

Reflections on My JewishGen-Sponsored Trip to Poland, 11-20 June 2019

I departed JFK airport on Tuesday, June 4, 2019, for what was to be my fourth trip to Poland since 2002. This travel opportunity had come about rather last minute through the generous sponsorship of JewishGen, the leading Jewish genealogical organization in the world, which is based in New York City at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, but actively serves individuals internationally. Fortunately for me, I have a longtime friend who lives in Warsaw with whom I was able to stay for the first week of my trip. As it turns out, the JewishGen trip was scheduled for the 11-20 June, but I left a week earlier, so that I could get in some archival research toward my doctoral dissertation, at the IPN (Institute of National Remembrance) and ZIH (Jewish Historical Institute), both based in Warsaw.

My first week in Warsaw proved somewhat daunting, as I tried to quickly get the hang of transportation routes, currency exchanges, difficult key locks, the Polish language – which I studied several years ago at Hunter College for two years – and a few other features not particularly common to daily American life. During that week, I spent roughly four days at the aforementioned archives sifting through, scanning, and photographing documents – some of them in hard copy, others in digitized form – but mostly in Polish, a definite challenge for me, even today. I also visited the Nozyk Synagogue on Shabbat and Shavuot, since my trip coincided with one of the major Jewish holidays. The Nozyk Synagogue is the only synagogue in Warsaw not destroyed during World War II by the Germans. Apparently, it was spared the destruction of all the other local synagogues – including the magnificent Tlomackie Street Synagogue – because the Germans appropriated it as a storage facility during the war.

The Nozyk Synagogue is located within easy walking distance from where my grandmother and great aunt grew up in pre-WWII Warsaw, at ul. Panska 26 and ul. Sliska 34. Although the street names still exist, the streets and buildings themselves in that area are all postwar constructs, and do not reflect the world in which my grandmother and great aunt grew up during Poland's interwar period. Looking around at all the mostly postwar Communist-style structures, I could not help but be haunted by what once existed there. Nor could I imagine my grandmother and great aunt, were they still alive today, recognizing this city that they – and generations of their family – formerly called home.

I was fortunate to be invited by Rabbi Eliezer Zarecki and his wife, Batya, for Shabbat lunch at their lovely home. Rabbi Zarecki is the director of the Kollel Torah Mitzion, which sends representatives to various localities throughout the Diaspora to help oversee and augment Jewish learning and knowledge. They have been living in Warsaw for two years thus far, and will likely remain there for at least one more year. They have two young daughters, and Batya teaches in the synagogue's nursery school program. Also present at lunch were a young Israeli couple and a young man who teaches Jewish studies at Morasha, the country's only Jewish day school. For me, this was an ideal opportunity to practice my Hebrew, since I was the sole non-Israeli present. It was certainly an ego boost for me to see that I could keep up with their Hebrew, participate in the various ongoing discussions, and even be asked how it was that my Hebrew was so good if I am not Israeli 😊.

Through the synagogue, where I ate lunch on the first day of Shavuot, I met other Jews, or Jews-in-process (i.e., those in the process of converting to Judaism) from different backgrounds. One of those individuals is Joanna Z., an English teacher who has been preparing for conversion with whom I later walked around the beautiful Stare Miasto (Old Town) and Nowe Miasto (New Town) sections of the city. Stare Miasto, although destroyed during WWII, was restored so as to appear the way it formerly did,

prior to the Second World War. Joanna would later – prior to my joining my JewishGen group – also walk with me around parts of Lazienki Park, a genuinely romantic spot that I first saw back in 2002 and with which I immediately fell in love. By the time we reached the park, it was dark outside, but I never felt truly frightened as I would at the same hour, here in the United States. Overall, violent crime is far less of a serious concern in Poland than it is in the U.S. In the park we encountered the jolting and bizarre sounds of peacocks exercising their vocal cords. I had never heard anything quite like those sounds before, but Joanna informed me what their source was. She also pointed out a large-sized peacock that was hiding overhead in a tree; only its long feathers were visible to us from down below.

Talking and getting to know Joanna was refreshing and illuminating, as we share a number of common interests and views. This only emphasized the point for me that although individuals may evolve in very different environments and hail from varied backgrounds, they are frequently more alike than dissimilar. If, for no other reason, I enjoyed my recent journey to Poland, it was because it enabled me to engage with individuals elsewhere and to gain insights into the state of Jewish and general everyday life in another part of the world – one in which I personally have deep-seated roots and a vested interest.

This last statement leads me to reflect on an illuminating conversation I had outside of the Nozyk Synagogue with a Jewish couple from Los Angeles and their local tour guide, who himself admitted to having a Jewish mother. When I heard that the couple resided in California, I laughingly replied to the tour guide in Polish that I had never been to California, but that this was my fourth trip to Poland. The tour guide looked at me with a somewhat puzzled, curious, and surprised expression and proceeded to ask me why this was the case. To this I replied that I feel tied to Poland – that I have deep roots in the country that are not terribly far-removed. California, on the other hand, has no special meaning to me; it does not call out to me in the same way – be it personally or historically. My reply must have satisfied the tour guide, for he had no additional follow-up questions or quizzical looks for me.

