

Chicago, IL, November 16, 2008

# “I’ll tell you my story,”

says Andrzej Folwarczny.  
We are at Temple Shalom, where Andrzej  
has just finished a presentation  
on Polish-Jewish dialogue.

BY JUSTINE JABLONSKY

President and founder of the Forum for Dialogue Among Nations, he is in the midst of a 2-week, 7-city, 33-meeting tour co-sponsored by the Friends of the Forum and the Polish Cultural Institute in New York. Each meeting is additionally sponsored by local organizations; today’s are the Temple Shalom, the American Jewish Committee (Chicago Chapter), and the Polish-American Awareness Foundation. If that seems like a lot of sponsors—that’s exactly the point for an organization committed to dialogue between two groups with a long and complex history.

“Three situations in my life brought me here,” Andrzej begins.

After the collapse of Communism in Poland in 1989, Andrzej became involved in politics. He soon noticed that the first non-Communist political campaigns were marked by strong anti-Semitism: One party would accuse the other’s candidate of secretly being Jewish, while the accused party would trace their candidate’s roots to prove that he was not. The fact that ac-

cusations of being Jewish were being used in a derogatory way bothered Andrzej. “Something is wrong,” he remembers feeling, “when people are thinking in anti-Semitic patterns.”

He next recounts an incident during a trip to Israel with a group of Polish students. Their group happened to be on the same flight as a German group. At one point, the Israeli flight sponsor embraced the German guide. “He then turned to me,” recounts Andrzej, “and I could see that he had a problem shaking my hand.” He initially believed that the two must have known each other previously, until another guide told him: “You must forgive this man, but he remembers the Holocaust.”

Andrzej had trouble understanding this reasoning, but further experiences on the trip only confirmed that initial incident. Israeli teenagers, he says, showed markedly more respect towards the German group than to the Poles. But what upset him most was overhearing a guide in Yad Vashem explain to German students that the reason Nazis had organized their camps in Po-



land was because of traditional Polish anti-Semitism. “That was very frustrating for me and the entire Polish group,” states Andrzej, who could not believe that such an inaccurate statement was being presented as fact.

After experiencing anti-Semitism in Poland and anti-Polonism in Israel, he went through a third experience that cemented his dedication to Polish-Jewish dialogue. This time, however, he saw opportunities and reasons for hope.

In 1997, Andrzej was elected to the Polish Parliament (he served through 2001). On his first official visit to Israel, he asked to arrange a meeting for groups dealing with Polish-Jewish dialogue. He was told that there were none.

The Polish Embassy instead arranged a meeting with 10 Holocaust survivors. “I told them that I was there to promote Polish-Jewish dialogue,” says Andrzej, “but they had nothing positive to say about Poland,” recalling only firsthand stories from family or friends who had returned from



concentration camps to find strangers living in their former homes.

After an hour, Andrzej felt that there was "no chance for reconciliation... I couldn't understand why there was such a gap between how this group and Polish [non-Jewish] Holocaust survivors remember their history."

Andrzej persisted. After four hours of discussion and dialogue, the survivors "had tears in their eyes," asking Andrzej what Krakow, Lodz, Warsaw were like now. "I saw," he says, "that they hate Poland, and on the other hand—they love it. I thought that, because of their age, the time of working with these people as ambassadors of Polish-Jewish reconciliation was limited."

**I**t was at that moment that he decided to devote himself to Polish-Jewish dialogue. "And that's why I'm here today," he smiles.

He founded the Forum for Dialogue among Nations in 1998. Its mission is to "foster Polish-Jewish dialogue, eradicate anti-Semitism, and teach

tolerance through education." The Forum seeks to fulfill this mission through seminars, publications, exhibitions, and exchange programs specifically aimed for Polish and Jewish youth and leaders.

Since its inception, the Forum has been involved in mutual exchange programs with the American Jewish Committee: The Forum hosts groups of AJC representatives in Poland—sponsoring meetings with Polish government leaders, thinkers, religious authorities; organizing lectures and discussions on Polish-Jewish history; and visiting Jewish sites. The AJC in turn hosts groups of young Polish professionals in the States.

Thanks to their experiences with the Forum, a group of Poles and American Jews founded Friends of the Forum in 2007. The Friends' mission is "to support Polish-Jewish dialogue," including the work of the Forum, according to Chairman Michael Rosenbaum. The Friends of the Forum considers itself a "partner organization" to the Forum, and has helped organize Andrzej's current tour.

