

RECLAMATION OF JEWISH LIFE IN POLAND AFTER NEAR ANNIHILATION



ECHOES & REFLECTIONS

TEACHING THE HOLOCAUST. INSPIRING THE CLASSROOM.

Jewish presence in Poland spans over 1000 years, marking a history rich with cultural vibrancy. Traditionally, Poland served as a relatively safe haven of religious tolerance and was a central hub for the Ashkenazi Jewish community from the 1500s to the 1700s, which thrived under a relatively autonomous structure. This golden age of Jewish life in Poland was markedly altered following the country's partitions beginning in the late 18th century, during which the Russian Empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire each seized and annexed territory belonging to Poland. Poland as a country did not exist for 123 years until it was reestablished as an independent country following WWI in 1918. Wars, pogroms, and anti-Jewish laws in neighboring countries, including Russia and Ukraine, sparked the most dramatic change in Poland – a huge influx of Jewish immigration into Poland, which by 1938, included more than 3 million Jews, about 10% of the total population.

About 90% of the once-thriving Jewish community of Poland was murdered during the Holocaust. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Jewish survivors who returned to Poland faced a barrage of antisemitic discrimination in education and employment. They also faced physical violence and persecution, including the infamous Kielce pogrom in July 1946, which resulted in the death of at least 42 Jews.

The mass violence of the Kielce pogrom was the result of entrenched antisemitism in Poland at the time, motivated in large measure by the false accusation that Jews kill Christian children in order to use their blood for ritual purposes. This accusation is called a “blood libel” and has been used against Jews for at least 800 years.



Coffins containing bodies of Jews killed in the Kielce Pogrom, USHMM, Photograph Number 08407.

On July 1, 1946, a nine-year-old Polish boy, Henryk Blaszczyk, left his home in Kielce without informing his parents. When he returned on July 3rd, the boy told his parents and the police that he had been kidnapped and hidden in the basement of the local Jewish Committee building, presumably so that the Jews could use his blood for ritual purposes. About 180 Jews who had survived the Holocaust and were attempting to return to their homes were living in the building at the time. Although Blaszczyk's story quickly unraveled, since the building did not

have a basement, on July 4, 1946, the police and local Poles numbering upwards of 1,000 people descended on the building in a violent pogrom.

The pogrom, in which 42 Jews were brutally murdered and many were wounded, was a turning point for survivors; it was the ultimate proof that no hope remained to rebuild Jewish life in Poland. During the months that followed it, survivors fled, with approximately 62,000 Jews fleeing Poland by the end of September, 1946.

Antisemitism continued in Poland under Communist rule. After the 1967 Six Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors, Jews who still remained in Poland were accused of being a potential “fifth column,” a coded word for internal spies. These charges were imbued with antisemitism. The Communist government began an aggressive antisemitic campaign that forced between 13,000-20,000 Jews to emigrate from Poland, leaving behind a small remnant of Jews, no more than 10,000 in a country of 32 million people.

The Jewish population in Poland remains small, especially compared to pre-Holocaust levels. Since the fall of Communism in the early 1990s, there has been a significant revival of interest in Jewish culture and heritage in Poland, evident in cultural events like the annual Jewish Culture Festivals and educational efforts such as the establishment of the Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw. These initiatives are part of a broader movement to reclaim and celebrate the Jewish cultural identity that suffered near annihilation during the Holocaust.



A performance at the Jewish Culture Festival, with the Menorah image in the background, Jewish Culture Festival.

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ANDY RETI

BIOGRAPHICAL PROFILE



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Andy Reti was born on July 16, 1942, in Budapest Hungary, the only child of Ibyola (Ibi) and Zoltan Rechnitzer. Andy's name at birth was Andras Rechnitzer. It was changed to Reti before he left Hungary, and to Andrew when he came to Canada.

When Andy was born, the horrors of the Holocaust had not fully reached Hungary. However, soon after, the Jewish people of Hungary were forced to wear yellow stars and were taken to live in the ghetto. Jewish businesses were also destroyed. Andy's grandfather's business was one

of many that were burned to the ground. Many of the Jews in the ghetto were taken to labor or concentration camps. Andy's father was one of the men taken to a labor camp. He died in February 1945, when Andy was only 2 years old. Ibi, Andy's mother, did not find out about her husband's death until after she was liberated. She and Andy were of the lucky survivors saved by Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish Diplomat who saved thousands of Jewish lives.

After liberation, Andy and his mother lived with her parents. Both sets of his grandparents had a great influence on him but his mother's grit and determination had the greatest influence of all. After the war, Hungary became a Communist country under Soviet occupation. There were still restrictions and Ibi wanted to take Andy away. After several attempts to immigrate, Ibi and Andy were successful in leaving Hungary in 1956 and arrived in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. After a year, Ibi and Andy moved to Toronto, where Andy went to high school. On December 15, 1968, Andy married Magdi and they had two children, David and Kati. Andy drove a taxi for 11 years, was a real estate agent, a museum tour guide, and is a motorcycle enthusiast. Magdi passed away from cancer and in 2006, Andy married Judy. He and Judy had two sons.

Andy still lives with Judy in Toronto and is devoted to Holocaust education and his grandchildren, Lea and Tara and Judy's grandchildren, Andrea and Eliana.

LIFE AND TRAGEDY: THE FIRST JEWISH PRESCHOOL IN LODZ IN NEARLY 50 YEARS



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Ten children from among the Lodz Jewish community, which numbers a few hundred members, have enrolled in the first preschool class in Lodz in almost 50 years. “There is a growing Jewish community in Lodz, as well as many Poles with Jewish roots who are becoming more and more interested in reconnecting with their heritage,” said Michael Freund, a New York native who founded Shavei Israel in 2002 after immigrating to Israel.



Jewish children at the gate of the preschool in Lodz. Janek Skarzynski/AFP/Getty

“Not only will this kindergarten provide an essential community service, but it will also serve as a symbol of Jewish revival in Lodz. The fact that Jewish children in Lodz will be singing Sabbath songs, learning, and celebrating the holidays is perhaps the best possible revenge for what was done to our people there during the dark days of the Holocaust,” he added.



People running from police violence during student protests in March 1968 near Warsaw University, Poland, March 1968, AP Photo/Tadeusz Zagodzinski.

The city in central Poland, 77 miles south of Warsaw, was home to one of the country’s most vibrant Jewish communities until World War II. It housed one of the largest ghettos, and nearly all of its 164,000 residents were murdered along with 90 percent of Poland’s pre-Holocaust Jewish community.

The last post-war Jewish school in Lodz – the I.L. Peretz school – was forced to close down in 1968 due to anti-Zionist (a code word for antisemitic) repression in the Communist government. Organized by the Polish United Workers’ Party (PZPR), the anti-Zionist campaign of 1968-1971 destroyed a Jewish community which had only just re-established itself after the Holocaust.

The opening of the preschool coincides with a broader expansion of Jewish educational facilities in major Polish cities, reflecting a nationwide recognition of the need for institutions that can nurture a knowledgeable and engaged Jewish youth. These educational initiatives are crucial for building a viable Jewish community, particularly in a society where many Jewish families are rediscovering their roots after decades of suppression.

As these educational institutions take root, they serve not only as centers of learning but also as symbols of the enduring strength and resilience of the Jewish community in Poland. They stand as testament to a community that, despite facing near annihilation, is once again finding its voice and reclaiming its place in the fabric of Polish society.

Adapted from:

Ziv, S. (2015, September 1). Nearly Half a Century Later, a Jewish Preschool in Lodz. Newsweek. <https://www.newsweek.com/nearly-half-century-later-jewish-preschool-lodz-367465>