After a week on my own in Warsaw, I met up with members of my group and toured the Stare Miasto area, which was also where our hostel was located. We had a wonderful and amusing, albeit highly opinionated tour guide, who showed us several sites connected with local Jewish history. This included the Nathan Rapoport (1911-1987) Warsaw ghetto uprising monument, which is virtually the same as the one located at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem; the Mila 18 memorial site, where Mordechai Anielewicz (1919-1943) and fifty other Jewish freedom fighters committed suicide during the ghetto period, rather than die at the hands of the Germans; former Jewish school buildings; the notorious deportation site called *Umschlagplatz*; a statue to honor Polish resistance fighter and Holocaust rescuer, Jan Karski (1914-2000), and the relatively new *Polin: Museum of the History of Polish Jews* (opened in the fall of 2014), which pertains to Jewish history in Poland from its earliest days up until contemporary times.

One of the personally meaningful sites we visited on our first day together as a group in Warsaw was the Jewish cemetery on ul. Okopowa and ul. Anielewicza. Before the Second World War, ul. Anielewicza certainly did not exist, as it is named today for the aforementioned tragic figure, Mordechai Anielewicz, who died while fighting in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, in early May of 1943. Prior to the war, ul. Anielewicza was called “ul. Gesia,” which means “Goose Street” in Polish. In the vast and overgrown cemetery, which was already overcrowded even before World War II, our group split up. At that moment, I sought out the help of the cemetery caretaker, Przemyslaw Izrael Szpilman, with whom I had been in contact shortly before my trip. I knew that I would require his assistance to locate the small and

far-flung Matzevah (headstone) of my great great grandfather, Yerachmiel Yosef Pszenica (1866-1941), son of Boruch Wolf, who died in early July of 1941 in the Warsaw ghetto. This was the grandfather of my maternal grandmother, who was herself a Holocaust survivor from Warsaw. I grew up hearing stories my grandmother related about this very grandfather, who along with my grandmother's father, owned and operated a family furniture/upholstery business in Warsaw prior to the war.

I only learned about the Matzevah and grave around 2012, at which point neither my grandmother nor my great aunt, who also survived the Holocaust, was alive. I then visited Poland in 2014, in part, because I felt it my duty to pay homage to my great great grandfather's eternal resting place. As I recalled from my trip to the cemetery five years ago, the grave is in the far back region of the cemetery, "Section 106," according to Mr. Szpilman, close to the towering brick wall that separates the Jewish cemetery from a Protestant cemetery that lies just beyond the other side of the wall. Mr. Szpilman helped me locate the gravesite and Matzevah both in 2014, and now again, in 2019.¹ It took a fair amount of effort, even for Mr. Szpilman to locate the Matzevah this time, because as it turned out, it was partially submerged beneath tree limbs that had been chopped down recently from nearby trees. Ironically, it was I, this time, who actually spotted the Matzevah. I visually surveyed the Matzevah and took a few photographs of the site to send my family, most of whom reside in Chicago.

The bulk of the day following the Warsaw Jewish cemetery visit was devoted to touring the aforementioned award-winning museum, which was in the works for many years before it finally opened its doors to the greater public only roughly five years ago. I had heard much about the museum during its developmental stages, since I worked at the YIVO Institute in NYC at the time, and was privy to some of what the museum's researchers and representatives were interested in obtaining in terms of historical documentation. Thus needless to say, it felt like a long-awaited first hand encounter for me to finally witness the fruits of all the years' worth of labor. Prior to this visit, I witnessed only the museum's exterior façade in 2014, my last trip to Poland. At the time, the museum was due to open its doors to the public in a matter of days from the time when I was in Poland.

All in all, the museum truly reflects the years of hard work and thorough research that went into creating this magnificent teaching tool. Walking through those several exhibition halls, which do a superb job of bringing the past to life, all I could think of was how much I would like my mother and other family members to visit the museum. In addition, I thought to myself how important it is for young Poles today – many, if not most of whom have never had any first-hand encounters with Jews – to learn about Jews from those exhibitions.

It is difficult for me to say precisely which exhibition spoke most deeply to me, but I think I echo many other visitors to the museum when I refer to the model of the Gwoździec synagogue, which is utterly beautiful in its colorful splendor and replete with biblical imagery, as well as biblical verses, proverbs, and anagrams.² I also found myself drawn into the exhibition showcasing Poland's interwar period. I

¹ For a more detailed account of how I located the Matzevah of my great great grandfather a few years ago and about my first visit to his grave in 2014, please read my blog article: "My Own Genealogical Journey," at: <http://www.rivkasyiddish.com/blog/my-own-genealogical-journey> (accessed 6-25-19).

² For additional information about the synagogue exhibition, see for example: <https://www.polin.pl/en/wystawy-wystawa-glowna-gwozdziec-rekonstrukcja-synagogue-gwozdziec> (accessed 6-23-19).

believe it was this section of the museum that included three-dimensional samples of the copious number of primarily Yiddish and Polish publications that appeared in Poland at that time. I suppose that much of what I saw there echoed the types of documents I worked with and wrote about during my tenure as an archivist at YIVO, and so it felt intimately familiar to me.

While in Warsaw my JewishGen group also met with the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Rabbi Michael Schudrich, who is based in Warsaw, but oversees all Jewish-related matter throughout Poland. Schudrich, notably, is a native of New York who has been stationed in Poland since the early 1990s. This meeting provided an opportunity for me and others present to hear about postwar and present-day Jewish life in Poland, and Warsaw in particular. In addition, it provided us with the opportunity to ask Rabbi Schudrich an assortment of questions such as: how did he come to find himself in his current position; where does he see the Jewish community of Warsaw being in another five or ten years from now; how has his tenure in Poland all these years affected his family; and a host of other probing questions.

