

# Encountering the Contradictions—and Possibilities—in Poland

By Michael Rosenbaum

The headstone stood to the left of the driveway, behind the high metal fence. More than five feet tall, black, inscribed in Yiddish from top to bottom, it was the first evidence of Jewish presence we'd found in the town my grandparents left nearly 100 years earlier.

Sokolow Podlaski is one of about ten towns in Poland with Sokolow in the name. We weren't even sure this was the right town, and the person who could tell us was apparently using Jewish headstones as lawn ornaments. At the end of the driveway, near a small outbuilding, two more headstones rested against a wall, next to a pair of grinding stones and an old sign.

I was feeling more and more uneasy about this place when Patrycja, my guide, called from the back porch. Marian Pietrzak, owner of this makeshift museum, was home and very excited to have guests. He was particularly excited to hear my name, because he attended the wedding of Wolfem Rozenbaumem in



Mr. Pietrzak and the Rabbi's headstone

1941, and he was sure we were related.

Mr. Pietrzak says he was nine years old when the Germans occupied the city in 1939. His childhood friends were among the 6,000 Jews—about 60% of the town's population—who were sent away, never to return. He rattles off their names as if he was still walking to school with them, but they are gone. All that's left are a few headstones he has rescued from desecration, some old Yiddish newspapers, Sabbath candlesticks and other scraps of a lifetime ago.

He shows us a row of headstones in one corner

of the property, displayed as if they were, in fact, the final resting place of souls at peace. The tablets recall the lucky ones, the ones who lived their lives and ultimately died in Sokolow Podlaski. The Germans forced the Jews to remove the tablets from the cemetery—a park, now—and most were destroyed. Mr. Pietrzak says the large black memorial that stands along the driveway must have been that of an important rabbi, because the Jews hid this one, at the risk of death.

He lived in the area that became the ghetto, because that's where his family had its home. His father's photo identification pass to enter and exit the ghetto, along with the invitation to the Rozenbaumem wedding, is on the cover of the book Mr. Pietrzak wrote about the occupation.

He shows us the town. Here was the cemetery. Here was the market. Here is where they shot the Jews who tried to hide. Here was the synagogue. There were the prayer houses. That was the rabbi's house and, next to it, the Rozenbaumem house. This was, most

likely, the home Morris and Anna Rosenbaum left in December 1906 on their way to Libau and, ultimately, the West Side of Chicago.

And here, too, is the contradiction of Poland. In a town with essentially no public display of Jewish history, a Christian man tries to preserve memory. Near the path where Jewish students are sometimes taunted as they participate in the March of the Living, a Christian guide from the town of Oswiecim (Auschwitz) mists up as she notes that none of the guards in the camps were Poles. In a nation that was possibly the most welcoming in Europe for Jews, once, the German war machine established its most efficient enterprise and altered Jewish memory forever.

I hadn't thought much about Poland before the American Jewish Committee invited me to participate in an exchange sponsored by the Forum for Dialogue Among Nations. Like many Jews, I had been told that Poland was a bastion of anti-Semitism; that while Germany did

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the heavy lifting during the Holocaust, nobody in Poland was exactly disappointed by the results. And many of the immigrant generation said the Poles were worse than the Germans.

Forum President Andrzej Folwarczny, encountered the same mindset when he brought Polish students on a tour of Israel several years ago. A group of German students was on the same flight and the Israeli sponsor welcomed the German leader warmly, while offering a stiff handshake to Folwarczny. “You have to understand,” about the Israeli sponsor, a guide later explained to Folwarczny. “He remembers the Holocaust.”

Folwarczny was stunned that his hosts placed more blame on Poland than on Germany for the Holocaust. That experience and other disconnects led Folwarczny, who is Lutheran, to create the Forum for Dialogue Among Nations, with a goal of bridging the divide between Jews and Poles.

It’s an enormous challenge in a nation that gained its independence after World War I and enjoyed less than 20 years of freedom before 50 years of foreign domination--



Belzec memorial

first by the Germans and then by the Soviets. By the time Poland emerged anew in 1989, Polish memory of the Holocaust had been redefined, filtered and, in great measure, forgotten. Polish memory focused on the suffering of Poles, not Jews, and Jewish claims of special victimhood can spark some resentment among Polish non-Jews.

The issues are more complex than they might appear at first. Christian Poles did suffer substantially during the German occupation. The Third Reich had so little regard for Poland that the Germans didn’t bother setting up a puppet government in the East. In only one country—Poland—the Germans decided to run everything

themselves. Camp guards were imported, largely from Ukraine and other captive nations.

There is no question that Jewish experiences were different from those of other Poles, and other Europeans. Many Poles would suffer, but Jews were to be annihilated—a distinction of importance and one that nearly became reality. History is written by the victors, as a rule, but in some cases it is written by the survivors. After the war, as a relative handful of Polish Jews returned to their homes and many left for the United States or Israel, national memory was written primarily by non-Jewish Poles, with a good measure of pro-Soviet ideology.

Folwarczny has his

work cut out for him. Working on a shoestring budget, he has linked his programs with likeminded organizations, including the American Jewish Committee, but the impact of Forum activities has been limited so far. In a nation of 39 million people, most memory of Jewish presence and culture is dim and, in too many cases, negative. The 800-years of Jewish contributions to Poland’s culture and history are unknown to most Poles today.

