

# Scholar analyzes Poland's Jewish revival



In his “I miss you Jew” campaign, Polish artist Rafal Betlejewski asks Poles to photograph themselves with an empty chair signifying the void left in the country by the loss of its Jews. \

*Photo courtesy tesknie.com*

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Decades after all but a fraction of Poland’s almost 3.5 million Jews were murdered in the Holocaust, a growing revival of Jewish religious life and culture has taken hold.

Since the fall of communism, Poland has seen a spurt of Jewish cultural festivals and klezmer clubs; Holocaust memorials; Jewish restaurants, bookstores, and museums; and, in major cities, the opening of synagogues and Jewish community centers.

Many of those attending cultural and historical events are not Jewish, their interest spurred by what Dr. Genevieve Zubrzycki refers to as a complex mix of curiosity, collective guilt, historical memory, and symbolism. Poles are also driven by a desire to diversify and westernize, push back against the Catholic Church, and oppose anti-Semitism.

A sociology professor at the University of Michigan, where she is also director of the Copernicus Program in Polish Studies, Zubrzycki spoke May 12 at the annual Raoul Wallenberg program of Rutgers University’s Allen and Joan Bildner Center for the Study of Jewish Life.

The program, funded by Leon and Toby Cooperman, was held at Douglass College Center in New Brunswick and was included as part of “Contested Memories and Contours of the Past,” a Bildner interdisciplinary conference held May 12-14 for graduate students and faculty.

“The Jewish revival in Poland is growing, and it is a phenomenon,” said Zubrzycki. Only several thousand Jews remain in a country where 10 percent of the prewar population was Jewish. However, she said, that number is growing as more people feel comfortable acknowledging their Jewishness, or, having discovered their Jewish roots, convert. The 2001 Polish census listed only 2,000 Jews, but two years ago, said Zubrzycki, 7,000 declared themselves Jewish.

“The community is not very large, but it occupies a large space in Polish memory,” she said.

Other emblems of the revival of interest: a Jewish-inspired clothing line that has young Polish hipsters wearing T-shirts with such sayings as “You Had Me at Shalom” and a spate of murals commemorating Holocaust victims on buildings in Warsaw.

A 15-year-old Jewish Culture Festival in Cracow has grown from two days to 11 and draws more than 30,000, most of them non-Jews. It is highlighted by a klezmer concert in Szeroka Square on its final night, which is broadcast live nationally on Polish TV.

Its large crowds visit seven historic shuls, and other programs focus on Hebrew and Yiddish literature and Israel.

Similarly, the JCC in Cracow, which opened in 2008, draws crowds — not necessarily all Jewish — at its events, which include Purim celebrations and Passover seders. A second JCC opened in Warsaw last year.

Both, said Zubrzycki, are “safe places for Poles to learn and reacquaint themselves with Jewish culture.” Unlike some Soviet bloc countries, Poland had a “very successful” transition to democracy, she noted, and firmly aligned itself with the United States. In the European Union, it became one of Israel’s staunchest supporters.

A French-Canadian native of Quebec City, Zubrzycki first went to Poland in 1990 to study what would happen to Catholicism with the fall of communism. However, she became fascinated by Jewish revival in the country and wrote an award-winning book, *The Crosses of Auschwitz: Nationalism and Religion in Post-Communist Poland*.

The downfall of communism brought with it the realization that Poland had been purged of its ethnic minorities, leaving it 96 percent ethnically Polish Catholic. Liberals accused the church of colluding with the communists.

“Many people who object to a cross in the public sphere do not object to Jewish religious symbols,” said Zubrzycki. “Feminists I know are very upset when they see a cross on the street, or a nun. But they think a Chabad woman with a wig is a good thing.”

Embracing Jewish culture, viewed as “cosmopolitan, cultured, and modern,” she suggested, is one way for Poles to regain what was lost in the war.

The country was also traumatized by the 2000 publication of *Neighbors: The Destruction of the Jewish Community in Jedwabne, Poland*, written by Polish-born Princeton University professor Jan Gross, which details the murder of the town's Jews by their Polish neighbors.

Many Poles were “genuinely shocked” to learn that their own people had committed atrocities against Jews during the Holocaust, said Zubrzycki. She was in Poland when the book came out and it was, she said, “all people were talking about.”

While anti-Semitism remains in Poland, Zubrzycki said, Polish philo-Semitism should be seen as “part of a broader attempt to expand what it means to be Polish and to counter the monopoly of the Polish Catholic right.”

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