From Warsaw, my JewishGen group next traveled to Lublin, which has an overall older look and feel to it than does mostly rebuilt Warsaw. But en route to Lublin, Dr. Dan Oren, one of our group leaders and the chief organizer of this trip, directed us to stop off at a clearing on the side of the road. Unbeknownst to us, this clearing led to the former Jewish cemetery of the town of Markuszow, where some of Dr. Oren's – aka, "Dan's" – maternal forbearers had resided. Later on in our trip, we learned from Dan that a Matzevah he had located many years earlier, turned out to be that of his own great grandmother. But according to Dan, the process of decoding the flowery inscription on the Matzevah and of determining whose Matzevah it indeed was, proved to be some twenty-plus years in the making. This process might very well have been speeded up, according to Dan, had this detective work all taken place in an Internet age.

After our stop-off at Markuszow, we rode a while longer before reaching Lublin. I knew that we were finally in Lublin when our bus pulled up in front of the famed former *Yeshivat Chachmei Lublin*, founded by Rabbi Meir Shapiro (1887-1933) in 1924 and forcibly closed by the Germans in 1939. For many years the building, which remained intact following World War II, was used for the Medical University of Lublin. But then in 2003, the building was returned to the Jewish community of Poland. A few years ago Hotel Ilan was established inside of the former yeshiva building, and it was in those classy surroundings that my group spent one night. We were joined for dinner – provided by a kosher caterer – by Dr. Teresa Klimowicz, who spoke to us about the important work of her association, *Studnia Pamięci* (Well of Memory), which organizes educational trips to memorial sites in Poland and elsewhere, as well as conferences and other such related venues and functions. *Studnia Pamięci's* special focus is on educational tours of Lublin and its Jewish history, and it aims at Holocaust commemoration and awareness.

Dan also provided our group with a very moving personal tour of part of Lublin, showing us the building where his own mother had grown up with her extended family prior to World War II. Apparently, this same building was used to house the *Judenrat* (Jewish Council) during the ghetto period. It was striking to see this fully intact prewar building and courtyard – replete with the original artistic tile work that Dan's family had once called home – especially after having spent several days in Warsaw, where it is frequently difficult or even impossible to find signs or remnants of prewar (Jewish) domiciles.

As part of our tour of “Jewish Lublin,” we visited a hidden away art gallery which currently has a rather innovative exhibition focusing on the often hand-drawn maps found in *Yizkor* books – memorial books – or, *Ksiegi Pamieci* (books of memory) in Polish. These specialized books were, for the most part, written in the first few decades following the Holocaust by those who survived those turbulent times. Generally, the two leading languages of these books are Yiddish and Hebrew, although they may also be found in Polish, English, Spanish, and other languages. One of the especially helpful features of many of these books are their necrology lists or pages of Jews who perished primarily in the Holocaust. Also of much use to genealogists and researchers, alike, are the personalized maps that they frequently contain. For these maps reflect how the Jewish community viewed itself and its place within the town’s/city’s broader context. This is not something that one could readily find in a more generic map of a given town or city.

I was pleased to find one of my own ancestral towns – Chmielnik, Poland – that I had written about for my MA thesis, represented among the maps on display. Indeed, I made ample use of that singular hand-drawn map when writing my thesis, as it enabled me to better visualize the various places mentioned in books, articles, interviews, and other resources pertaining to Jewish life in the town. What is more, I even took a copy of that map with me when I finally visited Chmielnik in 2014; it served as a most helpful street map.

From Lublin we traveled to Tarnow, which prior to World War II, was a part of Austro-Hungarian-controlled Galicia, also known as *Malopolska* or “Lesser Poland.” This region had a highly concentrated Jewish population at that time, and Tarnow in particular gave rise to two noted Polish Jewish historians, Ignacy Schiper (1884-1943; murdered in Majdanek) and Salo Baron (1895-1989), one of the leading professors of Jewish history in the United States at Columbia University in New York. On the eve of World War II, the Jewish community there comprised as much as 40-45% of the total population.³ Today, there are less than a handful of Jews who reside in Tarnow.

One of the only such Jews is Montreal-born and raised Gerald “Gerry” Vineberg, who a few years ago decided to up and come to Tarnow and establish a kosher café, “The Nosh,” there. As it turns out, our JewishGen group had lunch at “The Nosh,” which is under the supervision of Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich. This was a lively, colorful, and seemingly thriving venue that serves non-meat dishes, perfect for a vegetarian such as myself. Contributing to the colorfulness of the café were the walls covered in oil paintings made by Mina Nath, Gerry’s late mother-in-law, who was a Holocaust survivor from Tarnow. What is more, the paintings are for sale and the majority of those proceedings go to the “Tarnow Jewish Cemetery Project” to help restore the Tarnow Jewish cemetery.

