



Michael Rosenbaum

# Friends among Nations converstaion with

**MICHAEL ROSENBAUM**

**Michael Rosenbaum is the Chairman of Friends of the Forum and the International Relations Commission Chairman of the American Jewish Committee.**

**BY JUSTINE JABLONSKY**

**How did you get involved with the Forum for Dialogue Among Nations?**

Through my work, both nationally and locally, in the American Jewish Committee (AJC). The AJC has hosted ongoing exchange programs with the Forum for Dialogue for the past ten years. The Forum for Dialogue hosts groups of AJC representatives in Poland, and the AJC hosts groups of young Polish professionals in the States.

**Tell me about your first trip to Poland with the Forum for Dialogue and AJC.**

The trip was all-encompassing. We met and had conversations with Polish thinkers, government leaders, and religious authorities.

We met with the Chief Rabbi of Poland, the Archbishop of Lublin, the founder of the Jewish Cultural Festival in Krakow, and a Jewish student group at a local synagogue.

We paid our respects at Auschwitz and Birkenau.

We also learned about Polish-Jewish history to try and gain some perspective. Life becomes more challenging and complex once you understand the history of the view of the "other."

In 1939, when Germans invaded Poland, half of Europe's Jews were living in Poland. Jews had been living there as a separate nation within a nation—and also members of that nation—for 800 years.

The history of anti-Semitism in Poland is part of the broader history of anti-Semitism in Europe—especially in the inter-war period [1918-1939], when new nations across Europe tried to decide what it meant to be a nation and what it meant to be a member of that nation.

We also asked why it was that half of Europe's Jews were in Poland [in 1939]. Clearly, life wasn't always easy in Poland, but it must have been relatively better than elsewhere. Those perspectives are important in understanding the different narratives that people have about Polish-Jewish relations.

On the last day of the trip, we went to Sokolow-Podlaski to look for my grandparents' house. While there, I met an older man who was nine when Nazis came into the town. He lived in a Jewish neighborhood that became the Jewish ghetto, so he and his family had to move out. He told us about his childhood friends; they all had Jewish names: Rivka, Sarah... In my mind, he has survivor's guilt, similar to Jews who survived the

camps and wondered how it was that their lives were spared. He as a child hadn't been taken off and killed, but all his friends had.

In their memory, he keeps a makeshift museum behind his house, where he tries to save and preserve not just Jewish items but all the items from his town, a town that disappeared in 1939 and has never truly recovered.

At the end of that trip, I thought about how much work had to be done for both Poles and Jews. We are remiss if we allow the Holocaust to be the last chapter in 800 years of Polish-Jewish history.

I was very impressed with Andrzej Folwarczny's commitment to healing and reconciliation, to the youth of his country, and to Jewish youth as well. Knowing that there are interested partners for dialogue in Poland, I came back and began calling people around the U.S. who know Andrzej, the Forum for Dialogue, and their work.

**What progress have you seen since that first trip?**

Over the last two years our work has gotten much more active through the creation of Friends of the Forum (founded in 2007). Hundreds of peo-

ple in cities around the U.S. are interested in and supportive of Polish-Jewish dialogue.

**One of the questions posed to Andrzej after his presentation was whether his work is a "hard-sell." Do you think it is?**

Sometimes people are satisfied with their own perception of history. I have talked to Jews who say, this is a good idea, and you should teach Poles what they need to know. I have talked to Poles who say, tell the Jews this or that. But it is never productive to tell the other what they need to know. We need to look for common ground instead, and then we heal the world just a little bit, and build the future. Some people say, "There's nothing to see [in Poland] but death camps." When I came back, I told people what I had seen, and they found that interesting and insightful. It doesn't mean

that there weren't some very difficult times. Poland was a place where Poles killed their neighbors in Jedwabne and where Irena Sendler saved 20,000 Jewish children from the Ghetto and tried to reconnect them with their families after the war. Which narrative is correct? Both are correct—and incomplete.

**Why is Polish-Jewish dialogue important?**

MR: Many American Jews have a very rich culture and history in Poland that most of us never learn about as children. Instead we learn about the Holocaust. I know people from Ireland, Italy, England, who can go back to their ancestral homes and may still have relatives there. Jews don't have that in most cases. But we can connect to part of that and that is important for Jewish identity and continuity.

There is also an important benefit with younger

people—Jewish and Polish students can benefit from learning how to engage the other in respectful and productive dialogue. All our children are going to grow up in a complex, multicultural world, and their ability to become successful contributors to that world will depend in part on their ability to understand and engage other people whose perception is different, whose narrative is different—and yet who may be great partners for building the future.

Both narratives [Polish and Jewish] are accurate and incomplete. It's like the fable of blind men describing an elephant. It's a mistake to deny anyone's narrative, because these narratives are fundamentally true even if they ignore other narratives. We can't make progress and move forward unless we have reached an understanding of the legitimacy of the other's experience and sense of history.