

Beit Warszawa, Jewish Music, and *Shabbes*

Haim Beliak

Beginning in 1995, Beit Warszawa's founder Severyn Ashkenazy applied his professional sensibilities and experience to creating a *Shabbes*. Ashkenazy is a successful hotelier and he brought a profound Jewish love for creating *Shabbes* hospitality. A nourishing Shabbat dinner with a Jewish cultural program for those Jews who self-identified and would show up for Friday evening became a regular part of Warsaw's scene. *Shabbes* at Beit Warszawa became justly famous for an atmosphere suffused with warm candle light, flowers, music, and excellent food. All of this became synonymous with *Shabbes* in Progressive Judaism's Poland. Jewish visitors from outside of Poland and people exploring the meaning of Judaism from inside Poland are enchanted by our *Shabbes*. For many years government ministers and university professors, musicians and artists, intellectuals and seekers found their way to *Shabbes* at Warszawa.

Initially, repeat attendees admitted to only a passing curiosity about Judaism and perhaps a desire for a hot meal. In time, however, many admitted that they were not merely curiosity seekers, or what I like to call cultural anthropologists of the Jewish tribe, but that they yearned to return to their Jewish faith. Eventually, out of the *Shabbes* dinners and programs, Beit Warszawa emerged as a bona fide World Union for Progressive Judaism (WUPJ) congregation. The Shabbat congregation's ritual practice employs communal singing, which is greatly prized in Poland. The *Shabbes* Evening Service is conducted 95 percent in Hebrew. The siddur, based on the American *Mishkan T'filah* and the Israeli Progressive

RABBI HAIM BELIAK (C76) is the executive director of Beit Polska, the umbrella organization of Progressive Jews in Poland including Beit Warszawa, Beit Lublin, Beit Lodz, Beit Poznan, Beit Bialystok, Beit Konstancin, and Beit Trojmiasto. Beliak with Jane Hunter developed several social justice projects using the Internet and social media: www.JewsOnFirst.org, www.HaMifgash.org, www.StopMoskowitz.org, and www.InclusivePrayerDay.org.

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siddur, has a new Polish translation, Hebrew, and transliteration of Hebrew; it has been in use as an experimental edition for nine months and is soon to be published in a more permanent form.¹

Currently, the congregation is led by Israeli-born Rabbi Gil Nativ, who came to Warsaw with his wife, Ziva, in August 2012 to serve as the rabbi of Beit Warszawa.² Nativ was ordained by the HUC in Jerusalem, but he has served in Masorti congregations in Israel and North America. Rabbi Burt Schuman was the pioneering permanent rabbi for five years until his unfortunate illness. Schuman's efforts and successes are the basis of today's on-going synagogue life. Schuman is much beloved for his gentleness and human sweetness.

Today Beit Warszawa sponsors Sabbath services, Hebrew classes, a children's Sabbath school, a summer day camp, holiday and Jewish learning and cultural events, and offers conversion classes. Beit Warszawa, Beit Polska, and the friends of Jewish Renewal have trained eight Sabbath lay cantors and five teachers of the Introduction to Judaism course. Three of the lay cantors have completed their training to lead the much more complex and demanding High Holy Day services. Lay cantors are taught by a master teacher, Cantor Mimi Scheffer of Berlin and Israel.³ The fostering of a Polish-speaking cadre of learned and committed Progressive Jews continues with two candidates in rabbinical school and two more preparing for either cantoral or rabbinic preparation. The challenge of building a sufficient infrastructure for these future Polish leaders to serve in is a test of resourcefulness and optimism. Beit Polska, as the embodiment of a future Polish Progressive Judaism will for the foreseeable future need the help and wise counsel of Progressive Jews everywhere.

In 2008, Beit Polska was founded as an umbrella organization to minister to the Jewish population of Warsaw as well as to encourage the formation and support of other Jewish congregations elsewhere in the country.⁴ The chair of Beit Polska⁵ is Piotr Stasiak, a physicist turned businessman turned Jewish community leader. One of the challenges of Jewish life in Poland is working with congregants toward developing a sense of civic responsibility for Jewish life. Poland's immediate Communist past did not encourage communal leadership efforts and the model of Catholic life did not invite lay leadership. Notions of local communal responsibility are not well developed in Poland. The fabulous wealth acquired

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by individuals in the Former Soviet Union communities did not materialize in Poland.

At a much deeper level, the challenges of acquiring an individual Jewish identity outweigh in many ways the imagination of what a community might be like. Several generations are “missing” from the enterprise of building a Jewish community. In Beit Warszawa, there are very few families with an orderly succession of generations—grandparents, parents, and grandchildren. Many of our members are individuals who have chosen to embrace Jewish while their partners are often supportive and involved but unlikely to embrace Jewish life.