After lunch at “The Nosh,” our group indeed headed for the Jewish cemetery, where we met with Dr. Adam Bartosz, local historian, Director of the District Museum in Tarnow, and chairman of the Committee for the Protection of Monuments of Jewish Culture. Dr. Bartosz, along with his daughter, Magda, a convert to Judaism, relayed to us various aspects of the local Jewish history and informed us of the restoration work that was and is currently being done in the Tarnow Jewish cemetery. Remarkably, Dr. Bartosz, who has made the restoration of the cemetery one of his life’s missions, was recently awarded an EU grant for just this purpose: to restore the Beit Tahara (where bodies were cleaned and prepared for burial); remove the

³ For additional information about Tarnow’s pre-World War II Jewish population statistics, et al., see: <http://www.yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Tarnow> (accessed 6-23-19).

extensive overgrowth and make the cemetery totally accessible to visitors; to provide an index of the Matzevot (headstones); and a virtual map of their coordinates in the cemetery.⁴

What struck me most when meeting Adam Bartosz was that like Teresa Klimowicz and other non-Jews – Polish or otherwise – whom we would meet on this journey, he is what one would call a true Righteous Gentile – a “Ger Tzedek” in Hebrew. These are individuals who, for whatever altruistic reasons, have chosen to do good deeds on behalf of Jews. Indeed, Dr. Bartosz’s own example of altruistic philo-Semitic behavior, particularly in the form of “Chesed Shel Emet” – the ultimate act of loving kindness, taking care of the dead, who can never reward or repay the kind act – must have rubbed off on his daughter, Magda. She ended up living for an extended period of time in Israel, and as previously mentioned, even went so far as to convert to the Jewish faith.

Following our all-too-brief visit to Tarnow, we continued on the road to Krakow, where we arrived shortly before the beginning of Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath. Friday night we walked from our lodgings to the nearby Krakow JCC, where we were part of a communal Shabbat dinner. It was amazing to see the crowd of people in that large room, seated around several tables. As we learned in the beginning of the meal, there were both locals as well as visitors from various sites around the globe. Ushering in the meal was a D’var Torah (sermon) about the weekly Torah portion that was given by an eighty-something-year-old Holocaust survivor referred to as “Pani (Ms.) Zosia.” So as to facilitate inclusivity, an English translation of the D’var Torah was distributed to all the visitors, and oral translations were likewise issued.

What was perhaps most noteworthy, aside from the fact that here was a room filled to the brim with Jews in Krakow, c. 2019, sharing a Shabbat dinner together, was the fact that all of our servers are non-Jewish volunteers. According to Dan, our guide, and Jonathan Ornstein, Director of the Krakow JCC, the JCC currently has seventy non-Jewish volunteers who help tend to Shabbat dinners and a host of other functions. It is still not entirely clear to me just what motivates these individuals to provide these free services on a regular basis – as the JCC provides communal Shabbat dinners every week – other than because, as one young woman who volunteers there put it, “Once you come to the JCC, you don’t want to leave.” Essentially, this has become such a “happening place” over the past eleven years that it has a magnetic force on both young and old, established and newly emerging Jews, alike.

According to the aforementioned Jonathan Ornstein, who spoke to our group on Shabbat afternoon, the JCC building was erected in 2008 as the result of an initiative spearheaded by none other than the Prince of Wales. At present, the building is bursting at the seams with all of its regular daily functions, including Hebrew, English, and Arabic instruction; yoga classes; events and welfare aid oriented toward Holocaust survivors; an early childhood program; and a major event called “Ride for the Living,” which involves a bike route beginning at Auschwitz and culminating at the JCC, and aims at raising funds for the growing needs of the burgeoning JCC. As Ornstein conveyed, the Krakow JCC functions as would a multitude of different entities in a larger-sized Jewish community, say, in North America. It also serves as a safe and

⁴ For further information about Dr. Adam Bartosz and his achievements vis-à-vis the Tarnow Jewish cemetery, see for instance: <https://www.iajgsjewishcemeteryproject.org/poland/tarnow.html>; <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/t/625-tarnow/124-local-contacts/33434-tarnow> (accessed 6-23-19).

inviting haven for individuals who have only recently learned that they have Jewish roots and wish to explore what that means for themselves on an individual – but not necessarily a religious – basis.

Shabbat (Saturday) morning some of us attended prayer services at the *Synagoga Isaaka* (Isaak Synagogue; erected in the mid-17th century), which is one of two still regularly functioning synagogues in Krakow (the other synagogue is known as the *Synagoga Remuh*, the Remuh Synagogue). Miraculously, unlike Warsaw, which witnessed significant destruction during World War II, a number of prewar synagogues still exist to this very day in Krakow. Thus, there is something quite quaint and almost magical about walking down the streets of Krakow and its Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, in particular. Perhaps the district's only shortcoming in my opinion, is that because it still has an authentic prewar "feel" to it, and due to the comparatively cheap cost of beer and other commodities, it tends to attract an overabundance of tourists. Some of these onlookers are mainly interested in the more kitschy aspects of Judaism, while others are simply eager to down a few reasonably priced beers.

Overall, though, I love the winding and narrow streets one finds in Krakow's Jewish quarter that are filled with bustling activity late into the night (at least on the weekend, that is, which is when I was there). Unfortunately, we did not have enough time to visit the majestic main market square (Pol. "rynek") where the Sukiennice (Cloth Hall) is located. Having been there in the past, though, I have already had the opportunity to experience this particular scene. The same may be said of the castle known as "Wawel," which we simply could not visit, on account of our time restraints. Instead, we were given an informative tour Shabbat afternoon, which had us walking through Kazimierz, the Jewish quarter, all the way across the Vistula River, to the former site of Oskar Schindler's factory.

