



Op-Ed: Poland, Israel's new best friend

Tad Taube

Poland is Israel's new best friend, writes Tad Taube, who is planning a Polish Jewish cultural festival in San Francisco.

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SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. 19 (JTA) — A Polish-Israeli Nobel Peace Prize candidate? Sounds crazy, no?

The idea was advanced by Polish President Lech Kaczynski during his visit to Israel last month and received the enthusiastic support of Vice Prime Minister Shimon Peres.

The proposed Nobel candidate, Irena Sendlerowa, 96, is a Polish Catholic who oversaw the children's section of Zegota, the Polish underground body that saved 15,000 Jews during World War II. Through her efforts, 2,500 Jewish children escaped death at the hands of the Nazis.

The Nobel proposal is the latest example of the close ties between Israel and Poland, which is said to be one of the European countries most favorably inclined toward the Jewish state.

Kaczynski was the first European head of state to pay an official visit to Jerusalem in the wake of this summer's war with Hezbollah; Poland is a tough critic of Iran, which has threatened to destroy Israel and is believed to be building nuclear weapons; and Poland has soldiers on the ground fighting alongside U.S. troops in Iraq and "doing a fine job," as former Knesset Speaker Shevach Weiss told the Polish press.

If the enemy of my enemy is my friend, then Israel looks to have a friend in Poland.

Poland also is willing to increase its contribution to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, Kaczynski said during his Jerusalem stay. And he went even further, suggesting that, if asked, Poland might agree to help mediate the stalled Middle East peace process.

Both Israeli and Palestinian leaders appeared to be receptive to this notion, as Kaczynski learned when he paid a visit to Ramallah on the last day of his Middle East sojourn.

This burst of cooperation does not come out of the blue. When Communism was toppled in 1989, Poland had offered to let Soviet Jews transit through its territory, terrorist threats notwithstanding, even before it became the second ex-Soviet bloc country to re-establish relations with the Jewish state.

When Poland joined the European Union, Weiss, a former Israeli ambassador to Poland, remembers that the Polish foreign minister phoned to assure him that the Polish voice would be "decent," Weiss says, "and it really is."

Since then, political cooperation has been close, while business ties have boomed. Israeli businessmen, who have made investments in Poland globally amounting to some \$2 billion, say the climate they encounter in the country is very encouraging. Poland also is buying weapons from Israel and maintains close military and security ties with Jerusalem.

"We don't talk in public about those things. We just do them," says a former Polish ambassador to Israel, Maciej Kozlowski.

These policies, supported by all of Poland's governments, left or right, also have the support of the country's media, which are markedly more objective about Israel than their Western European counterparts.

The main Polish daily newspapers, for example, played up the recent Amnesty International report accusing Hezbollah of war crimes in the recent fighting in Lebanon, while Western European papers were less interested. Seminars about Israel at Polish universities attract students genuinely interested in learning about the country, not the PLO sympathizers you'd expect in Paris or Rome.

So, how does the "decency" Weiss spoke of align with the dark pages of Poland's recent past? Troublesome current realities include an assault on Polish Chief Rabbi Michael Schudrich; documentation of anti-Semitism both by visitors and Polish human rights NGOs; and inclusion of the notorious League of Polish Families, heir to Poland's pre-war anti-Semitic *Endecja* party, in Kaczynski's governing coalition.

The best answer is that these things align uneasily. Poland has faced up to the debate about the wartime massacre of Jews by Poles in the town of Jedwabne; the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum has called the Polish debate the frankest of all held in countries that had been under Nazi occupation.

Schudrich's attacker was caught and sentenced, and Kaczynski's coalition generally has been viewed as a parliamentary marriage of convenience. When the Israeli ambassador to Poland refused to interact with Education Minister Roman Giertych, leader of the anti-Semitic league, issues concerning the March of the Living were promptly transferred from Giertych's ministry to the Office of the President.

While Kaczynski's soft-pedaling of anti-Semitism in Poland is potentially troubling, the country's Jewish community, reborn after Communist oppression, continues to flourish. It has not experienced an increase of anti-Semitism under the current government, and on other issues Jewish concerns are being fairly addressed: Communal property restitution is proceeding apace regardless of claimants' religious affiliation, and — though Poland's postwar change of borders has made this a difficult issue — the new law should be passed by Parliament later this year.

It's true that the present government could be ousted: It's under heavy political attack for reasons quite apart from its stance on Israel or other Jewish concerns. Still, it seems reasonable to anticipate that any new Polish government would continue the course set by its predecessors since 1989, that is, a pro-Israel administration that is sensitive to Jewish concerns. The expectation is that Poland will remain, as Kaczynski has said, "a friend of Israel."

How many countries outside the United States are willing to assert such a claim? Supporters of Israel the world over surely should be grateful for the friendly overtures between Poland and Israel.

Tad Taube is chairman of the Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, which is hosting a Polish Jewish cultural festival in the San Francisco Bay Area from Oct. 18-27.
