

Changing Perspective: Jewish Life in Poland Today

By: Madison Jackson

“Shabbat Shalom. Shabbat Shalom. Shabbat Shalom.” These were the words pouring out from everyone around me. It was Friday night in July, and I was at Shabbat services, like I was most Friday nights. But this was different. I was across the ocean, in a different time zone, and in a place where the first language was not a language I understood. I was in Warsaw, Poland.

I spent many Shabbats of summer 2018 at an egalitarian congregation in Warsaw, called Ec Chaim. I was serving as a Goldman Fellow for the American Jewish Committee Central Europe office in Warsaw, and spent three months living in Poland experiencing present day Jewish Poland firsthand. At Ec Chaim about 40 people of all ages attend Shabbat services every Friday night and Saturday morning. The minute the service ended each person in the room starting shaking everyone’s hand. Strangers or friends alike, they were on a crucial mission to not miss even a single person. Before I had the chance to step away from my seat, someone reached out for my hand, shook it, smiled at me and said Shabbat Shalom. Without having said a single word in English, I felt like we shared something on such a personal level. We all spoke the language of Shabbat; the simple Hebrew words of our religion brought us together in understanding.

When many people think of present day Poland they picture it as dreary, dark, and gloomy. But, on the contrary, the minute I landed in Poland I cried tears of happiness for a sense of coming home. Since meeting European Jews my own age in high school, I have been an advocate for the revival of Jewish life in Europe. Yet, it wasn’t until that summer that I really thought much about the fact that my own ancestors come from Jewish Europe. As I landed I felt as if I had come to a place I already knew, even though I had never been there before. These were the streets my ancestors had walked. This was the place where my Jewish culture was developed. This was the country my family had once called home. Being in Warsaw inspired me

to do genealogical research at the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland, which was formerly the Central Jewish Library in Warsaw. I knew my family was Polish, had they stood where I was to stand?

There is a district of Warsaw called Praga, located across the Vistula River opposite the Old Town in Warsaw. Most people, including myself, never hear of this district prior to visiting the city. It is often called “Alternative Warsaw” for serving as Warsaw’s hipster and artistic base. What people don’t realize is it was this district, Praga, which served as the home of most of Warsaw’s Jews prior to the war. As I explored every crevice that Warsaw had to offer, I began picturing in my head an alternative map, an alternative route for tourists to the city. Many of the tours I went on pointed out the remains of the Warsaw Ghetto Wall, and the location of the destroyed Great Synagogue, while completely ignoring the fact that the present day Hillel stands right behind where the synagogue once was. I imagined a tour which would provide visitors with both the elements of the city related to the Holocaust and its history, and point out places of interest related to Jewish life in Warsaw today. Buildings such as the Warsaw Hillel, where I attended a Board Game night, and met peers my own age who invited me to Shabbat meals and to meet up for pierogis, buildings like the Jewish Community Center in Warsaw, and Makabi Warsaw, a Jewish sports organization are places that should draw visitors to witness the culture of local Polish Jewry.

As part of my internship, I travelled to Israel for a week to attend the American Jewish Committee Global Forum. There, I was met with Jewish peers my own age, from delegations all across Europe. One night, as the students were all sitting in a large room eating dinner, suddenly a large crowd started gathering around the tables in the center of the room. Then all at once banging and singing could be heard. The German and French students had started singing Jewish

songs such as Hinei Mah Tov. In the center of this room with over 200 students sitting all around, out of nowhere, they had just enthusiastically started singing and dancing and continued to do so for nearly twenty minutes. Their spirit was energetic and invigorating. The American students weren't singing. They were not the ones who got up and initiated this sporadic burst of Jewish song. This was the German and French Jewish students.

I bring this moment up because I see it as a moment which shows how there is so much proud Jewish life bursting from all corners of the world, with people ready to show their passion for Judaism any time they can. If we change our use of language and don't only speak negatively about present day Poland, we can transform our attitudes to ones that will help greater global Jewish continuity. While it should be a dialogue, and there is much that the European Jewish communities can gain from conversations with American Jews, it works both ways. There is so much we can learn from our counterparts in Jewish Europe to improve our own connection to Judaism in the United States.

Many of my peers return from strictly Holocaust oriented trips to Poland, where they only visited places of death and no places of present day, and say "I never want to go back there again." I do hope to go back to Poland someday, reunite with my friends from Hillel in Warsaw, and take part in the next stage of the revival of Jewish life in modern day Poland." When I return, I can't wait to experience once again a unique Jewish culture, both so different from my own, yet at the same time so similar.

It was past 11:30 pm on one of my last nights in Poland. Around me were men wearing black hats, women wearing long skirts, people wearing jeans and tennis shoes, elderly couples, young professionals, a few familiar faces of students my age I had met at a Hillel event. There was a mixture of Polish and English words floating through the air. It was a little chilly, but no

one noticed the summer night time breeze. Someone passed around prayer books. Hebrew words filled the pages. We all sat down on what seemed momentarily like a stage--but in reality, it was the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, facing POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

Traditionally, Tisha B'Av is considered the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, marking the end of a period of time in which Jews reflect on the destruction of the Holy Temples in Jerusalem. I had attended Eichah readings for years previously, many a times at Camp Ramah in Canada, sitting on the floor of the camp gym with fake candles, and other times at a synagogue wherever I happened to be.

But that night, I was across the world, congregated with over 30 Polish Jews of all Jewish backgrounds and practices, chanting Eichah in Warsaw, Poland, a place that to many is considered the epitome of tragedy, a place where many once thought all Jewish life had ceased to exist. And yet, there was something so symbolically powerful about sitting on the very grounds where Jews had encountered terror, and defiantly, silently saying “we are still here, we are still being Jewish, and we are being Jewish in the very place where once people wanted to eliminate us.”

It was moments like that which answer the question I am still asked quite often: “Of all the places you could go in Europe, why did you do a summer internship in Poland?” I was looking to experience Jewish life in Europe, and there was no better place to do that than in a country not only rich with history on every corner, once the second largest home of world Jewry, but also, where a revival of Jewish life is strong and vibrant.