-1967 “anti-Zionist” purges forced many Jews to either emigrate from Poland or head underground, hiding their identities for many decades to come. And yet after Communism fell, some Jews – like their Catholic neighbors who enthusiastically clung to their faith – were able to explore what it meant to be a Jew in a place where for the better part of 50 years it was unthinkable. And in many ways it was because a parent or grandparent shockingly revealed their Jewish heritage on their deathbeds.

So how did this happen?

Quietly and effectively, local and international Jewish organizations, philanthropists, and advocates – running the pluralistic gamut of religious movements and cultural options – have invested in both Jewish people (some who proudly identified as such and others who have since “come out”) and in synagogues, community-wide Sabbath dinners, camping experiences, Jewish learning conferences, Jewish Community Centers and youth clubs, urban holiday events, study groups, and even Jewish cooking classes.



Today in Warsaw and Krakow, centers of Jewish life, one can take a Hebrew class in the morning, learn how to make latkes at lunchtime, and meet with other people who are exploring their Jewish heritage – in some cases long hidden by their families for fear of persecution – at night.

Young Polish Jews are also leading the way. In many ways they have inherited a tremendous historical legacy, but are remaking it in their own image.

Take Antonina Samecka, a Polish Jewish fashion designer whose RISK. MADE IN WARSAW brand has a special line festooned with Jewish imagery and humor. By incorporating Stars of David in the design and creating a “You Had Me At Shalom” T-shirt, it embodies the vanguard of Jewish Poland today – a mix of pride and creativity.

And the picture would not be complete without mentioning Jewish heritage tours around the country, family genealogy research in corners of Poland where there are no Jews left, and a trend among some Jews to acquire a EU passport and embrace the country their parents and grandparents left behind.

Add to this a growing number of Jewish expats living and breathing Polish culture and language and you have an enigmatic phenomenon that is bolstering a local community’s confidence in itself and its identity.

Such confidence has led to extraordinary results: just this past weekend in Krakow, the 7@Nite Festival opened the historic city’s seven remaining synagogues to the public for a lively celebration of Jewish life and culture attended by thousands of people.

This event –organized and run by my organization with other local Jewish groups – hosts everything from a poetry reading to a multimedia tour through the seven gates of Jerusalem, from a dance workshop to a photography exhibition, from DJs playing Jewish funk, rock, and hip-hop to a hummus and grilled vegetable feast in a synagogue courtyard.

For Krakow resident Bozena Pitorak, a civil engineer, 7@Nite was the perfect way to reconnect with her Jewish roots as her mother was Jewish. Last year she attended 7@Nite at the urging of her son and was immediately inspired by an Israeli dance workshop.

Soon after, Pitorak started taking Hebrew classes at the Krakow JCC, became a member, and frequently attends Shabbat dinners and Jewish holiday celebrations. This year, she returned to the festival as a volunteer, proudly transformed and Jewishly identified.



“After reconnecting to Judaism I feel stronger, and this influences my private life and my work,” she said. “My dream is that more Jews come out, go to the synagogue, and become members of the community.”

In a scene in Steven Spielberg’s iconic film "Schindler’s List," the brutal Nazi Amon Goeth proudly hails that he and his soldiers are about to destroy 600 years of Jewish history in Krakow. And although they succeeded in liquidating the city’s ghetto and sending the survivors to the death camps, the winds of history have shifted to prove him wrong.

Today, in tens of thousands of Jewish faces and lives, in song and prayer, and even in new forms of Jewish self-expression, Jewish life in Poland is blossoming. And that is cause for celebration.

By Alan H. Gill