Despite numerous impediments, Beit Polska over the last two years has grown in the number of Progressive congregations/*chavurot*. The leap from one to seven is difficult and tentative but gradually more and more real. In addition to Beit Warszawa,⁶ there are now groups called Beit Lublin,⁷ Beit Lodz,⁸ Beit Poznan,⁹ Beit Gdansk,¹⁰ Beit Plock,¹¹ and our newest addition, Beit Bialystok,¹² founded in August 2012. A WUPJ congregation that is outside of the Beit Polska structure exists in Krakow under the leadership of Rabbi Tanya Segal.

My own involvement in Poland began in 2008 when I spent several months in Warsaw as a sabbatical replacement for Rabbi Burt Schuman. I found the experience of supporting a Jewish religious and communal revival in Poland truly gratifying and was determined to stay involved. I returned to Poland in 2011 and 2012, spending about ten months there during that time frame. My work was partially supported by a onetime grant from the WUPJ and the European Union for Progressive Judaism (EUPJ). Today, I serve as executive director of Beit Polska and spend six months a year in Poland. My mandate is to continue to nurture existing congregations and to look for opportunities to create new ones.

Beit Warszawa and Beit Polska Struggle for Freedom; Polish Courts Must Adjudicate a Legal Dispute Brought by Orthodox Leaders That Threatens to Take Away the Right of Progressive Jews to Organize and Pray

There are threats to religious pluralism and freedom in Europe. But sadly the threats to Progressive Polish Jews come not from right wing fascists or neo-Nazis but originate in the monopolist efforts

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of self-styled Orthodox Jewish leaders. In Poland, it is the government that is seeking to support and defend Jewish religious pluralism while the Union of Jewish Religious Communities (UJRC), a pseudo-Orthodox gang of five, threatens to institute monopolistic religious arrangements for their benefit. In every country in Eastern and Central Europe similar struggles are being waged in which Orthodox organizations, working often through unsuspecting government officials, establish official offices often at taxpayer expense. The governments are hesitant to pursue conflicts with the Jewish community for fear of being labeled anti-Semitic. At the same time, many of these governments are familiar with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and assume that Judaism has similar arrangements. These countries include the members of the Former Soviet bloc countries (Russia, Ukraine, and Lithuania) and Hungary, Austria, and the Czech and Slovak republics.

In Poland the Orthodox effort attempts to block Progressive life by both overt and devious means. By suggesting that the Orthodox rabbinate receive their authority from the Orthodox establishment in Israel, they further insinuate themselves in Polish life. Self-declared chief rabbis in Central and Eastern Europe anoint themselves as the equivalents of cardinals and bishops. At issue in Poland is a claim by the UJRC of a monopolistic lock on Jewish life. Numerous attempts by the WUPJ and the EUPJ to mediate an accommodation have failed. In March 2012, I was party to an attempt to reach an accommodation but again Mr. Kadlcik, the titular head of the group known in Poland as Twarda and the chief rabbi of Poland, Rabbi Schudrich, sought a humiliating surrender not a compromise. The newest player in this tragic waste of resources is a young Reform rabbi hired by the UJRC to form an independent Reform group. In a cynical move the UJRC took advantage of typical congregational intragroup rivalries in Beit Warszawa to set up an independent Reform congregation under the auspices of the Orthodox Rabbi Schudrich. Jews are used to breakaway religious groups dissenting and starting new groups. But this new independent "Reform group" seeks to have the old group declared illegal. The Polish Ministry of the Interior is being sued in an administrative court to revoke its recognition of Beit Polska. The UJRC (Twarda) authorities have eighteen rabbinical positions allocated for Jewish life in Poland. Most of the positions are vacant year after year and the ones that are filled employ only

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Orthodox rabbis! Twarda seeks to negate Poland's and the European Union's commitment to pluralism and religious freedom. No one denies the necessity and the value of Orthodox commitment but anyone who is familiar with the challenges of Polish Jewish renewal cannot seriously imagine a community in the sole control of the Orthodox.

The UJRC claims that the 1993 arrangement with the Polish government reached at the end of the Communist era permitted the Union the rights to settle all property claims on communal Jewish properties that had been confiscated during the Nazi era and the subsequent Soviet invasion and domination. The estimated \$300 million worth of Jewish communal property has been gradually sold off for undisclosed amounts. No audits have been performed nor are any elected boards empowered to oversee disbursements. The Union retains an enormous war chest with no plans to provide services such as clinics, or to educate Jewish teachers or rabbis for the future. No forward planning is happening for future training of rabbis or developing communal organizations. The estimated five hundred individuals who are recognized as members of the Union may collectively be the richest per capita Jewish community in the world.