As many who have seen the award-winning Steven Spielberg film, "Schindler's List" may know, Oskar Schindler (1908-1974) was a complex human being who was both a member of the Nazi Party, as well as the savior of some 1,200 Jews. In recognition of Schindler's Jewish rescue efforts during World War II, he and his wife, Emilie, were honored by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem for being "Righteous Among the Nations" (i.e., an official title) and Schindler himself was ultimately buried in Jerusalem on Mount Zion. To-date, he is the only former member of the Nazi Party to have received such an honor.

During our Shabbat (Saturday evening) dinner, which was provided – as was our Shabbat lunch – by Kosher Delight, we met and schmoozed with three representatives from the Matzevah Foundation.⁵ It should be pointed out that virtually all those who are involved with the Matzevah Foundation are religious Christians based in the southern states of America, and that the organization's mission is to help clean up and restore Jewish burial grounds, namely in Poland. The three representatives were: Steven Reece, a Baptist pastor and the Matzevah Foundation's founder and president; Przemek Panasiuk, a Warsaw-based member; and Rachael Romero, a Miami-based member who may be the organization's lone Jew. I might add that that dinner was only the first of several "schmooze sessions" that we would have during meals and at other pivotal moments with this genuinely motivated and inspiring threesome.

As I would come to learn later, Steven Reece has lived a number of lives and worn a great many hats in his 64 years. Initially a well-established photojournalist, he decided to begin a new career as a Baptist

⁵ For more detailed information about the remarkable work of the Matzevah Foundation, its board members, and organization partners, visit: <https://www.matzevah.org> (accessed 6-27-19).

pastor, which also took him to Poland. There, he spent twelve years with his family living in Warsaw. He is one of the relatively few Americans without Polish ancestry I have met who is fluent in Polish. In addition, he is scheduled to defend his doctoral thesis – something he has been working toward for the past seven years – in late July of this year. His doctoral work essentially reflects the type of leadership work he has devoted many years of his life to doing: helping to restore long-forgotten, neglected, and damaged Jewish cemeteries in places like Rohatyn (formerly Poland, today Ukraine), Czestochowa (Pol.), Krzepice (Pol.), Markuszow (Pol.), and elsewhere; and the reconciliation efforts between Jews and Poles that this type of activity generates.

Again, when I think of Steven and Przemek, the term “Righteous Gentile” immediately leaps to mind. For as Steven – a native of Texas with a heavy Texan drawl, conveyed – the cemetery restoration work is not his “rodeo,” but rather that of us Jews, who have a direct obligation to care for our own dead, and for the eternal resting grounds of Jews who are sadly no longer in our midst. Thus, for Steven and Przemek, their physical labor in these Jewish cemeteries is without doubt an altruistic act – and something that I am still attempting to fully grasp and sort out within my own mind. As such, I am truly inspired to have met Steven and worked under his guidance and direction. I only wish that more people – Jews, especially – knew about the Matzevah Foundation and supported it.

Rachael Romero, who ended up rooming with me for the remainder of my time in Poland, is herself a convert to Judaism who suspects that she may very well have Sephardic Jewish ancestry through the Lopez branch of her family. “Lopez” is a noted Converso surname; but what is more, Rachael’s Lopez forebears hailed from Toledo, Spain, which in the Middle Ages had a sizable Jewish community. Another thing that is noteworthy about Rachael is that she is the author of the book, *The Dollmaker of Krakow*, which, as she informed me, has become highly popular among adolescent Polish females. The book itself, while containing elements of fantasy and magic, is centrally rooted in the events surrounding the Holocaust and how it affected Jews residing in Krakow at that time.

Based on my several conversations with Rachael, I know that she did a great deal of research for her book by soaking up the ambience of Krakow on multiple trips to Poland’s former capital city. I have not yet read the book, although I certainly intend to do so when I have a chance. In the meantime, though, I have recommended it to family members; and my mother – the daughter of Holocaust survivors, a longtime child educator, and an avid reader – has already checked out the book from her local library. Knowing how quickly my mother devours books, she should be done reading the book within a day. I look forward to hearing all about it from her once she has read it cover to cover.

Saturday night we gathered together as an expanded group – those of us from JewishGen together with our Matzevah Foundation compatriots – to have a serious discussion about what we were heading into beginning as of Sunday, when we would be visiting the former Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, and culminating in our cemetery cleanup and restoration work in the Jewish cemetery of Krzepice (located in the vicinity of Czestochowa, in the former region of Silesia). This, along with the many other such group meetings we had during the course of our trip, was intended to help us prepare emotionally for what we would soon be encountering in the final phase of our journey. It was also meant to facilitate reflection on our part, on why we had chosen to come on this particular trip, and what we hoped to gain from it.

Early Sunday morning we departed Krakow for Auschwitz, which is only roughly an hour's drive away. Our tour guide at the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex was Pawel Sawicki, whom, as I understand it, has given tours to some of the highest-ranking political figures of different countries. Pawel, who was formerly a journalist, was an excellent and extremely knowledgeable tour guide who informed us of numerous details, yet at the same time, did not lose sight of the human element in the mechanism of destruction known simply as "Auschwitz." Among the informative and chilling details I learned from Pawel were the following: that $\frac{3}{4}$ of the members of the *Einsatzgruppen* had PhD's, and that it only cost the Germans the equivalence of approximately one cent for the gassing of each individual Jew. This new information gave me an added appreciation for all that was distorted in the minds and hearts of the Germans and their collaborators.

