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Poland's Jewish Culture Blooms Anew

By Tad Taube

Sixty-five years ago this month, the Jewish insurgents of the Warsaw Ghetto arose in armed resistance against the Nazis, the first popular revolt in German-occupied Europe. Warsaw's Jewish insurgents flew two flags above the Ghetto wall the occupiers had built: the banner of the Zionist movement (a forerunner of the Israeli flag) and the Polish flag.

Nazis declared both Jews and Poles "sub-human." Neither flag had flown in Warsaw since it fell in 1939, and their raising, as the Ghetto uprising itself, was an act of supreme defiance by Warsaw's Jews against the oppressors of both peoples. That act, in April 1943, was a declaration of faith in humanity, which the Ghetto's fighters believed would be restored once the Nazis were defeated.

Even today some people feel the words "Jewish cultural life" and "Poland" don't belong in the same sentence. Many associate Poland not with a thriving Jewish culture, but with the devastation of the Polish Jewry in World War II.

Yet almost all forms of Jewish identity originated in Poland, which was for centuries the world's largest Jewish community. The pioneers of Jewish literature, theater, film and painting had been Polish Jews. However, this spectacularly creative community had long lived in an uneasy co-existence with Polish society.

Yet there always had been a significant part of Polish society that genuinely considered Jews to be equal citizens. When the Ghetto insurgents raised

the Polish flag, they directed their unity message to them. Though it seemed for decades that the insurgents' hopes were to be dashed, the dream is becoming a reality in today's Poland.

The Taube Foundation for Jewish Life & Culture plays a leading role in supporting all aspects of Jewish life in Poland, from the popular Krakow Jewish Culture Festival, to the Museum of the History of Polish Jews currently under construction in Warsaw — an expression of the desire to acknowledge the past, while looking forward.

The Taube Foundation has supported nearly 40 different cultural and educational organizations serving the Jewish community, working to re-establish a healthy Jewish presence in a country that once stood at the heart of Jewish culture.

This is a victory against overwhelming odds. In 1989, Poland liberated itself from communism, due to the underground activism of the Solidarity movement, in which many Polish Jews took leading roles.

Without Nazi or communist occupation, the country could finally speak with its own voice. At first, Jews' status in this new democracy was ambiguous — particularly after 1968's communist-led Jewish expulsion. Official and popular support for Poland's renascent Jewish community was widespread, and sympathy for Israel consistent (Solidarity leader and Poland's first democratic President Lech Walesa visited Israel early, publicly asking forgiveness for Poland's anti-Semitic past). But anti-Semitism still existed.

However, the past two decades have seen a consistent improvement of Polish-Jewish relations, and a rebirth of Jewish culture. Jewish schools and sum-

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mer camps are open again, and synagogues are being rebuilt for worship and as cultural centers.

I was born in Krakow on the eve of the Holocaust. Now I visit as an American citizen and honorary Polish consul and proudly show my children what Poland has become — a tolerant and vibrant democracy.

In elections, Poles resoundingly reject right-wing politics and bring liberal coalitions to power. Poland and Israel jointly supported nomination of Irena Sendlerowa, one of Poland's Righteous Gentiles, for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize, and just last month Polish President Lech Kaczynski once again condemned the 1968 anti-Semitic campaign, promising to reinstate Polish citizenship for those expelled.

Next week, the United Kingdom's Prince Charles will preside over the opening of a new Jewish Community Center in Krakow.

Poles today no longer deny the dark pages of their history, and they embrace a reborn Jewish presence.

The Ghetto insurgents — heroes and visionaries — were right to hope for such a Poland. And we are right to support this Poland today.

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