In addition, more contributions from well-meaning but unsuspecting (Reform and Conservative) donors and the considerable know-how and funds from the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) flow to Twarda.¹³ The WUPJ and Beit Polska are demanding a clear and separate institutional space be instituted between the Union and the JDC. A concerted misinformation campaign by the UJRC seeks to undermine Beit Warszawa and Beit Polska groups and the morale of individuals seeking a Progressive Jewish milieu. One of the classic claims made by Twarda is that there was only Orthodox Judaism prior to World War II.

Members of Beit Polska have been subject to threats delivered to their employers suggesting that employees are members of a "strange cult." Men and women studying at Progressive congregations have been confronted with threats that if they attended Progressive synagogues they would not be allowed to marry and their status as Jews be questioned both in Poland and in Israel. In a community seeking to find its own direction, the activity of the Twarda group does not benefit the future of Poland's Jews.

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At the present time, Beit Polska is working with officials from the Joint Distribution Committee to demand equal access to social services funded by JDC. There is a concerted effort to include Progressive Jews and Progressive rabbis in JDC-funded and -staffed summer camps, family camps, social service agencies, and leadership trips to North America and Israel. The WUPJ and the EUPJ have stood by Beit Polska and Beit Warszawa. When visiting delegations from the March of the Living, the Forum for Dialogue among the Nations, the JDC, and many other organizations have entertained visitors while ignoring Beit Warszawa and new Beit Polska congregations. This is indicative of a culture of disdain for pluralism and Jewish diversity. Many visitors have little understanding that the money contributed largely by Reform and Conservative North American Jews is used to systematically undermine Jewish diversity in Poland.¹⁴

The newest participant in the attempt to enforce a religious straitjacket on the tiny Polish Jewish community comes from the president of the Abraham Geiger School, Walter Homolka. In an alliance with the UJRC, Homolka introduced the notion that a nineteenth-century German imperial governmental arrangement called an *Einheitsgemeinde* (unified community) would preserve the community. Homolka also offered to reconfirm conversions that had been authorized by the WUPJ and the EUPJ! Besides a lack of courtesy and *menschlichkeit*, Homolka managed to alienate large swaths of the Polish Jewish community who could not understand why Homolka, a German, was offering to meddle in internal Polish matters.

In Poland, World War II Ended in 1989: The New Context of Communal Renewal

There are factors that are unique to Poland and the surprising emergence of a Jewish community. With the withdrawal of Soviet troops and the gradual transformation to what is called the Third Republic in 1991, a new context for Polish Jewish life and indeed for Poland emerged. Today, ethnic Poles make up 98 percent of a largely homogeneous country. This is in contrast to the ethnic makeup of Poland's Second Republic (1918–1939) with its “nervous” demographics in which ethnic Poles were 60 percent of the population. Jews made up 10 percent of the Second Republic's

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population. That Jewish community despite being superficially protected with the Minorities Treaty was increasingly isolated and disdained until Poland repudiated the treat all together in 1935.

The post-World War I restored Poland contained other ethnic groups including Germans (Volksdeutch), Ukrainians, Latvians, and Lithuanians.¹⁵ A growing anti-Jewish movement shaped the Polish nation-building efforts encompassing conservative, traditionalist, and Roman Catholic expressions. Anti-Semitic stereotypes became the major ideological vehicles in the struggle to define a nation that disappeared between 1784 and 1919. The recurring anti-Jewish expressions were to reappear throughout Poland's failed attempts at national reassertion. Beginning in the aftermath of the failed 1864 revolt and up until the Communist era (1948–1989) and its aftermath, all failed national efforts were the fault of the Jews.¹⁶

The ethnic homogeneity of today's Poland is credited with opening in many circles a search for a Polish civic society and open stance, even nostalgia for Jewish culture.¹⁷ The demons of the Polish past that sought to portray Jews as the threatening Other are not completely exorcised but they are no longer respectable.¹⁸ Today there is a considerable part of Polish society that is dedicated to understanding and addressing the Polish past:

In Polish history attitudes toward Jews and other minorities have continued a litmus test of democracy, which embodied in the concept of modern civic nationalism . . . champions of civic and pluralistic Poland in the post-Communist era have "rediscovered" the cultural traditions of Jagiellonian Poland and view them as a historical heritage.¹⁹

The possibility of a renewed Jewish life in Poland is rooted in the context of a

liberal position of recognition of the rights of a minority to the maintenance of its ethno-cultural make-up and of recognition of such a minority as an integral part of a national community defined in the civic and pluralist sense.²⁰