Today, Andrzej is speaking to an audience of about 30. He begins with Pope John Paul II, who Andrzej considers "the best example of building bridges."

Andrzej cites the pope's "deep awareness and concern for Jews," stemming from a "complex experience" of witnessing anti-Semitism in post-World War I Poland and later—the Holocaust. As a priest, he heard confessions from people who had committed crimes against Jews.

The first pope to visit the Great Synagogue in Rome (1988), John Paul II established diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Israel in 1994. An important portion of his 1999 address at the Polish Parliament was devoted to Polish-Jewish relations. And his historical pilgrimage to Israel in 2000—where the pope blessed Israel, met with its political leaders and chief rabbis, and, in a speech at Yad Vashem, apologized for sins committed by Christians against Jews—was widely reported and praised by Jews and Catholics around the world.

Closely attuned to the pope's work, Andrzej was himself examining Polish-Jewish relations, and was especially inspired by the pope's 1999 Parliamentary address.

Andrzej's examinations yielded interesting finds: two narratives, which although parallel, "don't connect." He explains: Both narratives—Jewish and Polish—define themselves through suffering and being persecuted by others. But there, the similarities end. The Polish narrative focuses on Polish suffering and heroism. In the Jewish narrative, Poland is seen as a land of anti-Semites and the location of death camps; and Poles are viewed as—if not collaborators—then indifferent to Jewish persecution.

Andrzej set out to find how these narratives came to be—and if there were other narratives to be found.

**C**ommunist propaganda, explains Andrzej, "largely ignored" Jewish issues. And since what was taught, heard, and learnt in Communist Poland was dictated by this propa-

ganda, "we weren't even able to learn the real number of Jews killed in the Holocaust." Instead, Communist-produced textbooks and literature focused solely on Polish suffering and martyrology. After the fall of Communism in Poland, Poles were free to "re-learn not only our history—but to learn about Jewish suffering in the Holocaust." And, says Andrzej, to confront an enormous stereotype—that Poles were always "good" and always the victims during the war. Overthrowing this stereotype is not a simple task, Andrzej warns, especially given 40 years of Communism: "It is not enough to change curriculums and textbooks—we must also change people's mentality."

Alongside John Paul II's work and teachings, the publication of two books, "Neighbors" (2001) and "Fear" (2008), helped open Polish-Jewish dialogue. Both books started huge public debates. People were talking, discussing, and interested in Polish-Jewish matters; nothing of this sort had ever occurred under Communism.

During this time, recalls Andrzej, "I saw changes in public discourse." The debates themselves were marked by a new sensitivity and higher standards than seen before. Additionally, he noted that political figures could no longer openly make anti-Semitic statements without repercussions, and political parties that tried to play anti-Semitism to win elections failed.

Along with examining anti-Semitism among Poles, Andrzej was looking at anti-Polonism among Jews. He made an important find when he determined that a main cause of negativity towards Poland in the Jewish narrative was the way Holocaust commemorative trips to Poland were being conducted. Not because of the commemoration of the Holocaust or its victims—but because during these trips, the image of Poland was built solely on death and horror. Travelers would see the Nazi death camps where millions of their ancestors had perished, and little else.

Indeed, these trips seemed to convey that Jewish history in Poland started and ended with the Holocaust. But, wondered Andrzej, what about



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the 800 years of Jewish history in Poland before the wars? What about the over 6,000 Poles honored as Righteous Among the Nations for risking their own lives—and their families—to save Jews from Nazi persecution? (Poland was the only country in Europe where aiding a Jew during the Holocaust was punishable by death for the entire family.)

Andrzej found that 30,000 Jewish students were visiting Poland annually, and thought that these trips could be a "great opportunity for dialogue." Working with the American Jewish Committee, he began organizing meetings between Jewish and Polish students in 1998. And in these meetings, he saw "the power of dialogue when both groups confronted stereotypes with reality."

Questions raised during these meetings and gathered through questionnaires led to the publication of "Difficult Questions in Polish-Jewish Dialogue" in 2007. Co-published by the AJC, the book includes answers to such questions as why Poles "let" Nazis build camps in their neighborhoods, and where Jews in Poland came from, written by leading Polish and Jewish historians, sociologists, and religious experts.