The Forum’s efforts to promote tolerance through education reflects the same kind of thinking exemplified by the AJC’s *Hands Across the Campus* program—although on a vastly smaller scale.

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Folwarczny is starting from zero as his group seeks to promote the kind of understanding and insight that lead to tolerance and friendship.

Recently, the Forum and AJC released a new book, titled *Difficult Questions*, that seeks to bridge the gap of knowledge that separates Poles and Jews. Noted scholars and historians answer the questions Polish and Jewish students ask about *the other* in both Polish and English. Last fall, the Forum implemented a program in ten Polish high schools to teach students about Jewish history and culture in Poland. Folwarczny will also be in the United States later this year, leading a group of young Polish leaders on an interchange of ideas with Americans, hosted in part by the AJC.

The Forum has a number of natural allies as members seek to heal the world. Besides a relatively small band of committed volunteers, mostly non-Jews, the organization also receives some support from the Polish government. In addition, interest in Jewish culture has experienced a revival in parts of Poland. The Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow draws tens of thousands of participants



Rescued headstones in Sokolow–podlaski

for music, dance, food and seminars, while plans move forward for a Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

More than government support, the Forum has attracted interest from everyday Poles who seek to come to grips with their nation's history and recognize all the contributors to Polish culture. We met many of them as we crossed from Cracow to Warsaw in a week of discovery. From heated debates about Poland's future to the more scripted sessions with government officials, the clear message wasn't simply that we were welcome. More important, there was a plea for understanding—from Poland.

Understanding is the toughest obstacle, especially for Jews, as the Holocaust looms over all discussions of Jewish history in Europe. The situation is all the more challenging because so many death camps are in Poland and they are, for better or worse, a major tourist attraction. Thus, many visitors to Poland, especially Jews, see little of the country beyond the camps and see everything else through the filter of death.

This was not always the case for Jews, of course. It's estimated that as many as 80% of Jews today can trace their family roots back to Poland. When my own grandparents came to the States in 1906, they said they were Polish Jews, but

they were really Russians. At the time, Poland hadn't existed as a nation for more than 100 years, since the 1795 Partition of Poland by three invading neighbors: Prussia, Russia and Austria. Poland didn't exist when my grandparents were born, nor their parents, their grandparents, great-grandparents and great-great-grandparents. Still, they believed they were Poles.

Prior to the partition, Poland was the nation that sent Casimir Pulaski and Tadeusz Kosciuszko to support the American Revolution. King Kasimir III invited Jews to settle in Poland in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century CE and Jewish population grew in the relatively hospitable environment until 1939, when approximately 3.5 million Jews lived in Poland. After World War II ended, approximately 200,000 Polish Jews returned to their homes in Poland, but many left shortly thereafter for Israel and the United States. It's estimated that about 25,000 Jews live in Poland today, although only 5,000-8,000 are self-identified as Jews. Today, Poland is a major trading partner with Israel and a key European ally of the United States. To the extent that Israel and Jews

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Photos brought to Birkenau

seek natural allies, is it possible that one of the most natural is Poland?

The answer might depend on which Poland a visitor sees. On our own journey, Auschwitz and Birkenau were overwhelming, especially in the 95-degree heat of a cloudless day. Belzec was the most powerful and confounding site, to me, as it was clear that more people died a few hundred yards from the railway depot than ever lived in the nearby town. The memorial in Lodz defined the loss clearly as transport lists—including relatives of one member of our group—lined the narrow hallway leading to a chimney. Our days were filled with death and devastation, a level of loss still incomprehensible to me, and memorials that can't help but fail in their efforts to truly preserve memory.

In the other Poland, we dined on local fare at a country farmhouse—beneath pictures of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI—chatted with the Archbishop of Lublin about members of extremist parties whose presence in the ruling coalition is problematic for both Jews and Poland, discussed attendance trends and demographics with the director of the Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow, and watched as a dozen Poles were honored at an old synagogue for their work in preserving Jewish memory.

Both are the real Poland, just as the town of my grandparents is officially uninterested in Jewish artifacts, while a child of the occupation fights to preserve memory. It's the country with the largest number of citizens on Yad Vashem's list of the Righteous Among

Nations—and the home of the murder of as many as 1,600 Jews by the Polish residents of Jedwabne. In many ways, the real question isn't which Poland is real. Rather, which Poland will emerge in the future?

At a time of rising religious conflict, it's important to remember that the past is unchangeable, but history itself is not inevitable. Opportunities are created or missed and local initiatives can yield a butterfly effect on the global stage. The Forum's impact on Poland, along with Polish-Jewish

relations, is still uncertain. The importance of healing the world, however, is not. As the next chapter is written in Poland, how much healing might depend on a ragtag band of idealists who see dialogue and tolerance as essential balms?

Stay tuned.

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### How Many Jews Live in Poland?

Estimating the Jewish population of Poland today is a daunting challenge, one that might have no obtainable answer. One estimate says there are 25,000 Jews, while another says only 5,000-8,000 actually identify themselves as Jewish. Rabbi Michael Schudrich, Chief Rabbi of Poland, tells the story of a young wife who learned she was Jewish and decided to begin lighting Shabbat candles. Her husband accepted the decision, but his parents were incensed at this Jewish practice. As it turned out, the husband and his parents were Jews, but the parents had never told their son about his identity.

One more thing about this couple, the rabbi added. When they met, they were about 15 years old—and both were skinheads.