

Chaim's House – a proposal

An educational conference center – a place of learning

Include Chaim's family history & the history of the building

Restore some rooms to pre-WWII condition (perhaps obtain pics from Chaim)

The family had a bakery. Is there a family recipe we could incorporate into use at Chaim's House?

Include artistic elements – photos, reflections, narratives, etc

Partner with existing organizations: AJC, MDSM, Auschwitz Museum, Jewish Community of Bieske-Biala, etc

Work with AJC to incorporate Chaim's House as a stop on their Oswiecim Jewish Tour (Maybe help incorporate an actual trail with brochures & stops similar to Boston's 'Freedom Trail')

Training grids to be developed by TMF and partners

Incorporate both classroom and field training

Include academic/scientific research that's been done in the area by Dr Caroline Sturdy-Colls

Staff with people in/from the Oswiecim area

TMF to initiate and develop local leadership so that the Chaim House ends up being overseen and belonging to the community of Oswiecim

Leadership development to be constructed by Dr Steven Reece

Focus on Oswiecim history – Jewish & Polish

Goal: to initiate dialogue between Jews & Poles in a way that brings reconciliation

Prior to WWII, Oswiecim's population was a combination of Jewish and Polish citizens. The AJC focuses on Jewish history, Auschwitz focuses on the experience of the Holocaust, MDSM focuses on Holocaust education and promotes peace for today. What about the interaction between Poles and Jews before and during the war. What was Oswiecim like for people outside of the Auschwitz camp? What was it like after the war and during the time of communism? We would like to bring to light these aspects of history in Oswiecim, the hidden Oswiecim that most do not know, see, or think about.

Auschwitz Jewish Center – Guardian of Jewish Memory

Anonymity of Death – Specificity of Life

Before Auschwitz became the ultimate symbol of the Holocaust, it was just an ordinary Polish town known as Oswiecim. The majority of its citizens were Jewish.

Jews worked, married, studied and worshipped, cared for their families, and served the community. The tragedy of Holocaust suddenly ended the centuries-old Jewish life of the town.

In 1995, the Auschwitz Jewish Center Foundation was established in order to rebuild a Jewish cultural, spiritual, and educational center in Oswiecim.

In September 2000, the Auschwitz Jewish Center opened its doors to visitors from all over the world. It is a non-governmental organization which exists to serve as a guardian of Jewish memory, as well as to educate the public about the Holocaust.

Since August, 2006, the Center has been affiliated with the Museum of Jewish Heritage – A Living Memorial to the Holocaust in New York, USA.

MDSM – A house to live, a place to learn

Aim of the foundation:

Taking over a role in the education of adolescents and adults from all over the world - especially for Polish and German adolescents - within the work of the IYMC in Oświęcim and on the basis of the history of the KL Auschwitz.

Jewish life and history are complicated in Poland

BY [ESTHER D. KUSTANOWITZ](#) | PUBLISHED AUG 16, 2017 | [TRAVEL](#)

“There are no Polish concentration camps.”

I felt our group’s energy shift defensively at our guide’s proclamation. Quickly, there was a clarification: This was not a denial of Auschwitz and Birkenau’s existence, but a semantic edit — they were German Nazi camps on Polish soil, not camps established by Poles.

This is the murky, difficult-to-navigate space of contemporary Poland, a country eager to tell its national story but unsure of how to handle the more challenging stories within its history.

As a first-timer in Poland and guest of the Polish Press Office and the Polish government on a recent trip with seven other West Coast Jews, I had to balance the tales I’d heard of Poland’s anti-Semitism with the country’s contemporary, culture-celebrating face: Who has the right to shape the story of what happened in Poland in the 1930s and ’40s and put it into a contemporary Polish context? How could I acknowledge Polish pain within the deep wound of my Jewish pain? And how would being here inform my relationship with Poland and its people?