Today's emerging Polish Jewish community is only tangentially related to previous expressions of Jewish life in Poland. So much was carried away and forgotten. Even before World War II, during

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the mass murders of World War II, and in the aftermath of World War II during the civil war (1944–1948) and then the assertion of the Communist system in Poland, two contradictory phenomena worked in tandem: excluding Jews who were rebranded as Zionists and claiming that the Jews were in control of the Communist regime.²¹ The fact that it was easier to impugn people by simply inventing or suggesting a Jewish background did not cause too much concern even in the post-Communist era. Communists with a Jewish background did not claim that what they were doing was for the benefit of Jews. But this logic did not impress too many Poles. It was easier to blame the Jews.

There are internal dynamics that are uniquely Polish and uniquely Jewish in the current renewal of Jewish life in Poland; there are no remnant expressions of pre-World War II Jewish life that have secretly remained dormant, only to come to life in the post-Communist era. Poland's renewal of Jewish life is a product of imagination, creativity, and invention. It is also subject to all the ghosts of the past.

The current situation is difficult to assess. One important "internal" perspective is provided in the concluding report written for the Institute for Jewish Policy Research. Konstanty Gebert and Helena Datner conclude:

Twenty years after the fall of communism, the Polish Jewish community finds itself in a rather paradoxical situation. Even though the community is very small in number and insignificant at the national level, Jews still attract a great deal of political attention, and due to internal diversity, it is not possible to draw a single coherent picture of its current situation. Its very revival is something of a miracle, it finds itself today internally torn between the attractiveness of Orthodoxy, which was strongly supported in the past by both the community's own spiritual leadership and external funding, but nevertheless represents a minority within the community, and needs of the majority of Poland's Jews. Their Jewish identities still ill-defined, they tend to look towards Reform and secular models of Jewishness, yet struggle to find enough of real substance there.²²

This sobering conclusion by one of the most committed and longtime leaders of the revival of Polish Jewry must give one pause.²³ The author's attempt at sober realism is not historical nor

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is it current. No elements of the rich Polish Jewish past are employed to imagine or even allow an internal Jewish pluralism that once included Progressive Judaism.

American Jewish apprehensions over Poland's commitment to develop a civic society in the new era after Soviet domination contributed greatly to skepticism over the necessity for internal Jewish pluralism in Poland. The admittedly shaky nostalgia for Polish Catholic and Polish Jewish amity in North America contributed to perception on the part of philanthropists that one form of Judaism would be sufficient to address all of Jewish life in Poland. There has not been the kind of comprehensive communal planning that could imagine a Polish Jewish future.

The bulk of the resources invested in building Polish Jewish life in the early 1990s did support projects like the Orthodox led Lauder-Morasha school, which continues to this day long after the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation has withdrawn its major support. It is an excellent institution but it has not produced an Orthodox community or much of a non-Orthodox community. The school did not offer a realistic forum for Jewish life beyond its tiny Orthodox group. From a Progressive Jewish perspective, the failure of the Lauder school to produce a pluralistic Jewish community is not a surprise. A great opportunity is being missed.

Elements of a Polish Jewish Future Community

A brilliant and courageous tiny part of the Polish Jewish community is committed to Orthodoxy having moved from their days of the Flying Jewish University in which they recovered their Jewish identity to a stoic skepticism about a Jewish future in Poland. Faced with the realization that the majority of Polish Jews who identify as such are not Orthodox and yet, not fully secular, this influential group has often despaired about the direction of the community. It is this niche that Beit Warszawa has tried to address as its constituency. Understanding our constituencies in Poland is a challenge. There are groups of Israelis who seek their future in business and education in Poland. (There are eight medical schools in Poland teaching in English, which is an attractive option for Israelis and for former Jewish Poles whose families migrated to Europe.) Estimates vary but Polish officials have suggested that there may be as many as 200,000 Israelis with Polish passports and subsequent

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access to the European Union. Besides “reinforcements” from outside of Poland, we know very little substantively about the needs and desires of the 5,000 or maybe as high as 20,000 or even 100,000 who have a claim on Jewishness.

Making the Historical Contribution of Poland’s Progressive Judaism Visible

The thirteen Progressive (Modern or Reform) synagogues in pre-World War II Poland located in major urban areas proceeded along the lines of moderate religious views and leadership by their rabbis in the development and strengthening of a sense of Peoplehood not only in their synagogues but also in Zionist affairs and Polish national leadership. The key contributions to the Progressive Jewish communities are often elided; the significance of these Progressive Jewish efforts is completely obscured from consciousness in present-day Poland.

