

Opinion | OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

# In Poland, a Grass-Roots Jewish Revival Endures

By JONATHAN ORNSTEIN FEB. 26, 2018

KRAKOW, Poland — “Should I still visit Poland?”

I’ve been asked this question a lot in the last two weeks by people planning trips to Krakow, where I’ve lived for 17 years after growing up in New York and then spending seven years in Israel. They are worried about the “Holocaust bill” recently passed by the Polish government and the war of words that erupted in response on the international diplomatic level, as well as among the Polish public and the global Jewish community.

The concern is genuine, warranted and appreciated. We, the Polish Jewish community, are weathering challenging times. The country we call home can feel a little less welcoming these days. On one hand, young people who only recently discovered their Jewish roots have eagerly joined newly opened Hillel student organizations in Warsaw and Krakow. But they hold in the back of their minds a question of what the future may bring.

Polish Jewish leaders, too, are grappling with an uncertain future as we continue to build Jewish life in an environment that has taken a turn away from democracy toward populism. That shift is never a good sign for Jews — or anyone in a free and open society. And now the Holocaust bill, which criminalizes statements that the Polish nation had any responsibility in the Holocaust, may complicate our good relationship with our non-Jewish neighbors.

What we have managed to rebuild over the last 30 years with the help of those neighbors is real. It is strong and it has emerged not only from government policy, but also from grass-roots efforts. We've built Jewish schools, synagogues, community centers and museums by working hand in hand with non-Jewish high school students, senior citizens and many others. Not only have they allowed these institutions to be born and flourish, but many have stood up and taken an active part in Jewish rebirth.

Before Hitler's and Stalin's forces invaded Poland in 1939, it was home to 3.5 million Jews. The war and Holocaust reduced that number to 350,000 or less. The number kept shrinking during the Communist period from 1945 to 1989, when Jews were made to feel unwelcome and even forced to emigrate. In the immediate postwar years, about 185,000 left; another 50,000 did in the late 1950s, and some 18,000 in 1968.

During those dark days, Poland was closed to the West, which prevented nearly all prospective visitors from traveling and supporting the Jewish community. Polish Jews felt alone, isolated from the Jewish world as they made the painful decision of whether to stay or go. Those who stayed frequently hid their Jewish identities, even from their own children, in order to get by. And when Communism fell, not many émigrés or their descendants returned. Those two factors have left it hard to gauge how many Jews remain in Poland, but it is probably in the low tens of thousands; some are children and grandchildren of survivors and only recently learned that they had Jewish roots.

Now Poland is no longer under Soviet domination. We aren't sealed off from visitors. In the past couple of decades, our Jewish community has welcomed hundreds of thousands of visitors who have come to Poland to see the Nazi death camps, the shtetls where Jewish villagers once lived and the graves of great rabbis.

They also have found something unexpected: Jewish life emerging anew. Nothing less than a miracle of cooperation between Jews and non-Jews who believe that by working together we can ensure that Poland has a bright Jewish future. And after 17 years here, I remain solidly optimistic that this cooperation will endure.

Those visitors who have engaged with our communities have taught us and been taught by us. They have left invigorated after meeting young Polish Jews who are eager to enter Jewish institutions and reconnect to their heritage. And through this engagement, Polish Jews have come to understand that they are no longer alone. They are part of not only a more accepting Poland, but also of a big, messy, complex and interconnected Jewish world that has welcomed Polish Jews back into its own fold with open arms.

So the answer is: Yes, come visit Poland. Walk down the historic streets that I walk without fear as a proud Jew. See beyond the camps. Go beyond the history, both the beautiful and the tragic. Stand with a community that has been through so much suffering, yet has emerged optimistic and eager to rejoin the Jewish world.

Your visit would not represent tacit acceptance of a misguided law. It would reinforce efforts for full acceptance of Poland's Jews by their country and the larger world.

Today we need more friends, not fewer.

Jonathan Ornstein is the executive director of the Jewish Community Center of Krakow.

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