

Time of reconciliation for the Poles and Jews

By Larry Lowenthal

A Jewish visitor to Poland today – open-minded and sensitive to the complexity of Polish-Jewish relations – will be quickly plunged into a maze of bewildering contradictions, historical distortions, and angry stereotypes from both communities.

Having just returned from an intensive, nine-day educational tour of Cracow, Auschwitz-Birkenau, and Warsaw, sponsored by the Forum for Dialogue Among the Nations and the American Jewish Committee, I am still struggling to make sense of the bewildering and emotionally explosive array of arguments – both negative and positive – that dominate the issue of Polish-Jewish relations today.

Our group met with Polish politicians, students at the University of Warsaw, Polish Jewish intellectuals, rabbis – both orthodox and reform – the liberal editor of a leading Catholic newspaper, the chief aide to the President of Poland, the First Secretary of the American Embassy, the Israeli Ambassador to Poland, the former Polish Ambassador to Israel, and the Director of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, a monumental enterprise, scheduled for completion in 2009.

We toured Kazimierz, the former Jewish quarter of Cracow, as well as the former Jewish Ghetto of Warsaw, and endured a six-hour, morally devastating tour of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

All the speakers presented complex analyses of the long, 800-year relationship between Poles and Jews, and answered our probing questions with forthright honesty.

Perhaps, it is best to begin with some startling facts.

Over 80 percent of all American Jews have Polish ancestry. In 1939, over three and half million Jews lived in Poland, constituting 10 percent of the entire pre-War Polish population. Jews comprised over 30 percent of the population of Warsaw – one out of every three people in that city of two million citizens.

By the end of the Second World War, three million Polish Jews were dead, along with three million non-Jewish Poles. Almost 20 percent of the entire population of Poland had been slaughtered by the Nazis, a loss unequalled by any nation outside of the Soviet Union.

But instead of uniting Poles and Jews, this unspeakable devastation led to a bitter division between the communities, and radically different interpretations of

World War II history.

In Jewish communities, the common conviction is that Poles looked upon the Holocaust with indifference and often betrayed Jews to the Nazis, while Polish memory is focused on Polish suffering, stalwart Polish resistance to the Nazis, and the heroism of Righteous Poles who saved Jews during the War.

Both interpretations are correct, but incomplete, and it is that incompleteness that carries the possibility of reconciliation between Poles and Jews.

It is true that Polish anti-Semitism, both past and current, is an inescapable fact of Polish life. Although Jews were warmly welcomed to Poland in the 11th century after savage persecution in Western Europe, anti-Semitism grew to dangerous heights with the rise of Polish nationalism after World War I. During the Holocaust, overwhelming evidence corroborates Jewish charges of Polish blackmail, extortion, betrayal, and elation at the destruction of the Jewish community.

But equal evidence confirms the heroic Polish rescue of Jews. Almost 6,000 Polish names are enshrined in Yad Vashem's list of Righteous Gentiles – more than any



Larry Lowenthal with his daughter in Warsaw.

other nation in Europe. Polish rescuers also faced uniquely horrific Nazi reprisals, if caught. A Rescuer's entire family – men, women, children, grandparents, friends, and even family pets – were executed if rescue efforts were uncovered.

Furthermore, it is estimated that between 10 and 50 people were involved in the rescue of a single Jew during the Nazi occupation. Yad Vashem estimates that Poles saved as many as 40,000 Jews from death. Estimates of unsuccessful rescue attempts are impossible to calculate. In other words, it is clear that hundreds of thousands of Poles risked their lives and the lives of their entire family, under appallingly difficult circumstances, to save Jews from certain death.

It is time for expanded Polish-Jewish dialogue. Poles have to confront their ugly anti-Semitism. Jews have to ac-

knowledge Polish suffering and Polish heroism.

Fifty years of communist domination literally effaced Jewish history from Polish consciousness. Now that Poland is once again a free nation, she must confront the lies of the past, acknowledge the unique Jewish suffering in the Holocaust, and resurrect the splendid history of Jewish contributions to Polish national culture.

Polish-Jewish dialogue, carried out with honesty, respect, and sensitivity – with the recognition of mutual traumas caused during horrendously difficult times – can provide a role model for other inter-group tensions. There is simply no other path toward survival in the 21st century.

Larry Lowenthal is the executive director of the Greater Boston Chapter of the American Jewish Committee.

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