An appreciation of the historical contribution of Progressive Judaism in Poland is neither part of trips to Poland nor part of the official history taught in the curriculum of the new Museum of Polish Jewish History. Instead, visiting groups focus almost exclusively on the Nazi murders in visits to Auschwitz, while Polish schools teach about shtetl life to the exclusion of other Polish Jewish expressions. Across the board—visitors to Poland and home born—are left with the erroneous impression that all Progressive Judaism was a German Jewish development of the nineteenth century.

These communities were termed by their Orthodox detractors as the *Yekish* (German) synagogues, but they were rooted in the complex intersection of a Polish Jewish reality that comprehended the modern world’s conflicting demands. These Progressive (Postepowe) communities collectively numbered in the neighborhood of one hundred thousand members. While certainly influenced by German Reform they hewed to their own Polish direction. The community in Lviv (Lemberg, Lwow) is the oldest and most illustrious, dating back to the nineteenth century.²⁴

The modern synagogues of interwar Poland were very promising. The Great Synagogue on Tlomackie Street in Warsaw was led by rabbinic leaders of great stature, Abraham Poznanski²⁵ and Mojzesz Schorr.²⁶ These synagogues were home to

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acculturated Jewish Poles and Zionists alike. In Chestochowa, a smaller edifice modeled on the Great Synagogue in Warsaw, was a site led by Rabbi Nahum Asz, who served as a bridge figure to the Catholic hierarchy during his life. Asz was known as a defender of the practice of *sh'chita*. Bishop Teodor Kubina from Chestochowa, a friend of Asz's, was the only member of the Catholic hierarchy who forthrightly condemned the July 4, 1946, Kielce pogrom.²⁷

The premier Progressive rabbinical model was Rabbi Ozjasz Thon, the leader of the Tempel Synagogue in Krakow, from 1897 to 1936. Thon was trained in traditional studies and received ordination from Orthodox scholar Uri Wolf Salant. He attained subsequent degrees in philosophy and sociology at Fredrich Wilhelm University in Berlin and rabbinical training at the Institute for Jewish Studies (Lehranstalt für die Wissenschaft des Judentum) in Berlin.²⁸ Rabbi Thon wrote a "weekly column in the Zionist daily *Nowy Dziennik*" and held a seat in the Sejm, the Polish Parliament between 1919 and 1935. The Jewish group in Sejm was led by Rabbi Thon for five years.²⁹ From 1918 to 1926 Thon was president of the Tarbut (Zionist) school system, which eventually was responsible for about a fourth of the Jewish students not enrolled in Polish government schools.

After World War II, Poland's western boundary moved 150 miles to incorporate areas that in the nineteenth century had been Germanized but retained a connection to their Jewish Polish roots. Cities like Wroclaw (Breslau), Poznan (Posen), Gdansk (Danzig), Slupsk (Stolpe), and Bytom (Beuthen) are now part of the Polish reality. For Reform and Conservative Judaism these communities were the cradle of religious reform. The luminaries of our religious movements—Abraham Geiger, Heinrich Graetz, Leo Baeck, Yoachim Prinz, Max Joseph, and many others—were born or served congregations and communities in these areas. Each of them had an influence on modern Jewish life that is lost to us. The Reform and Conservative movements have not fully explained the many important roots that their movement has to the Polish lands. The inspiring examples of the fruits of their work are not available. I conclude with one example. A hardly noticed hero of Progressive Judaism is Rabbi Max Joseph who wrote one of the first tracts defending the Zionist Movement and later with the rise of the Nazis was one of the first

advocates for people leaving for Palestine and settling in Haifa, where he died in 1950.

Israel Is Perceived Positively

When people from Poland seek to visit Israel or to live there after completing the conversion process in Poland they often encounter official suspicion by representatives of the Israeli Ministry of the Interior and Jewish agency representatives. Even though the formal agreement between the Israeli Ministry of the Interior and the various religious movements provides for a direct process of the movements attesting to the integrity of the conversions, something else happens.

The questions asked of the perspective immigrant assume that they are living an Orthodox lifestyle. The request that often hostile Orthodox rabbis ratify the conversions of people who chose a Reform conversion leads to delays.³⁰ The professionalism and leadership of the Israeli Religious Action Center's attorneys and staff is absolutely critical to a successful conclusion of the citizenship process. In practice each candidate is examined by the Israeli Ministry of the Interior as if the old Orthodox monopoly applied.