Although this was not my first visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau complex, the last time I was there prior to this trip was in 2002 and I was unsure of quite what to expect this second time around. As it turned out, a fair number of things had changed at the former camp since then. For one thing, it was significantly more crowded now and there was security. I do not recall any security there seventeen years ago. Furthermore, there were far fewer visitors there when I was there back in 2002. Apparently, in the passage of time since the early 2000's, Auschwitz has become one of the leading tourist attractions – if not the leading one – in the world. In 2016, for example, over two million people visited the former forced labor and extermination camp site.⁶

As such, it is now necessary to book visits ahead of time online, and the memorial and museum site is now actually forced to turn away visitors, because it simply cannot accommodate such large numbers of people on a single given day. On one hand, this news surprises and fills me with a sense of hope, since Auschwitz and the Holocaust have clearly garnered so much visibility, especially among certain countries. On the other hand, though, I found that the significant volume of visitors unfortunately detracted from my own visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where many of my close kin were murdered. There were several times when I felt rushed along from one exhibition display to another; and at a couple of points, it was even difficult for members of our group to pass other tourists, as some of the rooms, halls, and staircases there are rather narrow.

Nevertheless, I am "glad" to have made this second journey to Auschwitz-Birkenau, if for no other reason, than because I felt compelled to honor and commemorate the lives of my loved ones – and those who left no survivors to remember them – who perished at this everlasting symbol of Man's inhumanity to Man.

Perhaps the most constant theme that struck me both seventeen years ago, and once again, in 2019, was how vast, well-organized, and efficient this forced labor/killing center was. We were only able to visit a small portion of the entire camp, much of which no longer exists today, and even with that, we could make out barracks upon barracks stretching far beyond our vantage point. Insofar as the sundry artifacts of the victims: the piles of shorn hair, kitchen utensils, suitcases – some of them still bearing their owners' names – adult and children's shoes, and prosthetics, I believe I shuddered most at the site

⁶ For more precise statistics of visitors to Auschwitz-Birkenau in 2016, visit: <http://auschwitz.org/en/museum/news/over-2-million-visitors-at-the-auschwitz-memorial-in-2016,1232.html> (accessed 6-25-19).

of the children's shoes and prosthetics. For without a doubt, nearly all the owners of those articles were immediately slated for the crematoria; in this Kingdom of Hell, the weak and helpless seldom stood a chance of survival.

In general, I believe it is difficult to capture in mere words the flurry of emotions one feels at such a notorious site. Therefore, I would encourage people – both Jew and Gentile alike – to witness the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial and Museum for themselves, first-hand, and to reflect deeply on what they see there. May the remnants of Auschwitz-Birkenau thereby serve as a warning cry to all for what evil and bigotry can ultimately lead to, and as a motivator for never allowing such destruction to occur again on this earth.

After visiting Auschwitz, I believe I can speak for many of my fellow group members when I say that I felt emotionally drained. But in some ways, as at least one of my group members later conveyed, Auschwitz-Birkenau also helped to provide a segue and to prepare us for the difficult work we would be facing over the next three days in the Krzepice Jewish cemetery. Indeed, I think that was an appropriate estimate of our position at the time. On Monday through Wednesday, we would be working – that is, members of the JewishGen group, the Matzevah Foundation representatives – along with local high school students and mentally challenged adults – to help clean up and restore the still-extant Jewish cemetery of this small Polish town. I am not certain quite precisely what I was expecting to find at the Krzepice site, especially in light of my recent visit to the Warsaw and Tarnow Jewish cemeteries, but relative to Warsaw – at least – Krzepice appeared far less jungle-like and more manageable.

What we would learn from our long, hot days working amidst the mosquitoes, stinging nettle, raspberry shrub thorns, and other sundry cemetery creatures, was that the Krzepice Jewish cemetery is unique for its large number of wrought-iron Matzevot, which in fact comprise the majority of the headstones in the cemetery. Apparently, this is a rarity among Jewish cemeteries in Poland, and possibly elsewhere, as well. The metal headstones may be explained by the fact that there was once a Jewish owner of a local wrought-iron factory in town. He was the one responsible for making the templates used for the Matzevot themselves and the various symbols found on the Matzevot.

Among the symbols one may find scattered about the Krzepice Jewish cemetery are: animals such as doves, eagles, and lions; flowers; tree stumps; the Star of David; books; books of Psalms; prayer books; broken candlesticks; two hands bearing fingers extended in a very particular manner; as well as a pitcher being poured. I will mention the meanings of some of these symbols, many of which one may also find in other Jewish cemeteries around the world. The eagles are most likely not a religious or Jewish symbol per se, but rather, an allusion to the Polish national coat of arms, a white eagle. The lion is a sign of royalty and may also refer to the Lion of Judah. Broken tree stumps and candlesticks are typically signs that the deceased died at a young age; however, the candlesticks themselves are usually reserved for women, since traditionally they were the ones (and in many cases still are) to light the Sabbath candles. The two hands with the extended fingers are the traditional sign of the Kohane, or Priest, whereas the pitcher harks back to the Levite, as it was the Levite's responsibility to wash the Kohane's hands in the

ancient days of the Temple. Psalms, prayer books, and other such books generally point to the fact that the deceased was learned, scholarly, and pious – possibly even a rabbinic figure.⁷

As for the fewer and more typical-looking stone Matzevot, I only learned toward the end of my time in Krzepice that these were most likely taken from a castle that had formerly existed in the town, but was destroyed around the time of the First World War. The likelihood is also that the stone Matzevot were used by wealthier and/or more significant members of the local Jewish community, since their engravings would have been more involved than simply using a wrought-iron template. Indeed, I believe I may have found the headstones of at least two different rabbis, and in both cases, the Matzevot were made of stone.

