



Poland is Healing

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Poland can never be less than a graveyard for Polish Jewry, but it's not only a graveyard. Though Poles cooperated with the Nazis during the Holocaust, they were not the only ones to do so. Moreover, many Poles have been honored by Yad Vashem as righteous gentiles for rescuing Jews and risking their own lives in the process.

However, many, perhaps most, Jews today only see the graveyards. Even the many students from Israeli schools who visit the country are often programmed to remember the crematoria and the ghettos, which is as it should be, but not to interact with Polish peers who would show them a different, new, Poland. That's a pity.

This is even more in evidence in the annual "March of the Living" when young Jews come from all over the world to Poland to commemorate *Yom Hasho'a*, the Holocaust Memorial Day, and then move on to Israel for *Yom Ha'atsmaut*, Independence Day. The message is simplistic: the destruction of Polish Jewry reflects the degradation of Diaspora existence; Israel assures redemption. The truth, however, is more nuanced.

In recent years the negative image of Poland has been supported by two books by the American historian Jan T. Gross. Gross left his native Poland in 1968 when government sponsored Communist anti-Semitism set out to remove the Jewish remnant from its home country, thus trying to finish what the Nazis left undone. His first book, *Neighbors*, described the massacre of Jews by Poles in the village of Jedwabne during World War II, the second, *Fear*, documents Polish anti-Semitism after the war.

These are important books but they don't tell the whole story about Poland today. You only have to visit a bookstore in Warsaw or Krakow to be impressed by the number of books showing Judaism and Jews in a positive light. Many Poles have a genuine interest in things Jewish. Anti-Semitism in today's Poland is still a menace. It's strongest, however, among simple country folk where it's fuelled by right-wing Catholic clergy. Sophisticated urbane people think differently and their stance is gaining ground.

Donald Tusk, Poland's new Prime Minister currently on a visit to Israel, is a case in point. When President Shimon Peres received him, Peres spoke warmly of the new Poland, which, together with Germany, is today Israel's most vocal advocate and trusted friend in the European Union. Peres stressed the need for the many young Israelis who visit the country every year to establish links with their Polish peers to see Israeli-Polish relations in their proper perspective and, together, work for a better future.

I'd like to hope that our teenage Israeli grandchildren, with whom Fredzia and I just visited Poland, got something of that more nuanced impression. We traveled with them and their parents to show them where we were born and how we lived, and to visit the places of destruction where many of

their forbears perished. But we also tried to put the contemporary situation in perspective and stress, in the liberal fashion in which they were reared, that people should be judged as individuals, not as relics of history.

Professor Anthony Polonsky, the historian of Polish Jewry, has said that when Poland lost its Jews, a limb was cut off from its body. After years of neurotic and damaging denial, the country is now beginning to feel the phantom pains. Though much of that work Poles will have to do by themselves, it behooves us Jews to help them – and thus also ourselves - to heal. Prime Minister Tusk's visit is part of the process.

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