

Poland and Me

Poland began for me as a place of horror. It was the land where my people experienced unspeakable treatment during the Shoah. I grew up hearing countless horror stories about Poland and Polish people from family members who had survived the war and swore never to return. My grandmother has rather infamously assured us all that she would not return, “for a million dollars”. I have never actually tested her resolve.

For most of my life, this was what made sense to me; Poland as a place of horrors that must be avoided. Five years ago, this began to change.

I was looking for a way for my mother and I to deepen our connection to each other. We were once close, though had grown distant over the years. I proposed to her that we see Poland together – that we go to her parent’s hometowns of Wolbrom and Komarówka, and that we see Treblinka and Auschwitz where we had lost most of our family. Although I knew the trip would be painful for us, I believed it may also bring us closer together. My mother reluctantly agreed.

We knew nothing about contemporary Poland – only the brutalities of its past – and so we began researching and learning. We knew nothing about post-war Communist Poland or the Jewish exodus in 1968. We knew nothing about Marshall Law, the Solidarity Movement or Smolensk. And we knew nothing about the rejuvenation of Jewish culture in Poland. We found this to be particularly shocking. It seemed implausible that anyone could be able to still practice Judaism in Poland.

Our first trip to Poland happened in 2013. We saw our family’s hometowns. We went to Auschwitz and Treblinka. And then we came to Krakow and we spent some time with the Jewish Community. This is when my association with Poland started to change .

I had begun seeing Magda in 2012. We met in Montreal, Canada. I was there to speak about my upcoming trip to Poland with my mother, and she was there from Poland to speak about contemporary Judaism in Poland and the Progressive Jewish community that she helped start. That’s right. She *started* a Jewish community in Poland. We had a fantastic and romantic weekend together that we knew would end when she went home.

It didn’t.

The relationship lasted long enough that on my trip to Poland with my mother, the community we spent time with was Magda’s. She invited us to Krakow for Shabbat (Sabbath) after spending the day in Auschwitz. It was strange to be practicing Judaism in Poland. It was also profound. They said the mourner’s prayer for the family we lost, and my mother and I wept together for the first time in our lives.

The trip with my mother ended, however my trips to Poland did not. Magda and I began getting more serious, and I started visiting Poland more regularly to see her. And the more I went to Poland, the more I missed it when I was not there. I missed Magda, of course, but even when we were together in Canada, we would miss Poland.

Growing up in Canada, I'd always felt disconnected from history. We are a country of immigrants built by colonizers who mostly destroyed our country's Indigenous history. In Poland, for the first time in my life, I felt connected to a history – and this history was my own. My people's history is in Poland, and I am a Polish Jew. My people have been in Poland for centuries. This has always been true, but it took coming to Poland, being on the land and being with the people, to reconcile for myself this somewhat obvious truth.

There is an idea – one that I subscribed to – that Jews and Poles never mixed – and so Jews were never actually Poles. I have come to learn that this “idea” is absurd. First, if you are born in Poland you are Polish. Second, Jewish and Polish culture – in larger cities in particular – were deeply intertwined; many Jews considered themselves Poles. In smaller towns this mixing did not happen as readily, but in the cities there were Jewish movements and political parties with strong mandates towards integration into Polish society. The oral history of Poland – because of the Shoah – has been perverted due to the trauma of war being too great to imagine Poland as a place that Jews liked. And so we're raised being told that the Poles were all terrible – some believe they were worse than the Germans. After the war, the notion of a Jewish-Polish identity was mostly eradicated and only the negative narrative remained. Jews lost their Poland, and Poland lost their Jews. But not entirely.

Today, many people in Poland are discovering they have Jewish roots and embracing them so as to gain a greater sense of their own identity. It has also meant these “new Jews” need to be supported and have formalized communities to facilitate daily Jewish life. Judaism is once again existing in Poland. It is young, and fraught, but it is here. And it is this new Polish Jewish life that has been, for me, a re-entry back into my own Jewish identity; one that not only includes my Polish identity but, in fact, *requires* it to hold resonance.

When someone in Poland discovers they have Jewish roots and embraces them, they will often engage in the “practice” of being Jewish. For some this can mean keeping kosher, for others it can mean going to Synagogue, taking Hebrew lessons, going to Jewish school or visiting Israel. And for a few, it can be as dramatic as going through a conversion process to Judaism.

It likewise occurred to me that if I wanted to embrace my Polish identity, I too would have to engage in Polish practices beyond increasing my vodka and sausage intake. And so I started publically identifying as a Pole, and I began to learn Polish.

I had been told that Polish was difficult to learn, but I had not been prepared for just *how* hard. Its been over three years of off and on learning, and I have the speaking capacity of a 3 or 4 year old, and the comprehension of a 5 or 6 year old. But still, I am learning. and for that I am proud. I am consistently regretful, however, that I will never learn enough in time to build a relationship in Polish with my Polish speaking elderly grandmother, great uncle and great aunts before they die. They all speak English, of course, but I have this feeling that to know them in one of their mother tongues would be a more authentic experience of who they are.

I am hoping the same holds true for me when I become more affluent with the language; to better know my authentic self.

Two years ago, Magda and I got married in Krakow, Poland, in the Old Synagogue in Kazimierz. I had never been able imagine a context where I would want to be married until we began talking about doing it in a synagogue in Krakow. Our marriage, while very much to each other, also felt like a marriage to Poland. During the wedding we were surrounded by the living and the dead, and we could feel our histories being channeled through us. After the wedding we decided what made most sense was to make this country our home. We now live in a flat on Dietla that we purchased and renovated. We plan to not only live there but to host performances and gatherings – a place where we can build community.

And I feel good. Most of the time. I feel like I am in the right place. Most of the time. It is hard being in Poland. The reminders can be painful. To live an hour from Auschwitz is not something I would have imagined was what my future held. But it does. It has. This is where I live, and this is my reality.

Choosing this reality has begun giving me a new sense of who I am. Or who I may have become. When I tell other Jews that I am living in Poland, the response is varied. Some think its inspiring or fascinating, others think its insane because “Poland will never want the Jews.”.

The Jews lived in Poland for 1000 years. It was not always easy, and it was at times a nightmare. But 1000 years is impossible to ignore. This is why I’m in Poland. I can no longer ignore my history. I cannot forget my history. The Jews say “we will never forget” what happened in Poland. For me, that means also never forgetting that before Israel, Poland was the contemporary Jewish homeland. And that is why I am here.

My mother and I still struggle in our relationship, though we too both also now have Poland. We made a piece of theatre together about our relationship and confusion around Poland, and she keeps coming to Poland to perform it with me. And for some reason, our relationship is always stronger in Poland. We’ve asked her to move to Poland so she can be closer to us. Her response? “Never”.

But she’ll always visit – which is much more than she (or I) would do before.

And my grandmother? She still will not come to Poland, but in Wolbrom my mother bough her a bracelet that she never takes off. She will likely die with this bracelet and be buried with it. I find it all so untenably beautiful and sad. Which is also how I feel about Poland.

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