

Poland and Me: Stephanie Leigh

Below is a piece of writing I wrote during my three month stay in Poland from November 2016. Learning Polish is something I cherish and enables me to stay connected to my Jewish Polish roots and love for Polish culture. I would love the chance to return to my beloved Poland and further my knowledge in the language.

I have been living in Podgórze. I can see *Plac Bohaterów Getta* (Ghetto Heroes Square, formerly 'Plac Zgody') from my window. This is where I walk everyday. *The Empty Chairs* memorial is located here. I have caught the number 24 tram from Plac Bahaterów Getta everyday to attend Polish class, just north of Stare Miasto (old city). At night time, the plac is dreary and ill lit. The memorial chairs are lit from below, and usually, the occasional person walking their dog will be hovering about. Sometimes I see the pizza delivery man walking back into the pizza shop, probably to pick up more pizzas.

On the plac there is a curiously small building, purposefully located at the head of the square. It is a florist/art gallery. It makes no sense. It is made of concrete, with metal bars and resembles a toilet block, however too formally curated to have been this in the past. During the day the plac is a transitional space for those coming and going from the main tram stop. I think of many things when I am in the plac. Sometimes I am checking Jakdojade to see which tram I need to take. Often, when it has been snowing, I have to focus on walking stiff and slow in order not to slip on the cobblestone. Sometimes I am thinking of what happened there. Sometimes I am thinking of the babies they once stacked in tall columns, and then stood from above, shooting each stack with one bullet, hoping that one bullet killed them all so they could save on expenses. Sometimes I think about what I will buy for lunch. There is always at least one tour group there, huddling together and listening to the history of such a place. There are regularly people climbing on the chairs, laughing and taking selfies. Everyday I see small tour shuttles pulled up on the side of the road. There are often tour groups in my street. I dodge them in order to get

home. I often have the urge to yell out "*I'm a Jew. Here. Over here. You can take a photo if you want*". I never do.

My apartment is a communist block probably built in the 70's. Sometimes I think about the building that used to exist before this one. One night I watched *Schindlers List* in bed whilst eating a bowl of take away pasta. I cried.

On March 20th, 1941, there were approximately 18,000 Jewish people forcibly "living" in Podgórze. I think I might be the only Jewish person living in Podgórze today. At least it feels this way. There were approximately 65,000 Jewish people living in Kraków before the war. It is said that Jewish people first arrived in the territory of what is now Poland in the 10th century. I often wish that everyone I knew lived here and we could just all hang out in Poland.

I have had Shabbat at the JCC (Jewish Community Centre) three times. Last Friday there were 15 Polish Jewish holocaust survivors at dinner. I had no idea that Holocaust survivors existed over here. I thought everyone left. Maybe this is because everyone back home is talking about Israel and no one is talking about Poland. I like talking about Poland. I like that I can buy the same kind of salad my babi makes at the supermarket. I like going to Polish school. I am definitely the only Jew there. Everyone there is either marrying a Polish person, got themselves a Polish job, or is interested in learning another European language, other than their own. Sometimes I feel like no one understands how important learning Polish is to a Jew like me. I thanked both my teachers at the end of the course. I told them how rare this experience is within the Jewish community. They smiled and nodded. Sometimes I think what my Papa would say if he were alive. He would have thought what I am doing is so cool. My babi thinks so. I remember my first phone conversation I had with my mum in Polish. She was totally shocked. I am shocked.

When I first arrived, I walked to school everyday. Now it is much colder. On those walks I used to travel through Stare Miasto. Sometimes I think about what people were doing on this side of the city during the war. The buildings are so beautiful and fancy. What were people over here thinking? What did they know? Podgórze is just a 25-minute walk away.

Often I go to the small supermarket downstairs from my apartment. They sell "chałka". It looks like challah. Tastes like chałka. A few houses down from where I live there is an apartment with huge bullet holes indented into the entire facade. I look at it every time I walk to the footbridge that leads to Kazimierz. Across from this I also see the same hipster hairdresser who takes his cigarette breaks out front. We always stare at each other but never say hello.

Sometimes when I am walking to the tram stop I look into the street on the other side of the *Plac Bohaterów Getta* and the main road. That street leads to Schindler's Factory. Just a five-minute walk. If I walk fifteen minutes south I will end up at *Krakus Mound*. I can see all of Kraków from here. If I turn around I can see *Liban Quarry*, established in 1873 by two Jewish families, which was later taken over by the Nazi occupation and converted into a slave labour camp. Płaszów concentration camp is also located within viewing site. 150,000 prisoners were held there. It's weird living down the road from a former concentration camp.

I finally found out about that peculiar small building located on *Plac Bohaterów Getta*. It was the former S.S. guardhouse. I can see it from outside my bedroom window.

Sometimes when I eat breakfast, or do something ordinary in my apartment, I think about what people used to do here.

One night I invited some friends over to my apartment for dinner. I made Jewish chicken soup (vegetarian style). I made kneidlach with matzah meal that

I bought from the Kosher deli in Isaac synagogue. I also made a bucket of kasza gryczana and outsourced the best replica non-Jewish challah, something that is available on a Thursday. I wanted to cook Jewish food here, an act that would have gotten you killed 70 years ago. During the time of the ghetto, whilst Jewish people were gathered inside for Pesach, the Nazi's built a ghetto wall around them, shaped in the form of Jewish grave headstones. My friends loved my cooking. It was the first time I had made maztah balls without the premade packet. Now, they were good. Poland is good too.