One of the most unusual Matzevot I found in the cemetery was that of four brothers and one sister, who had seemingly been buried together in a single grave. All of their given names were indicated, along with what appeared to be the dates in the Hebrew month of Av (i.e., this corresponds with July or August on the secular calendar). Unfortunately, the actual year of death was not indicated on the joint Matzevah. The dates in Av, themselves, were all a matter of a day or a few days apart. This led me to wonder whether these family members had not all died tragically in some sort of epidemic. According to Nicolas S., one of the high school students with whom I worked quite closely in cleaning and decoding moss-covered Matzevot, there was a cholera epidemic in c. 1849 that claimed about 50% of Krzepice's inhabitants. I have not yet found any historical information to verify this strong possibility, nor do I know how old that particular headstone is. It is, though, something that I am now definitely interested in researching further.

While several of my compatriots arched their muscles in chopping down shrubs, weeds, and trees that had grown wild, oftentimes obscuring the sites of Matzevot – many of which had fallen or been knocked down – I took a less physically arduous approach and did my best to brush off and manually remove the moss and weeds that had grown over the Matzevot themselves. For in a number of cases, it was simply impossible to read the names of the given deceased party through this overgrowth. I felt that that was the least I could do to bring dignity and an identity to those who call those hallowed grounds their eternal resting place. It felt somehow gratifying after all this work to be able to read the names and dates of death of the departed, as well as other details regarding their lives, from the Matzevot. In one case, for example, after I brushed a Matzevah clean, it became evident that the departed individual was a woman named “Basha Leah.” The sad irony is that this was the Jewish name of my paternal aunt, Barbara, who passed away only this past year. I could not help but feel that it was a personal omen for me to have stumbled upon this precise headstone.

I think that one of the most impressive aspects of the Krzepice cleanup and renovation initiative was the fact that it was completely a joint endeavor, thanks in great part to the hard work and devotion of the local Krzepice high school students and their teacher. I would like to single out one student with whom I worked quite closely in cleaning Matzevot and with whom I gave a cemetery tour to our fellow group members and classmates. That is the aforementioned Nicolas S., who revealed to members of my

⁷ I found a rather informative blog article on the subject of Jewish symbolism on Matzevot, which bears direct relevance to the Krzepice Jewish cemetery, as well. That piece may be viewed here: <https://bloodandfrogs.com/2011/04/jewish-gravestone-symbols.html> (accessed 6-25-19).

JewishGen group that this cemetery cleanup and renovation work is of special significance to him, since his great grandfather was himself a Jew. Upon hearing Nicolas' revelation and witnessing his clear enthusiasm for this challenging physical undertaking, I could not help but be reminded of the Yiddish expression: "Dos pintele Yid," which loosely translated means: "The spark of Jewishness" (or "The Jewish spark"). The expression is often used in reference to the remnant of Jewishness in persons or places where one might least expect to find it.

Furthermore, Nicolas' father, Greg S., also came to the cemetery two out of three days and informed my JewishGen members and me how proud he is of his son for his interest in his Jewish heritage. He likewise implored us to stay in touch with his son, which I am personally most glad to do. Both Greg and Nicolas ended up giving us a tour of the remains of a Jewish cemetery in Krzepice, which is located only a short distance away from the cemetery. Apparently, the synagogue was built in c. 1820 and destroyed shortly before World War II by fire. Neither Nicolas nor his father, though, knew what exactly had caused that fire.

At this time, the synagogue is literally a large shell bearing only walls without windows, doors, or a rooftop. However, one can still make out where the Holy Ark and the women's balcony likely once stood. In addition, there are still the extant words that translated from the Hebrew mean: "How awe-inspiring is this place..." and presumably, Lions of Judah symbolizing the Jewish people, affixed in stone above the entrance to the former synagogue. Today, the synagogue is owned by the local town of Krzepice and is considered an official historic site.⁸ Members of my JewishGen group, Nicolas S., and I stood inside of the remnants of the synagogue amidst the tall grass and weeds that have grown wild over the decades since the structure's virtual destruction, as Nicolas' father, Greg, proudly took photos of us.