Except for the period from 1949 to 1956, people who sought to leave Poland could do so with relative ease compared to the situation in the Soviet Union. During certain periods of official anti-Semitism/anti-Zionism, *aliyah* was actively encouraged by the Polish authorities. While this "permissiveness" was part of anti-Semitic/anti-Zionist campaigns, the notion of moving west and then deciding to leave for Israel allowed some Soviet Jews to find their way to Israel after 1956 through the 1960s and 1970s. Poland often served as the first destination during the late 1980s for Soviet Jews seeking to immigrate to Israel after the fall of the Soviet system. The motivations for Polish government assistance in the period after 1989 were often attributed to a newfound interest in reconnecting with Western powers. Nevertheless, this help was forthcoming.³¹

It is noteworthy that at least 25 percent of Beit Warszawa and Beit Polska attendees who complete the Step-by-Step classes attempt *aliyah*. The network of young people who remain friends and advisors to each other is impressive because they are active members of Reform and Masorti congregations in Israel and Poland. There is a

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normal constant stream of people moving back and forth between Israel and Poland. The once distant and detached communities of Poland and Israel actually have a good deal of interchange. It is not unusual for families to spend considerable time in each country. It is hoped that in the future Beit Warszawa will form a kindergarten program that will help to solidify the sense of community.

Memorial Projects and Cultural Festivals

Progressive Judaism in Poland is committed to memorial projects but is resolute in its focus on building congregational life. Considerable philanthropy was directed toward other kinds of efforts: memorial projects and cultural festivals.

The memorial projects seek to preserve remnants of the physical presence of synagogues, schools, and other buildings. These projects transform these buildings to community centers, libraries, and other laudable uses. Those community centers serve the local educational needs of towns seeking to have a “placeholder” for their past. These efforts build friendship and goodwill but often they are a distraction from Jewish congregational life. The mayors and city councils mean well but often these projects come with the hope that the city will realize a tourism boon. In as much as foundations from abroad support these efforts the day-to-day needs of building up Jewish life are ignored.

The cultural festivals such as the successful Krakow or Warsaw festivals have provided a venue for spreading goodwill and Jewish literacy. There, too, remains a certain ambivalence by those committed to building Jewish communal life since an unintended consequence of the reenactment culture reinforces stereotypical representations of Jews.³² From the perspective of Progressive Jewish ideas of openness, the festivals do attract a certain number of spiritual seekers. If they are fortunate enough to connect to Progressive congregations, an often long-term process begins that sometimes culminates in people formalizing their relationship to Judaism. As Progressive Jews we are open to this process without crossing the line into proselytizing. We make a clear distinction between welcoming people and teaching about Judaism and missionary work, which is universally frowned upon.

A good deal of tourist detritus comes with the cultural festival. Often one sees grotesque presentations of dolls and representations

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of Jewish ritual objects. The appearance of anti-Semitic tropes is part of the tourist presentation.³³

It is important to note that the Jewish world in Poland is often dismissive of the people's non-Orthodox spiritual searches. Often people who five and ten years earlier were themselves welcomed into Beit Warszawa become the least tolerant of gentiles. The availability of DNA testing is another strange phenomenon that has somehow served to motivate interest in Judaism. The suggestion that Jewish "blood" can be verified through a DNA test holds a certain fascination for people. These stories of people who discover their connection to Jews are often very dramatic, but we are reminded of the need to foster proper reasons for connecting to Judaism.

Poland Is More a Religious Community Than Not

The formulation of the Polish national narrative—both Catholic and increasingly secular—is complex. Any analysis of the renewal of Polish Jewish life must take into account the importance of Polish Catholic piety as the milieu in which a considerable portion of modern Poland lives. Unlike Christianity in other Communist-dominated countries, the Catholic Church did not die out under oppression. The Church during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and most of the twentieth century became the fervent keeper of Polish national identity.³⁴ The religious nature of part of Poland's society—while diminished from the days of Communism—provides a context sometimes constricting for Jewish piety. It suggests that a careful part of the pedagogy for people seeking to develop a Jewish commitment is the necessity to have a clear pattern of expectations and mitzvot. The community has developed a statement of thirty-five principles that help define our path and direction in Judaism. In the light of an organized campaign of disinformation and even a court case the community has sought to explain how Progressive relates to classical Judaism and how it is unique.³⁵

The growth potential for these small communities is difficult to know. Many individuals have worked assiduously to cover any connections to the family's Jewish past. Some have accomplished this hiding coupled with a fear of discovery. The decision by a relative to visit from Israel or the decision of a nephew to embrace Judaism may spell disaster for some who are hiding.

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Most moving for me were my two encounters with two separate men just three or four years older than my age (I was born in 1948 in Germany) whose elderly “relative” in their nineties informed each of them that the family had brought him into the family and raised him as Catholic but he was not a blood relative. He would not inherit the family farm!

