



Gratz Insider, September 2012 - Story Continuation

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Poland: Exploring Jewish Life Past and Present

“This is going to be your challenge: You will be standing in a place where tens of thousands of Jews were murdered, and then you will learn that for many hundreds of years before, there was a flourishing Jewish community on that very spot. The challenge is to hold on to both,” said Dr. Steinlauf to the 33 people on the Gratz trip to Poland. He raised this challenge, and then—with the support of the Taube Center for the Renewal of Jewish Life in Poland—gave these travelers the unique opportunity to meet it.

“The trip achieved an excellent balance. It was a moment-by-moment study in contrast,” explains Dr. Reena Friedman, trip participant and professor of Jewish history. For example, there was the concentration camp Majdanek—in all its horror—followed by a visit to the grand yeshiva in Lublin. Similarly, while the Jewish cemetery in Warsaw contained what Friedman described as “layers and layers of Jewish history” and “tombstones that are so respectfully inscribed,” there was also a marker for the mass graves of those who perished in the Warsaw Ghetto. “Everywhere we went the contrast was very striking—going from a place of utter barbarity to a place of great peace and humanity,” says Friedman.

The Gratz group was able to witness the scope of Jewish history in Poland primarily because today’s Poles—both Jews and non-Jews alike—have been dedicated to uncovering and restoring their country’s rich Jewish past. As David Mink explains, “What excited me throughout the trip was to see the young people of this country enthusiastically reclaiming their history—Polish history and Jewish history because the two cannot be separated. We met some of the wonderful Poles who have been part of this renaissance, and that’s what really made this trip exceptional.”

People like Dr. Anna Sommer, the cosmopolitan young woman who led the group’s tour of Auschwitz. Sommer grew up in the town of Oswiecim, next to where the Nazis constructed the Auschwitz camp. Although she is not Jewish, her curiosity about what

happened in her town led her to earn a Ph.D. in Jewish history. She has since relocated to the United States, but returns to Poland every summer to lead tours.

Then there was the respected historian Jan Jagielski. Beginning in the 1970s, Jagielski, a non-Jew, was among the first generation of people working to preserve the Jewish past in Poland. Dedicated to this effort for decades, he brought history to life for the Gratz group by sharing stories enshrined in thousands of tombstones in the Warsaw cemetery.

There were also the impressive young Jewish tour guides from the Taube Center's Mi Dor Le Dor program, who directed the group on many legs of its journey throughout Poland. And there were the passionate people of the Grodzka Gate, a cultural center run by non-Jews, which has been dedicated for many years to restoring the memory of Jewish life in Lublin.

In addition to the restoration of Jewish sites in Poland, many Polish Jews themselves are in the process of discovering and exploring their Jewish heritage. After the Holocaust and four decades of Communism, there are Poles who have only recently uncovered their Jewish roots. Michael Schudrich, Poland's chief rabbi, raised on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and who once served as chief rabbi of Japan, shared a particularly dramatic story of two skinheads who discovered that they both had Jewish roots. As a result of this discovery, they are now a married couple living as Orthodox Jews.

Stories like this one proliferate in contemporary Poland, Dr. Steinlauf stresses. Poland today is an amazing success story," he says. "It's modern, bright, airy and very youthful. The Poles have transformed their country and have created a place unlike what anyone expected."

The interweaving of such modernity with Poland's Jewish past will soon be prominently on display in the sleek new Museum of the History of Polish Jews, set to open next year. High tech and interactive, this grand structure on the footprint of the Warsaw Ghetto will be a "major site for Jewish remembrance," according to Steinlauf.

With the new museum on the itinerary, Steinlauf is planning to lead another Gratz tour to Poland in the summer of 2014, giving other travelers an equally eye-opening view of Jewish life in Poland—both past and present.

For photos and a personal account of the 2012 Poland trip, consult the [travel log](#) of trip participant and history scholar Dr. Lawrence Schofer. The next trip in the popular Gratz travel-study series is to Cuba in January 2013. For more information about this trip, click on [Cuba](#) or contact Mindy Blechman at 215-635-7300 x 154.