

# Finding hope on a visit to Poland

By Nancy K. Kaufman

I expected my journey to Poland to be dark and dreary, depressing and debilitating. But how I experienced modern-day Poland was quite different.

We all have our stereotypes about everyone who was associated with the greatest tragedy of the 20th century, the Holocaust. Many of us grew up avoiding any contact with Germany, its people, its products, its music, its culture. Some of us watched the Nuremberg trials and, later, the Eichmann trial with a mixed sense of curiosity and disbelief.

We prayed that justice would be done, but knew in our hearts that there was no justice for the millions of innocent men, women and children who lost their lives during the Holocaust. We all have stories of the first time we learned about the horrors of that event, and we remember the first survivors we met and the numbers that were indelibly marked on their arms.

But now, nearly 65 years after the end of World War II, Poles and Jews are coming to terms with their most painful shared histories. The Forum Among Dialogue for the Nations, the NGO that sponsored the study tour I participated in last month with 20 other American Jewish leaders, is led by a new generation of young Poles who want to confront their past and chart a new course for the future of Polish-Jewish relations. By introducing us to intellectuals, businessmen, diplomats, government officials, students and educators, they exposed us to the layers of complexity in the history of Polish-Jewish relations.

Poland was home to 3.5 million Jews when Germany invaded 70 years ago.



Nancy K. Kaufman, executive director of the Jewish Community Relations Council, flanked by Andrej Folwarczny and Agnieszka Chrabolowska, officials with the Forum Among Dialogue for the Nations.

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By the end of the war, a community, whose presence in Poland had dated back to the 11th century, was largely eliminated. In addition to the 3 million Jews who perished in the death camps of Poland, 3 million non-Jews were killed. Today, important things are being done to promote a greater recognition of the unique roles Jews played in Polish life before the war and to expand the rebirth of Jewish life.

In Warsaw, a museum celebrating the

rich history of Jewish life in Poland will open in two years on the site of the Warsaw Ghetto. In Krakow, where unlike Warsaw, the Jewish quarter is still intact, a Jewish festival organized by non-Jews has been held each June for the last 18 years. The largest Jewish festival in the world – with tens of thousands experiencing Jewish culture through music, art and literature – it is one way Poles have kept alive the Jewish culture that once flourished in their country.

And there is the Auschwitz-Birkenau Museum and Memorial, which was dedicated in 1947 by the Polish government. A visit to Auschwitz and Birkenau is an experience that defies words, and it should be an essential part of any visit to Poland. Walking in the steps of those whose lives ended there is a surreal and deeply profound experience.

It is simply unbelievable that anyone survived the inhumane, evil treatment perpetrated there. I have always greatly admired the survivors among us but this experience made me realize what heroes they truly are. It also made me realize how lucky we, as American Jews, have been to lead lives of ease.

I now feel better equipped to share the stories of man's inhumanity toward man, so that we can redouble our efforts to ensure that "Never Again" is not a hollow cry.

The day we visited Auschwitz concluded with a Shabbat service back in Krakow at the Ramu Synagogue in the Jewish quarter. At a Shabbat dinner afterward, three young members of Krakow's Jewish community talked about when they first became aware of their Jewish roots and about the impact of their Birthright trips to Israel. If they are examples of the future Jewish leaders of Poland, then the Jewish people are well on their way to a renewed life there.

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