Joshua Holo, dean of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion campus in Los Angeles and one of the five local people on my trip, explained Polish attempts to present history are “a bit like a three-car accordion mashup.” As he explained, the first car (Nazis) rear-ends a second car (Poles), which then rear-ends a third (Jews). The Poles understand that the third car was damaged but don’t see themselves as responsible.

“In fact,” Holo said, “the Poles braked as hard as they could and heroically tried to avoid damaging the third car, but the violence of the collision proved too much. But the Polish version risks appearing defensive to many Jews and even partially distorted — distorted, that is, where it concerns us most.”

The week before she joined our trip, Rabbi Cheryl Peretz, associate dean at American Jewish University’s Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, was in Germany and noted how differently the Poles and the Germans handle acceptance of the Holocaust. In Germany, she said, “everywhere you go, there’s testimony to the existence of the Jewish people — memorials, museums, statues. With the Poles, that story is still sort of hidden.” She observed that the Germans are “clearer on their story,” and that “some of their acts of *teshuvah* (repentance) or reparations is to tell the Jewish story. Poles haven’t yet gotten to the place to say, ‘We were part of this’ because they feel like it was done to them.”

Los Angeles Museum of the Holocaust President Paul Nussbaum, a trip participant whose Hungarian parents survived Auschwitz, said he believes the responsibility to be vigilant in telling the truth is sacred.

“It is entrusted to us by those who cannot speak their truth themselves,” he said. “So when the truth is hijacked or attempted to be managed for petty political purposes, I am compelled to fight it with all my strength in order to honor my sacred responsibility.”

Everything we did in Poland had two layers — what is now, and what was and is no longer. And the transition often was an emotional and historical whiplash. For instance, our group took a train from Warsaw to Krakow on a Friday for a 650-person Shabbat dinner and a Jewish culture festival held in Kazimierz, which had been Krakow’s Jewish quarter before the Nazis deported the inhabitants. The following morning, we were at Auschwitz, making the weekend feel like a reductive, sped-up tour of the Jewish European experience: vibrant Jewish culture suddenly, and drastically, dimmed at a concentration camp.

The trip presented contemporary Warsaw and Krakow as Poland’s current cultural and cosmopolitan face to accompany a troubled history. The Poles — at least those we met in the context of our trip —

were fond of saying, “There is no Polish history without Polish Jewish history” — often before reminding us again that the Poles were victims and that they weren’t responsible for the concentration camps.

It seemed like they were sincere and trying to say, “We’re all in this together.” But equating the Jewish and the Polish experience under Nazi-occupied Poland didn’t sit quite right.

At the Polin Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which opened in 2013 and is built where the Warsaw Ghetto once stood, our guide shared a legend: When the wandering Jews reached Poland, they saw the word “*Polin*” — Poland in Yiddish — written on a tree. They mistook it for the Hebrew *po-lin*, “rest here,” and they did for 1,000 years, until 90 percent of Poland’s Jewish population was destroyed in the Holocaust. The architecture of the museum entrance was designed to evoke the parting of the Red Sea and also the bridge of history — a rich Jewish life in Poland, disrupted by the Holocaust, and now moving forward.

The question of where Jewish culture and symbols belong in contemporary Poland is complicated. Because the Jewish population was decimated during the war, the Jewish culture has become for the Poles something exotic, somewhere between a fascination and a fetish. And the elevation of Jewish deference, even for celebratory or festival purposes, may still, for some Jews, feel more like anti-Semitism.

On Aug. 9, JTA reported on a fake Jewish wedding, held by a Polish cultural heritage group, involving a group of non-Jewish volunteers dressed in traditional Charedi costumes. Many Polish souvenir shops sell small figures of bearded Jewish men, called “Lucky Jews.” One of our guides said it’s not considered anti-Semitic, explaining that Jews are so rare as to have become the emblem of good fortune.

