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THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF CRACOW

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Cracow was one of the two capital cities of former Galicia, together with Vienna (see JL No. 356, "The Jewish Community of Vienna"), and like Vienna, it too offers examples of splendid Hapsburg architecture. Here we look at present-day Jewish life and culture in another Jewish community which, in the light of its history, exists against all the odds.

This account describes the rituals of the elderly, the potential for tourism, and the involvement of international organizations, as well as questions of Jewish identity, the problem of antisemitism, the ambivalent attitudes of Poles towards Jews, and attitudes towards the Holocaust.

85 Percent of Polish Jewry Murdered

Jewish settlement in Poland can be traced back more than 1,000 years, and by the middle of the sixteenth century, 80 percent of world Jewry lived on Polish lands. Between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries the history of Polish Jews followed a pattern of alternating expulsion and favor, depending on the partitioning of land, social movements,

and the benevolence of rulers.

In 1939 there were approximately 3 million Jews in Poland, 64,000 of whom lived in Cracow (approximately one-quarter of the city's population). Although many of Cracow's Jews lived in the city's Jewish quarter, Kazimierz, the community was pluralistic both in terms of degree of Orthodoxy and political persuasion.

The tragedy that befell Polish Jewry during the Holocaust is well documented. The Nazis invaded Cracow in September 1939. In the period until March 1941 Jews were systematically deprived of their rights in all walks of life. By the beginning of 1941 there remained an estimated 15,000 Jews in Cracow, and they were forced into a ghetto in Podgórze (south of Kazimierz, across the River Vistula). Following numerous murders in the ghetto and the transportation of many inhabitants to the Belzec death camp, only a few thousand Jews remained. Those able to work were sent to a nearby labor camp, Plasów, and the rest to Auschwitz. It is estimated that 85 percent of Polish Jewry were murdered in the Holocaust.

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After the war, most of the survivors refused to return to Poland. However, the Jewish Committee registered approximately 13,000 Jews at their Cracow headquarters (on ulica Długa, which lies on the other side of the main square from Kazimierz). Very few stayed longer than was necessary to check on lists for missing relatives or to return to see their property taken over by Poles. A few, however, did stay and began the reconstruction of Jewish communal life. (For example, the first communal *Seder* was held at the ulica Długa headquarters on Passover 1947.)

The events of the postwar years, most markedly the shock wave effect of the Kielce pogrom (in which an estimated 150 returning Jewish survivors were attacked by Poles and over 40 were murdered), made the decision to remain in Poland a difficult one for the Jews. The years of Communism that were to follow made the situation even more difficult.

In fact, until the late 1960s the Jews retained practically no Jewish communal identity at all, whereas the Catholic Church under Communism enjoyed a unique position in Poland. It was the anti-"Zionist" witch-hunts of 1967-68 which reminded people of their religion, as Jews were forced out of professions and other walks of life. Thousands of Jews emigrated from Poland during these years. In the years to come, in Cracow this loss would be felt most severely, as so many of those forced to leave were intellectuals, professionals, and artists.

Cracow was one of the few cities in Poland that was not destroyed during the war. The architecture of Kazimierz, and indeed neighboring Podgórze, tells as many stories about past and contemporary Jewish life in the city as do the people themselves.

Estimates of the Jewish population of Poland range from a modest 1,500 to 15,000, depending on the definition of "Jewish" that is applied. In Cracow the figure may range from 150 to 1,500. Most members of the Cracow community are not native to the city, but came in the 1950s, often from parts of Russia and Ukraine. Individual members are often known by the name of the town/country from which they came.

In Cracow there is no permanent rabbi (as there is in Warsaw) and no regular daily prayer. The Remuh Synagogue is the only one of many synagogue buildings that is open for Friday night and Sabbath morning services. A rota for a prayer minyan operates within the community and participants receive financial remuneration. The resident cantor is Mr. Stein, although the Torah portion is usually read by visitors to the syna-

agogue, and on the High Holidays in recent years by Dr. Jonathan Webber of Oxford University.

There are two major national communal organizations, one religious and one social, as well as the activities of the Lauder Foundation.

Who is a Jew in Cracow?

Today, the first question all Jewish visitors ask when coming to Cracow is: "Are there still Jews living here?" (usually in disbelieving tones), followed by the inevitable "but how many?" The questions themselves are revealing about Jewish perceptions of Poland as is the frequency of their repetition. The second of these questions requires a far more complex answer than the asker would expect, one which ventures into the realm of the age-old question "Who is a Jew?"

