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Friday February 8, 2008

Warsaw: The new Jewish destination

by rabbi brian lurie

Many Jews hear the word “Poland” and are filled with visions of anti-Semitism. I understand that perspective.

In the late '70s, I traveled twice to Poland, both times with Jewish federation missions. Each trip revolved around visits to Auschwitz-Birkenau — experiences that are among the most emotional and up-setting times of my life. I felt confusion, anger and impotence. In this gray communist society, all Poles looked anti-Semitic to me. I wore a yarmulke throughout my time there to show that we had survived, and as a challenge to all around me. From Poland we went to Israel. The message was simple: from the Holocaust to rebirth, from almost unquenchable evil to light and hope.

I never thought I would go back to Poland.

But I returned last month at the urging of Bay Area philanthropist Tad Taube and Jerzy Halbersztadt, the director of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews. I went from Israel to Poland on El-Al. That the order of my trip was reversed was a harbinger of the whole experience.

Warsaw was its customary winter gray, but not as cold as I was warned it might be. My room at the Novotel Centrum Hotel was brighter and more user-friendly than the one I had just left in Herzliya Petuach. In discussions with many



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Poles, I found the attitude of the people and government much like what I had experienced in Germany during the early '90s — the government was supportive of America and Israel, the people were hungry for democracy and capitalism.

I am not saying that anti-Semitism has vanished. One only has to read “Difficult Questions in Polish-Jewish Dialogue,” co-published by the American Jewish Committee and the Forum for Dialogue Among Nations, to be disabused of that notion, but there is a dramatic difference from my trips in the '70s.

Most notably, today's Poland is democratic and more sympathetic to Israel and Jewry than most of Europe. Since the fall of communism in 1989, Poland is home to a phenomenal rebirth of Jewish life and culture that receives support from American donors, led by the San Francisco-based Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, as well as the Polish government.

For a number of years, I have been concerned that the Holocaust will forever be the central point in Jewish history. Though the Holocaust is our nadir,

the Jewish people should be committed to life as our central purpose, rather than death. Despite how powerful the Holocaust mentality of victimization remains, it must not trump our commitment to living and improving this imperfect world.

The reason for my journey was to talk to the professional leadership of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews, and talk we did. I was preconditioned to appreciate the museum's efforts, but my reaction to what the planners were doing thrilled me.

The professionals at the museum — especially Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, head of the international team that is producing the 40,000-square-foot core exhibit — have captured 900 years of Polish Jewish



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history in the most exciting and unusual ways. I do not have the space here to describe all the imaginative methods her team has used to present those 900 years.

Halbersztadt wrote about the project: “In sum, our museum will take its place internationally as a bold and innovative example of what a museum can be and do in the 21st century. It will provide a rich visitor experience with a unique learning environment that is informed by a progressive approach to informal education, civic engagement and dialogue.”

After my many meetings, Halbersztadt took me to the site. The museum will face the Rappaport Memorial, which depicts the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Standing there, I realized that this place and this museum will become one of the key destinations for the Jewish people. Already 40,000 Israeli youth visit Poland every year; it will become a major educational center for this young population.

Moreover, I believe that tens of thousands of American Jews will come to Warsaw to experience this place. This also will become a key educational center for Polish youth.

Yet one should not see the museum with a view only to the past, but as a place that offers insights for the present and future. For much of the 900 years depicted in the museum, Poland was the center of all Jewish creativity. Its lessons about pluralism, tolerance, multiculturalism and diversity ring true today. I see the symbol of this place as the phoenix — from ashes we are reborn anew, a strong and dynamic Jewish people.

P.S. The January day I left Warsaw, it was bright, warm and sunny.

Rabbi Brian Lurie was formerly the executive director of the S.F.-based Jewish Community Federation and head of the United Jewish Appeal. He is currently a volunteer in the Bay Area and in Israel.

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