

Poland and Me

By: Madison Jackson, USA

“Shabbat Shalom. Shabbat Shalom. Shabbat Shalom.” These, greetings of peace for Shabbat (the Sabbath), were the words pouring out from everyone around me. It was Friday night in July, and I was at Shabbat services. But, instead of being in Binghamton, New York, where I went to university, I was across the ocean, in a different time zone, and in a place where the first language was not a language I understood. I was in Warsaw, Poland.

When many North American Jews think of present day Poland they think of black and white photos which depict Poland as dreary, dark and gloomy. Photos of Warsaw, Poland, in 1945 after the Germans bombed the city to the ground and photos of the entrance to Auschwitz-Birkenau Concentration Camp in Oswiecim, Poland. But, when I think of present day Poland I see images like Zlote Tarasy, the large mall in Warsaw with modern, unique architecture and images of Polish Jews of all ages gathering together at the Warsaw Jewish Community Center for a weekly, Kosher, all you can eat Sunday brunch.

I was fortunate to spend three months living in Warsaw, Poland, working for the American Jewish Committee Central Europe office and experiencing present day Jewish Poland firsthand. Since meeting European Jews my own age at an international Jewish summer camp in High School, I have been an advocate for the revival of Jewish life in Europe. Yet, it wasn't until I had the opportunity to spend the summer in Poland that I really grasped how big of a connection I had to Poland specifically.

The minute I landed in Poland in May, 2018, I felt tears come to my eyes. I was crying tears of happiness for a sense of coming home. Although I was still only in the terminal outside of the Warsaw airport, I felt as if I had come to a place I already knew, even though I had never been there before. These were the streets my ancestors had walked. This was the place where my Jewish culture was developed. This was the country my family had once called home. Being in Warsaw inspired me to do genealogical research at the Jewish Historical Institute in Poland, which was formerly the Central Jewish Library in Warsaw. I knew my family was Polish, had they stood where I was to stand?

I spent many weekends of that summer at an egalitarian synagogue in Warsaw, called Ec Chaim. At Ec Chaim, about 40 people attend Shabbat services every Friday night and Saturday morning, people of all ages, including little children and young adults. While some of the tunes were new to me, many were familiar, and while the sermon was conducted in Polish, and at first I felt many people did not speak any English at the synagogue, the conclusion of the service was the most beautiful Jewish experience I ever witnessed. The minute the service ended, each person in the room starting shaking everyone's hand. Strangers or friends alike, they were on a crucial mission to not miss even a single person. Before I barely had the chance to step away from my seat, someone reached out for my hand, shook it, smiled at me and said Shabbat Shalom. This happened over and over again until I had shaken the hand of nearly everyone in that room and received a large smile in return. Without having said one word in English to any of those people, I already felt like we shared something on such a personal level, like they

understood me. Although our language may not have been the same, we all spoke the language of Shabbat; the simple Hebrew words of our Jewish religion brought us together in understanding.

In a country where there is only somewhere between 30,000 and 60,000 Jews, and in a city where there are 420 members of the Jewish Community Center and over 700 official members of the Jewish Community, I found my Jewish ideal. I had never been as comfortable in a Jewish prayer setting as I was during my time living in Poland. I had never felt as Jewish as I did walking across Chmielna Street on my way to Shabbat dinner. I had never felt prouder of my Jewish culture than when I stopped at a Polish bakery for Chalka, (the Polish word for Challah, the Jewish bread eaten on Shabbat), on my way home from work, and saw how integral Jewish culture is to Polish culture, and Polish culture to Jewish culture. Wearing my Jewish star necklace had never felt so right.

Instead of dwelling on numbers, hierarchical structures, and institutionalized positions, things I have often found to be the focus of my Jewish communities in the United States, this Polish community focused purely on the quality of Jewish life. I began realizing that sometimes size is not everything. I didn't feel overwhelmed by the amount of people in the room, lost in a crowd, left out from a group, but rather I felt taken in by a tight-knit yet open community exploring new traditions. By spending time with my counterparts in Jewish Poland I learned more about what is important to me within my own Jewish identity.

I never heard of Warsaw's Praga district prior to visiting the city. Often called "Alternative Warsaw" for serving as Warsaw's hipster and artistic base, what I didn't know was that Praga served as the home of most of Warsaw's Jews prior to the war. As I explored every crevice that Warsaw had to offer, I began picturing in my head an alternative map, an alternative route for tourists to the city. Many of the tours I went on, or self-guided tours I discovered, pointed out the remains of the Warsaw Ghetto Wall, and the location of the destroyed Great Synagogue, important sites to visit and remember, but all while completely ignoring the fact that the present day Hillel, a global Jewish student organization, stands right behind where the synagogue once was. I imagined a tour which would provide visitors with both the elements of the city related to the Holocaust and its history, and point out places of interest related to Jewish life in Warsaw today. Buildings such as the Warsaw Hillel, where I attended a board game night and met peers my own age who invited me to Shabbat meals and to meet up for pierogis, buildings like the Jewish Community Center in Warsaw, and Makabi Warsaw, a Jewish sports organization, are places that should draw visitors to witness the culture of local Polish Jewry.

Many of my peers return from Holocaust oriented trips to Poland, where they only visited places of death and no places of present day, and say "I never want to go back there again." I hope to go back to Poland many times, reunite with my Jewish and non-Jewish friends and take part in the next stage of the revival of Jewish life in modern day Poland. When I do return, I can't wait to experience once again a unique Jewish culture, both so different from my own, yet at the same time so similar.

One night during my last week in Warsaw it was past 11:30 pm. Around me were men wearing black hats, women wearing long skirts, people wearing jeans and tennis shoes, elderly

couples, young professionals, a few familiar faces of students my age. There was a mixture of Polish and English words floating through the air. It was a little chilly, but no one noticed the summer night breeze. Someone passed around prayer books. Hebrew words filled the pages. We all sat down on what seemed momentarily like a stage--but in reality, it was the Monument to the Ghetto Heroes, facing POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

Traditionally, the Jewish holiday of Tisha B'Av is considered the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, marking the end of a period of time in which Jews reflect on the destruction of the Holy Temples in Jerusalem. I had attended Eichah (The Book of Lamentations) readings for years previously, many times at summer camp, and other times at a synagogue wherever I happened to be. But that night, I was across the world, congregated with over 30 Polish Jews of all Jewish backgrounds and practices, chanting Eichah in Warsaw, Poland, a place that to many is considered the epitome of tragedy, a place where many once thought all Jewish life had ceased to exist. And yet, there was something so symbolically powerful about sitting on the very grounds where Jews had encountered terror, and defiantly, silently saying "we are still here, we are still being Jewish, and we are being Jewish in the very place where once people wanted to eliminate us."

It was moments like that, which answer the question I am still asked quite often: "Of all the places you could go in Europe, why did you do a summer internship in Poland?" I was looking to experience Jewish life in Europe, and there was no better place to do that than in a country not only rich with history on every corner, once the second largest home of world Jewry, but also, where a revival of Jewish life is strong and vibrant.