Perhaps the easiest way to approach the question of "Who is a Jew?" in Cracow is to examine the structure of the present-day Jewish community, starting with the core of the community — a group of people for whom Judaism or the Jewish community plays a central role in their daily lives. These are the people who attend synagogue services, eat in the community center soup kitchen, are members of one of the Jewish clubs, show tourists around the Jewish cemeteries and Kazimierz, attend memorial and commemorative services, or who receive aid money from the Joint. The majority "came back" to Judaism after Communism; some even come from notable Hasidic families. However, knowledge of Hebrew, Jewish ritual, and prayer among this group, who are primarily in their 70s, is rare. Many of the Jews among this group have little formal education, as their childhood years were spent in ghettos, concentration camps, or in hiding. Many also lack familiarity with rites of passage such as circumcision, bar mitzvah, and even weddings. The sole exception is the funeral service.

Even with this core group, questions of Jewish identification arise. Several members of the group are not *halakhically* Jewish (their mother was not Jewish) or, as a result of losing their parents in the Holocaust, have no proof of their Judaism. The majority of this core group, which is male-dominated, are married to non-Jews (usually Catholic Poles or Russians). Thus, in effect, some members lead a double life: it is not unheard of to spend Friday night or Saturday morning in the synagogue and attend Catholic mass on Sunday. A more serious problem with this, however, is that according to *halakhah*, their children are also not Jewish. With only one or two exceptions, effectively

a whole generation (who would now be in their late 20s-40s) is missing from the Jewish community in Cracow.

A second group, on the periphery of the core community, are the irregular synagogue-goers, those who attend services occasionally, mainly on the *yahrzeit* (anniversary of death) of family members or on the High Holidays. Visitors and tourists aside, the number of native Yom Kippur attendees can sometimes rise to as many as 200. Many of these come to light candles in the Remuh Synagogue for relatives murdered in the Holocaust and clearly have not lost all affinity with Judaism, though they themselves may never practice in the conventional sense.

Harder to number are those who may privately identify as Jewish and may be known to other Poles/Jews as such, but are not part of the congregation. Often political allegiance, usually to Communism, or religious allegiance and conversion to Catholicism, have separated them from their Jewish identity. In Cracow especially, with its strong Catholic tradition, there are many "Catholic Jews." This group includes those who refuse to identify as Jewish for any number of reasons. However, their children and grandchildren, when acquiring knowledge of their heritage, often take an interest in Jewish matters, even though it may only go so far as attending a synagogue service out of curiosity or buying a cassette of Yiddish songs.

Also very difficult to identify is the population who do not know they are Jewish, the so-called "hidden Jews." This not only includes a group of Jews born as a result of prewar infidelities (as must occur in a population of 3 million, though often it would be the father and not the mother who was Jewish), but more numerous, children saved by Catholics during the war who are or were unaware of their Jewish parentage. Often another generation has evolved who are now themselves (Christian) parents. Renewed interest in all matters genealogical and ethnic has brought about a wave of enthusiasm among the next generation for tracing family roots in Poland (as indeed has occurred in the rest of the Western world). It is perhaps with this group of teenagers and students that the future of Jewish communities in Poland lies. And indeed, this group, who may number some thousands, has been targeted by the Lauder Foundation at their meetings and summer camps.

Impact of the Lauder Foundation

The efforts (and money) of the Lauder Foundation have clearly shown that with the correct leadership a new generation of Jewish life may evolve in Poland. The Foundation's Jewish camps are popular and over-subscribed, and they seek to provide a basic Jewish education and construct a feeling of *yiddishkeit* among young Poles. Much of their success is due to the personal fervor of the Foundation's American rabbi, Michael Schudrich. Indeed, the popularity of many events often has much to do with individuals with spiritual leadership qualities. When one young Orthodox American Fulbright scholar spent a study year in Cracow, he had an average Friday night Sabbath dinner attendance of 20 persons, and held several Hebrew courses in Polish schools. However, when he left, despite the financial intervention and support of Lauder (the Foundation is usually most active in Warsaw) and the inauguration of a new Jewish youth club in the buildings of the former Izaaka Synagogue, far-reaching interest has never been rekindled.

In sanctioning circumcision and even several Orthodox conversions, the Foundation is looking to create a core of Jewish identifying and educated youth who will eventually take over its work and build a self-generating Polish-Jewish community for the future. But for whose benefit? Do the young Poles involved have ulterior motives, perhaps thinking that Judaism can provide an escape from difficult Polish economic and social conditions? Is there a belief that by the return of Jews to Polish society, a society which undeniably has xenophobic tendencies will be in some way improved? Or is the hope to create a new generation of guides to the Jewish history of the country, for the ever increasing number of tourists? Without an influx of Jewish immigrants, can the new diaspora really survive?