And then there is the annual Jewish Culture Festival in Krakow, a week in June offering workshops, concerts, tours and lectures for thousands of people for the past 28 years. As the brainchild of Janusz Makuch, a non-Jewish Pole, the festival culminates in a massive, multi-act, outdoor, afternoon-to-night

klezmer concert on Szeroka Street in Kazimierz. In the background stands the *shul* of Rav Moses Isserles (the Rema), considered to be the Maimonides of Polish Jewry.

Makuch spoke with us at a Morocco-and-Israel-themed coffee shop called Cheder Cafe, where many patrons spoke Hebrew. The menu offered Israeli snacks, kosher wine and *charoset*. The *finjans* (tea kettles) were authentic, Makuch bragged, from Nazareth.

Makuch grew up knowing nothing about Jews until he visited Kazimierz and realized “there had to be young Jews hungry for knowledge of the world we lost.” He credited young musicians for “bringing real Jewish light to this dark place” and expressed pride in the festival’s mostly non-Jewish volunteers.

The culture festival is curated, likely with the best of intentions, initiated by a new generation trying to apply cultural salve to what the wartime generation had wrought. But some Jews see the result as similar to Disney’s Epcot Center’s treatment of different countries: well-intentioned but inevitably displaying little more than cultural tropes and stereotypes. Jews of the world, ingrained with ancestors’ anecdotes over decades, may not always see this a positive, whatever the intent.

Still, what a marvel, I thought, that 70 years after near extermination, Jewish culture had returned to Krakow. And what a strange gloss on history such a vibrant, loud and musical return of Jewish culture to the main square truly is.

In Warsaw, the ground floor of the Jewish Community Center (JCC) resembles a cafe, with a coffee bar and tables. The JCC also hosts films, events, lectures and classes for its 400 members and 1,000 program participants, most of them young families. And in Krakow, the JCC is serving 630 members and actively building the Jewish community of tomorrow. Its preschool, pristine at the time of our visit, opens this fall.

While most online sources indicate that modern Krakow has “a few hundred Jews,” Jonathan Ornstein, a Polish and United States citizen who is the JCC’s executive director, estimates there are “at least 100,000” but admits, “it’s hard to know.”

He painted a picture beyond verifiable statistics and our American-inflected understanding of “who is a Jew.” A Pole discovers, through a family confession or a box of relics in the attic, that she has a Jewish mother. She becomes involved, even religious. Her 12 other relatives are as Jewish as she is but do not care and do not become involved.

Ornstein knows this kind of story from personal experience. The weekend of our visit, he married his fiancée, Kasia, who had learned of her Jewish heritage only several years ago, after which she sought out the JCC to learn more.

“The people who are living there as Jews clearly want to tell their own story,” said Peretz, recalling another woman who had discovered she was Jewish but didn’t want to be told how to be Jewish. “She and her sons are exploring it, while no one else in their family is interested. We have to be willing to let them write their own story.”

Krakow has seven synagogues within walking distance of one another, and the JCC had 100,000 visitors last year, “after the Polin Museum and the camps, the most visitors,” Ornstein said.

“There’s the idea that we have to treat it [Poland] as a cemetery. Now, there’s a rebirth. Hey, March of the Living, come inside and see some Polish Jewish life,” Ornstein said.

As one example, he mentioned the Krakow JCC fundraising program, Ride for the Living, an 8-hour, 55-mile bike ride starting at Auschwitz and ending in the massive, JCC-orchestrated Shabbat dinner that happens during the culture festival.

“Why are we still around as Jews? We developed values and mechanisms for dealing with our tragic past,” Ornstein said. “We are Jewish despite the Holocaust not because of it.”

Nedda Black, an L.A.-based lawyer on the trip, found this future-driven spirit deeply resonant.

“Polish-Jewish children, no less and no more than American-Jewish children, need to feel loved, to laugh, to experience joy and to have a story that is their own,” she said. “I felt honored that so many Polish Jews shared their stories with me and allowed me into their community and homes to light candles, break bread, sing and dance together with them. In the end, we are all looking for the same things in life.”