The impact on an individual in their sixties grappling with their identity was quite stunning. One individual described a combination of shock, curiosity, and even elements of revulsion. This was accompanied with some rejection or distrust when an attempt was made to connect with the Jewish community. The collective effort of Beit Polska has been to be as welcoming as possible. Some individuals express a desire to learn about Judaism but remain faithful Catholics. For others there grows a desire to go one step further by formally connecting with the Jewish community. In March of 2013 five men who had been studying with Rabbi Gil Nativ participated in the first step of conversion, circumcision. This was an unprecedented event but very moving for all concerned. The presence of a group of seekers in a Jewish community represents a host of challenges.

Response to Jewish Renewal in Poland and in North America and Israel

The response of many members of the organized Jewish community outside of Poland to the phenomenon of individuals reclaiming their Jewish identity has often been confused, dismissive, and skeptical. When I talk in North American congregations about the work of building a Progressive Jewish community in Poland, I often encounter a range of responses. Some negative responses are born of mourning and unresolved grief. Others are skeptical and full of questions. (Why didn't “they” move to Israel? What is their motive for connecting to Judaism? Why did their grandparents convert to another religion? Why did their grandparents support Communism? “They” are simply seeking some advantage!) Often, anger and ignorance combine to create a wall of disassociation and rejection toward the very people we should be embracing! The happy news of reuniting with lost brothers and sisters is sometimes met with hostility and suspicion. I think that fostering Jewish life in Poland is a duty and an opportunity directed to Progressive Jews. Helping those who seek to learn about Judaism is our mitzvah. Some will

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discover that they want to regularize their status and become Jews. Thank goodness there are those who recognize the miracle of return and want to help these congregations flourish.

In Poland, some organizations have tried to capitalize on this phenomenon by seeking to regain public Jewish property for what appears private gain. The fate of the monies from the sale of public Jewish properties remains a mystery. Others saw an opportunity to connect with the burgeoning Jewish community and to foster an old-world, nineteenth century form of Judaism. The once idealized “Klezmer Judaism” often serves the romantic (exoticize) impulses that lead people to seek a deeper Jewish connection, but these do not appear to be representative of what Jews in Poland are looking for today. Nevertheless, the Polish Jewish spectrum seems less about ritual practice and more about strategies of cultural transmission.

The Polish Polish Jewish Context

It is in this larger context of the subsequent period of Poland’s Third Republic that a new phenomenon began to appear—Polish Polish Jews.³⁶ Stanislaw Krajewski writes:

Polish Polish Jews [are] Polish Jews who live in Poland, and . . . treat Poland as their homeland rather than just a place of origin . . . We do not ignore the reality of antisemitism in Poland, we feel it. We know that in the eyes of many Poles, Jews still provide much of the mystical explanation of Poland’s misfortunes . . . On the other hand, however, we do feel the existence of pro-Jewish attitudes, popular interest in “things Jewish,” and respect for Judaism. Above all, we feel the bond of common experience between contemporary Polish Jews and their non-Jewish peers.

Jews in Poland are numerically inconsequential today, but have an enormous role to play in the future of Jewish memory for all Jews, and also this small community will form a living witness for non-Jewish Poles.

The Museum of Polish Jewish History on the Seventieth Anniversary of Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, April 2013

The future meaning of the Museum of Polish Jewish History will continue to be debated. Certainly the new museum will grow,

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develop, and change. Its exhibits will respond to the educational needs of visitors.³⁷ In the future, Jewish youth will encounter in an organized and well-conceived fashion more of Polish Jewish culture than is encapsulated by the remains of Auschwitz and Majdanek. Polish school children will come to the museum to see part of their past. Jewish youth from around the world will gain a glimpse of aspects of Jewish culture. Whether there will be sufficient input from Polish-speaking Jews living as Jews in Poland is a challenging matter for the community to face. No doubt the Jewish Socialist movements, the Bundists, and the Progressive movements (Postepowe) will receive short shrift in the new museum. For ideological reasons these movements will take a back seat to the caricature of shtetl culture.

The museum will serve as a venue for reconciliation. Beit Polska has had a role in introducing educators from North America and Israel to their counterparts in Poland. The museum will represent an important stage in the process of telling the thousand-year-old narrative of Jewish life in Poland.