Kazimierz — The Former Jewish Quarter

These complex questions are echoed in the debate over the future of the buildings of Kazimierz, and this echo may even go part way to providing some answers.

Kazimierz, named after its fourteenth-century founder king, spans the area from Wavel Castle to the River Vistula. Once an overpopulated and ever vibrant Jewish town, today it lies in ruin. Although a large residential sector remains, in the main centers of the

quarter, between Plac Nowy — the Jewish market and ulica Szeroka — the wide street where the main synagogues stand, whole streets are derelict.

Unlike Podgórze, across the river, where the Nazi ghetto stood, many of the buildings in Kazimierz were never repopulated by Poles. A certain amount of government-sponsored resettlement took place in the 1960s when so-called "undesirables," for the most part the poverty stricken, Roma, alcoholics and drug addicts, were housed in several Kazimierz streets. Since the fall of Communism and the onset of Jewish tourism, the area has been "cleaned up." In Podgórze (and in the Polish countryside in general) it is often the case that commercial buildings retained their prewar use; only the ownership changed. Holocaust survivors returning to the cities and villages of their childhood often experience a strange sense of *déjà vu*; in the place where they remembered a fish shop, for example, a similar shop may stand to this very day. When the Jews were forced to leave, the Poles simply took over their businesses. Although some of the Jewish houses of Kazimierz are today populated by Poles, many residential buildings, and tens of synagogues and shtetls, remain empty. While in some Polish villages, a centrally located synagogue is now the local library, archive or even fire station (for example, in Kielce or Gorlice), in Cracow this transformation never took place. This is not only due to the "survival" of the Cracow Jewish community (technically they hold rights over the ritual buildings), but also due to other complex problems of property ownership and perhaps even to the psychological weight of the knowledge of how this whole quarter was left derelict in the first place.

Although the buildings of Kazimierz have been left unattended for several decades, that is not to say that they have been completely ignored. For many years now there have been plans for the area put forward by government officials, idealists, and visiting architects. Most were thwarted due to the complexities of legal ownership. However, since 1990 the shape of the former Jewish quarter has changed. As with the work of the Lauder Foundation, these changes have been enacted by individuals with a vision, albeit perhaps, in this case, an entrepreneurial one.

It would not yet be true to say a partial gentrification of Kazimierz has occurred: the input of money has not yet been great enough to create a Polish Montmartre. However, the process is definitely underway. On ulica Szeroka there are now three cafes by the name of "Ariel" offering a menu of "traditional Jewish food"

and "Jewish music evenings" (one band even dress as Hasidim). The Nissenbaum family have opened a kosher restaurant, and there are several other less permanent establishments. (Originally from a Warsaw family, now based in Frankfurt, Nissenbaum has made his name in the "kosher vodka" market and by erecting a series of memorials and commemorative plaques in key Jewish sites [including Szeroka street], ostensibly to mark his renovations.) All of these places serve the ever increasing number of Jewish and German tourists, as well as interested or more wealthy Polish regulars. Some members of the Jewish community make a regular Sabbath call on Ariel (number 1) for challa and wine after the synagogue service.

The popularity of these cafes among Poles is mirrored in the ever increasing market for "kosher" goods. Here *kashrut* takes on a new meaning as a mark of rabbinical approval is stamped on a multitude of vodka bottles with names such as "Cymes," "Shabbasow" and "Rebka" (often with suspect stereotypic pictures to match), beer labels, mineral water and, more strangely, crystal sugar. This fashion for things Jewish has spread to an affinity for Jewish culture, and indeed the bi-annual Jewish cultural festival is a total success. Here, as in Vienna, Jewish events are not necessarily organized for a Jewish public.

Although Poles attend "Jewish" events and buy "kosher" goods, the Jewish market appears increasingly to be pitched to the many American and Israeli Jewish tourists as well as the huge number of visiting Germans. The filming of Stephen Spielberg's *Schindler's List* also gave Cracow quite a boost, both financially and in terms of tourist attraction. Today it is still possible to take a tour of the sites of the film. The participants in this tour are generally more interested in seeing the sites where the film was shot than where the action "really" took place. Subsequently, more than one review or travel article has confused the streets of Kazimierz with the site of the Nazi ghetto.