Andrzej describes how these questions are used as a basis for the Forum's workshops. One question asks why there is anti-Semitic graffiti in Poland. Andrzej explains that rival soccer clubs sometimes use this type of graffiti to mark their turf. Role-play is critical in this exercise: One student plays an elderly Holocaust survivor on his first trip back to Poland, while another is a journalist interviewing the survivor. The survivor tells the journalist that one of the first things he saw in Poland was this anti-Semitic graffiti. The journalist and those watching all come to understand what the survivor is feeling, and why it is so important to react to, not ignore, the anti-Semitism in this graffiti—and elsewhere.

Such sensitivity training, underlines Andrzej, must happen on both sides, especially with regards to the complicated tapestry of World War II and the Holocaust. Students are taught that Poles were sometimes involved in the atrocities committed by the Nazis against Jews, and also that Polish suffering was immense: Poland lost 20% of its population. Out of that 20%, half was Jewish. It is also important to note the work of such Poles as Irena Sendler and Jan Karski, who were devoted to the Jewish cause during the Holocaust.

Another important aspect of the Forum's work is the organization of visits to Jewish (or formerly Jewish) sites, so that both Jews and Poles can learn about the rich Jewish past in Poland.

In addition to its work with students, the Forum reaches out to leaders of public opinion in Poland. "We try to bring together people who have influence," Andrzej explains, "like journalists, businessmen and women, academics, who may not be connected to Polish-Jewish issues, but who all want to be involved."

The Forum also reaches out to Jewish groups. "Dialogue requires two different parties," says Andrzej. What's interesting, he continues, is to not simply focus on differences, but to acknowledge the similarities and a common past.

"Where do we go from here?" he asks. He believes that this is "a special time for Polish-Jewish dialogue."

Poland is experiencing a strong revival and interest in Jewish matters. A new Museum of the History of Polish Jews is slated to open in Warsaw in 2010. The Jewish Cultural Festival in Krakow

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has grown from what it itself dubbed "a modest affair" in 1998 to an internationally acclaimed event; last year's festival offered over a hundred events, and an audience of 13,000 attended its finale concert. Jewish studies are offered at the majority of Polish universities. Bookstores stock literature on Jewish subjects, and most Polish newspapers regularly deal with Israeli and/or Jewish issues. And politically, Poland is one of Israel's strongest allies in Europe today.

Of the 30,000 Israeli students visiting Poland annually, Andrzej estimates that 5% are involved in Forum programs. The Forum currently works with 15 schools in Warsaw. He, and the AJC, would like to see the numbers grow on both sides. Andrzej says there are many more Polish schools that would like to have these exchange programs, but need partner Jewish groups. A new program, scheduled to launch next year, will bring together Polish and Jewish students for a full week. Together, they will discover and celebrate Poland's Jewish heritage. Andrzej is planning trips to former shtetls—places inhabited up to 80-90% by Jews before the war. In these locations today, various groups upkeep Jewish cemeteries and the mayors of these towns hold celebrations of Jewish culture. "We want to bring Jewish and Polish students to these places," says Andrzej, "to show how much people care." Last month, the Forum organized a reunion of

former participants, who brainstormed about how to continue facilitating Polish-Jewish dialogue. "We keep asking ourselves," says Andrzej, "how to promote the dialogue, and how to get sponsorship." He also adds that he is thrilled at how many former participants stay involved.

Andrzej concludes his presentation with acknowledging how much has been achieved thus far. Sociological polls conducted in 2004, for example, showed "huge progress" in common perceptions of Poles and Jews by each other. He recalls how one man from his initial meeting in Israel had emphatically stated that he would never return to Poland. When, a few years later, a huge ceremony in Lodz was conducted to celebrate the liquidation of the city's ghetto—that man, along with others from the initial group—came to Lodz. "A lot has changed," says Andrzej.

In thanking those who have attended today's meeting, he states, "We are reaching people in both communities that care and want to make a difference."

As we later wrap up our interview, he talks about how much progress has been made, and how much more needs to be accomplished. His trip is nearing its end; he began in New York at the Congregation Edmond J. Safra, and then spoke at Boston College. At the Polish Embassy in Washington D.C., he received the first Waldowski Award from the Polish Library in D.C. in recognition of "Difficult Questions." In Miami, he gave his presentation at the Aventura Turnberry Jewish Center. Tomorrow, he will speak at the Holocaust Center of Northern California in San Francisco, and afterwards present at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles.

What is most important in his work, he believes, is the building of relationships with people who understand the need for Polish-Jewish dialogue and care about preserving the memory of Polish-Jewish history. And it is crucial, Andrzej concludes, that both sides be part of this work, as its future depends on "people who care—people of good will on both sides."