

## **A new Poland, a new paradigm**

**By Tad Taube**

The troubled relationship between Jews and Poland - burdened by historical anti-Semitism and events of the Holocaust - is at a potentially positive turning point. Ironically, it has fallen on Israel to join in leading the way forward.

That presents difficulties for Israel, since much of the worst Nazi brutality toward Jews during the Holocaust took place on Polish soil. Despite the bravery and decency of Poles who sought to protect Jews, some Poles succumbed to overt or passive cooperation with the Nazi killing machine.

More than sixty years later, the Holocaust's extraordinary trauma still weighs heavily on Israeli Jews - citizens of a nation that rose phoenix-like out of the ashes of the Holocaust - and the pain, anger and mistrust cut particularly deep.

Some 25,000 Israeli teens visit Poland each year to tour sites of the former Nazi extermination camps and to learn more about Poland's extensive pre-war Jewish history. Unfortunately, the Polish media, including the respected *Przekroj* newspaper, report increased instances of the teens' misbehavior, including trashing hotel rooms and other acts of vandalism. The reports also say that some of the teens' Israeli security guards routinely show disrespect toward their Polish hosts, preventing Poles and Israelis from interacting. Similar events have occurred in the past, but the Polish media has largely downplayed them out of fear of being accused of anti-Semitism.

The current situation has had a detrimental effect on diplomatic relations between Poland and Israel. Israel's ambassador in Warsaw, David Peleg, warned that "the relationship between Israel and

Poland is strained." Agnieszka Magdziak-Miszewska, Poland's ambassador to Israel, said, "For some of the kids, the pressure is too high, going from one death camp to another. Some express their anger and sorrow in the way they behave."

Individual responsibility and accountability for inappropriate actions even by immature teens must not be condoned. Moreover, security guards are adults and if they act inappropriately they should be removed.

For its part, the Polish government has reacted to its citizens' concern with calm and moderation. It is now negotiating an agreement with Israeli representatives to officially raise the operating standards for Israeli groups in Poland; but if a true change is to take hold, existing Jewish attitudes toward Poland must also change.

Indeed, Poland today is a far cry from the Poland of World War II. Jewish life in Poland is experiencing a rebirth - modest, perhaps, when compared to pre-Holocaust Jewish life, when Poland's Jewish population was 3 million, but significant nonetheless.

Warsaw, Krakow, Lodz and Wroclaw all boast newly thriving Jewish communities. Polish universities have steadily increased Jewish studies programs and the government has set aside \$27 million to fund the new \$80 million museum in Warsaw to document Jewish history and culture in Poland. A growing list of Jewish writers is being translated into Polish and Krakow's annual Jewish culture festival attracts 20,000 or more.

On the diplomatic front, ties between Poland and Israel have never been stronger. Poland was the second ex-Soviet bloc nation to re-establish official relations with the Jewish state. Military ties between

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the two nations have also solidified, as have investments and other private business endeavors. Israeli diplomats readily acknowledge that Poland is the most pro-Israeli country in the European Union.

Poland, as its president, Lech Kaczynski, has said, is today "a friend of Israel."

This good will is largely shared by Polish civil society. Poland has few anti-Israeli hecklers, slanderous media, or boycott organizers. Shock and outrage over a recent neo-Nazi demonstration in Krakow was expressed not only by Jewish tourists who were subject to anti-Semitic and anti-Israel slurs, but also by many Poles, who staged a spontaneous counter-demonstration. Programs which sponsor Israeli teen visits to Poland, such as March of the Living, need to have their emphasis re-ordered to focus much less on death in Nazi-operated extermination camps and much more on 800 years of Jewish history and culture.

None of what I write should be misunderstood as a declaration that anti-Semitism has been completely eradicated in Poland. It remains a reality, but where is it not? More to the point is official Poland's attempts to come to grips with its history and make amends to the extent possible.

The horrors of the Holocaust cannot be overlooked or minimized. At the same time, life must move forward. It is time for Jews - Israelis in particular - to be open to Poland's desire for reconciliation and friendship. It is not enough to feed Israeli youth a steady diet of death, destruction, and historical anti-Semitism. Israel's educational leaders and March of the Living organizers need to incorporate the new Poland into their thinking.

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*Tad Taube is the founder of the Jewish Heritage Initiative in Poland, which supports the renewal of Jewish cultural life in Poland, and connects American Jews, two-thirds of whom are of Polish descent, with their heritage.*

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