Synagogue Restoration Questions

A more permanent center for Jewish culture is also finding a niche. With funding from the American Judaica Foundation and the Polish-American Joint Commission, a Center for Jewish Culture opened in November 1993. Huge sums of money were spent on the restoration of the nineteenth-century building of the Bene Emuna Prayer House in Meisela Street in Kazimierz to bring it up to "American standards." (Although these standards included all the latest plumbing

and multi-media facilities, they did not rise to the restoration of the original polychrome.) At the opening ceremony, which drew a large and influential crowd who were entertained by local celebrities and Jewish music, the snacks were still the usual Polish affair of ham and cheese. This is very typical of Polish-Jewish events and is indicative of the large gap in cultural understanding that remains to be closed.

It was not until New York University housed their summer program there in 1994, however, that the center has really had a purpose, or spare funds. In its first years it struggled to confirm its identity: was it a center for educating Poles about lost Jewish culture that would reach out into the void of ignorance, or a center of Jewish tourism able to provide knowledgeable guides, or even a research and resource center on the Jews of Poland (at that time there were library facilities but no money for books)? These questions cover the same ground as those posed earlier concerning the Jewish community. Once a building is repaired, for whom exactly is it and can the renovators afford its upkeep?

While the Jewish Heritage Council of the World Monuments Fund has a slightly different agenda in their restoration of the nineteenth-century Tempel Synagogue (also in Kazimierz), and a genuine belief in the worthiness of restoring buildings, there are certain issues that just will not go away. Although the restoration was at the invitation of the Cracow Jewish community, the bill for the installation of a new heating and water system in the synagogue and for repairs to the roof was paid by American patrons. This explains why it was the Tempel Synagogue — a progressive one, and not, for example, the equally or more beautiful Orthodox Kupa Synagogue, which stands in a worse state of disrepair — that was chosen for renovation. Among the American public, the funds for restoring progressive synagogues were probably more free flowing than for restoring something reminiscent of the *Ostjude*. Would, ideally, all seven synagogue buildings be restored to their former glory for eternity?

On ulica Szeroka, the only regularly open synagogue, the Remuh, is currently undergoing further restoration work. Extensive work has already been done on its cemetery. The building of the Stara (Old) Synagogue has housed the Jewish Museum since the 1950s and the Popper Synagogue is rented out by the Jewish Community as an arts center. Elsewhere in Kazimierz the Izaaka is partially renovated but empty and bare (due to lack of funds), although it is regularly

attended and its upper floors house the Lauder Foundation's new youth center. The Wysoki (High) Synagogue houses a warehouse, as did the Kupa which now stands in ruins, its murals being washed away by the rain and damp.

While the American community can raise funds for restoration, in the case of the Tempel the community is in charge of its upkeep. While it may be advantageous to have a permanent guide seated in the building during the summer (certain members of the elderly community are renowned for taking money from tourists), in the winter, when there are no tourists but when the building really needs to be heated and attended daily, foremost to preserve the paint work, members of the community who are primarily concerned with their day-to-day survival see little sense in spending so much money, even though it fulfills their part of the bargain. This brings us again to the question of for whom this restoration is aimed. Finally, does restoration honor the memory of those murdered any more than the sad and moving ruins of the city?

Current Polish Attitudes Towards Jews

This review would not be complete without a brief discussion of the attitude of Poles towards the history of World War II and more specifically towards Jews. These attitudes are often interpreted by a series of stereotypical statements, typified by Ariel Sharon's "all Poles drink antisemitism with their mother's milk." More recently, a series of controversies over the site of Auschwitz has shaped world Jewry's perception of matters Polish. The situation is, of course, far more complex and, in fact, the attitudes of the Polish people and government appear to have changed considerably since the fall of Communism. However, this evolution has been slow.

The fashion for all things Jewish is not directly mirrored in the results of opinion polls. A January 1995 poll conducted by the AJC at the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz found the following: 30 percent of Poles would not want Jews as neighbors; 16 percent believe Jews have too much influence on Polish society; 13 percent thought Jews behaved in a way which provoked hostility; and 36 percent believed Jews were responsible for killing Christ.

How these findings affect the quality of life of the country's Jewish inhabitants is difficult to discern. Official Polish government involvement in the commemorations of the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation

of Auschwitz and the like has so far only caused more problems for the Polish and international Jewish communities alike. The appointment in 1995 of a Polish Ambassador to the Jewish Diaspora surely has little to do with Poland's remaining Jews and more to do with present-day diplomacy and figures of Jewish tourism. Unlike in some other countries, the Poles are not falling over themselves to pay reparations, return property, restore Jewish buildings, and erect million-dollar memorials.

In Cracow, a city full of monuments and memorials, the absence of an official stone or plaque in Kazimierz to commemorate the tragedy of the Jews has always weighed heavily with visiting Jews. But perhaps the derelict buildings, left to decay until they finally

disappear, is perhaps the greatest testimony that the surviving community can have.

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