Other educational and enlightening aspects of our time spent working in the Krzepice Jewish cemetery, against the panoramic backdrop of a green cornfield and clear blue sky, included a talk given to us by local historian, councilman, and artist, Romuald Ciesla, who wrote a definitive history about the town. The lengthy book itself, a copy of which Mr. Ciesla gifted to our JewishGen leaders, Dr. Dan Oren and Avraham Groll, contains roughly forty pages specifically devoted to the town's Jewish history. It was likewise Mr. Ciesla who informed our group that Krzepice had, prior to World War II, been located quite close to the German border. Upon the outbreak of the war and the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, Krzepice was one of the very first towns to be invaded by the German forces. What is more, according to Mr. Ciesla, the Germans intentionally drove their panzers through the Jewish cemetery, overturning and destroying many of the headstones in their path. This specific route was chosen, according to Mr. Ciesla, even though there would have been easier and more direct routes the Germans could have taken upon invading Krzepice. In a word, wiping out both Jewish existence and Jewish memory was a top priority for the Germans, coupled with their military dreams of overtaking Europe.

⁸ For historical background about the Krzepice synagogue and other aspects of Jewish life that once existed in Krzepice, see for instance: <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/towns/k/441-krzepice/112-synagogues-prayer-houses-and-others/86322-synagogue-krzepice> (accessed 6-28-19).

Another fascinating, highly relevant, albeit sobering talk was presented by two representatives, respectively, from the Rabbinical Commission for Jewish Cemeteries in Poland and the *Fundacja Zapomniane* [literally: Foundation for the Forgotten]. On Facebook the latter organization may be found under: “Recording Cultural Genocide and Killing Sites in Jewish Cemeteries.” These two organizations, both of which report back to the Chief Rabbinate of Poland, are tasked with the considerable responsibility of locating, marking, and commemorating the graves and mass graves of Jews who perished and/or were murdered during the Holocaust in Poland. All of the work that goes into this investigative process is done according to the principles of Jewish Law, or Halacha, which means that efforts are always made not to disturb or disrupt the burial grounds of the departed. Our group and that of our local Krzepice partners were also told to abide by these very principles, which meant that we were not permitted, for example, to extract deeply-rooted grass and weeds growing very close to Matzevot, for fear that this could possibly disrupt the bones resting beneath the surface. Thus, we could only cut back the tall growths in the immediate vicinity of headstones.

Steven Reece, who has had a significant amount of experience working in Jewish cemeteries throughout eastern Europe, alerted our group that there were (at least) three discreet areas in the cemetery that had the look of possible mass graves, due to the fact that they were lower than the rest of the surrounding ground, and because their shapes and sizes were also potentially consistent with mass grave areas in the region that he had previously witnessed. In other words, these were spots in which Germans may have gunned down local Jews during World War II and then had them buried en masse. The possibility of mass graves in the Krzepice Jewish cemetery was something that our two aforementioned speakers also addressed, once surveying the said areas. In their opinion, one of the three areas has an appearance that is highly consistent with a Jewish mass grave site. Another one of the questionable areas, they remarked, may even have been used as a hiding place by Jews during World War II. But in either case, they stressed that it would be necessary to use certain equipment and even to seek out surviving witnesses from the Second World War, to determine what exactly – if anything – lay beneath the surface of these suspicious-looking areas.

By the time we left Krzepice on the final day of our journey to Poland, I could better appreciate the well-known Jewish adage from *Ethics of the Fathers* (2:16): “It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either.” Even though my compatriots and I had not been able to fully clean up and restore the current state of the Krzepice Jewish cemetery, which until relatively recently had remained fallow for several decades since the time of World War II, we had definitely made a significant dent in the work. As a result, we left feeling that we had contributed something truly valuable – having taken part in the noble Mitzvah (good deed) of helping the deceased members of Krzepice’s former Jewish community – those who can neither help themselves nor return the good deed.

On the morning of Thursday, June 20, we sadly parted ways with our unforgettable Matzevah Foundation partners: Steven, Przemek, and Rachel, and left Krzepice for Lodz. Alas, we did not have a great deal of time to tour the city otherwise known as the “Manchester of Poland,” since most of us had to make return flights to the United States, Germany, and Israel, in Warsaw – roughly another 1 1/2 hours’ drive from Lodz. Nevertheless, we did have the opportunity to meet with Maria Synger, a young Jewish woman who lives with her four children in Lodz, and serves as a charismatic spokesperson for the tiny Jewish community of contemporary-day Lodz. Furthermore, our exchange with Maria (also known

as Miriam) over a quick kosher lunch in front of a kosher hostel called “Linat Orchim” (Hebrew for “guest lodgings”) was filmed by a filmmaker who was apparently making a documentary about Jewish life in present-day Poland.

From Lodz, we again boarded our bus and headed for the capital – indeed, where our journey had begun several days earlier. It was a bittersweet farewell, as we had come to know some truly wonderful and admirable individuals – all of whom are activists in one way or another, both for the preservation of Jewish memory in Poland and the renewal of Jewish communal life in the post-Holocaust world of today (c. 2019). Nobody is making the naïve claim that all that was destroyed of the formerly sizable Jewish community of Poland can be remade. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the fledgling Jewish community of Poland – what has been called a renaissance of Jewish life by some – should not receive our support or friendship.

If anything, this journey was an opportunity to forge bonds of friendship between JewishGen members, Matzevah Foundation representatives, and the various Jewish and Christian Poles (or in some cases, Jews of non-Polish backgrounds) we encountered during our travels. Ultimately, this was far more than simply a trip to some random overseas country. Rather, it was a journey into the heart and soul of the Jewish past and to a present that I believe is paving positive and promising inroads into a future of Jewish life in Poland. Finally, it was an indelible journey that I know will remain with me for many years to come.