Visiting Scholars, Rabbis, and Artists

A dedicated core of teachers from the Reform and Conservative movements are teaching at Polish universities under Beit Polska's auspices. At a very modest cost the Polish institutions of higher learning are welcoming academics from a host of academic fields. These Jewishly informed individuals have provided an opportunity for high schools and university students to learn about the culture of Judaism for the first time. Often where a young Pole meets a Jew is in these forums. The presence of teachers living in the community for a few weeks or a couple of months has provided Jewish role models and teachers for individuals seeking to reconnect to Judaism. In turn, Beit Polska's leaders are visiting congregations in North America, Israel, and Europe to learn about Jewish communal life. The network of twinning congregations has provided an opportunity for shared discussion. Book discussions via Skype have allowed a sense of the larger Jewish world to be as close as one's computer.

There has been considerable discussion of encouraging young Polish Jews to join a special elite school of Ambassadors of Judaism. By offering a sophisticated course to young people that would

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prepare them to speak and represent Judaism before high schools, student clubs, Rotary clubs, and other emerging civic institutions we would create a boon to Jewish young people's Jewish formation and inform Polish young people about Jews. There is nothing comparable to the experience of representing a group to inspire young leaders and educate Poles more broadly about Judaism.

Notes

1. Wikipedia article: Beit Warszawa, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beit_Warszawa_Synagogue.
2. Beit Warszawa website, <http://www.beit.org.pl/>.
3. <http://www.mimisheffer.com/index-en.htm>.
4. Friends of Jewish Renewal in Poland, <http://www.jewishrenewalinpoland.org/>.
5. Beit Polska, <https://www.facebook.com/beit.polska>.
6. Beit Warszawa, <http://www.beit.org.pl/>.
7. Beit Lublin, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Beit-Lublin/178811312131129?fref=ts>.
8. Beit Lodz, <https://www.facebook.com/beit.lodz.5?fref=ts>.
9. Beit Poznan, <https://www.facebook.com/beit.poznan>.
10. Beit Gdansk, <https://www.facebook.com/BeitGdansk>.
11. Beit Plock, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Beit-Plock-%D7%A4%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%A6%D7%A7/262225673911579?fref=ts>.
12. Beit Bialystok, <https://www.facebook.com/BeitBialystok>.
13. "Toward" is the name of the street on which the Union of Jewish Religious Communities has its offices.
14. Cnaan Lifshiz, JTA, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/in-poland-orthodox-and-reform-clash-over-control/> and a more in depth article by Nissan Tsur, <http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Judaism/Article.aspx?id=302318&prmusr=GeLTKjYhLjzsL7EuPo9EDrF5l4SFYnN%2fTWeUG2a6tMYJUaOzPz0ADlBovGoywO8>.
15. Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other: The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 2006), 108–30, especially 131ff.
16. Michlic, *Poland's*, 1–2.
17. Ruth Ellen Gruber, *Virtually Jewish: Reinventing Jewish Culture in Europe* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002), 6.
18. Michlic, *Poland's*, 133–39.
19. Michlic, *Poland's*, 3–4.
20. Michlic, *Poland's*, 15.
21. Josef Banas, *The Scapegoats: The Exodus of the Remnants of Polish Jewry* (New York: Homes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1979).

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22. Konstanty Gebert and Helena Datner, "Jewish Life in Poland: Achievements, Challenges and Priorities. Since the Collapse of Communism," *Institute for Jewish Policy Research* (September 2011): 32, <http://westburyeurope.org/sites/default/files/attachments/JPR%20Poland%20report%20for%20website.pdf>
23. Steve Lipman, "The Revival of Jewish Life in Poland," *Jewish Action* (Fall 2010): 16–18, <http://www.ou.org/pdf/ja/5771/fall71/14-18.pdf>.
24. Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia* (Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2012), vol. 2, 315, and <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/article/lwow/5,history/?action=view&page=3>.
25. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Poznanski#Writings.
26. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moses_Schorr.
27. Polonsky, *Jews in Poland and Russia*, vol. 3, 193.
28. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hochschule_f%C3%BCr_die_Wissenschaft_des_Judentums.
29. Polonsky, *Jews in Poland and Russia*, vol. 2, 194–95.
30. Gil Kariv, Israel Religious Action Center talk, San Francisco, March 2010.
31. Gebert and Datner, "Jewish Life in Poland," 28.
32. Gebert and Datner, "Jewish Life in Poland," 19.
33. Gruber, *Virtually Jewish*, 49.
34. Adam Zamoyski, *Poland: A History* (London: Harper Press, 2009), 275.
35. Statement of Principles of Progressive Judaism in Poland, http://beit.org.pl/images/PDFs/mission_statement_A4_ENG.pdf.
36. Stanislaw Krajewski, *Poland and the Jews: Reflections of a Polish Polish Jew* (Karkow, Poland: Wydawnictwo Austeria, 2005), 17–19.
37. <http://www.jewishmuseum.org.pl/en/cms/home-page/>.